



HUNGER

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
MONIQUE EDENWOOD

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Hunger by Monique EdenWood

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This book features the poem "Wind and Window Flower" by Robert Frost (1915). This poem is in the public domain.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Foreword

Prologue

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

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Afterword](#)
63. [Playlist](#)

Also by Monique EdenWood

About the Author

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This book is a departure from the Black Oak series. It is not quite as dark but I needed something different after three long years of writing this challenging series. Hunger is a story I've seen wandering around my head for a long time, so I hope you enjoy the adventure and can feel the heat between Greyson and Indigo.

FOREWORD

Hunger is a dark romantic suspense novel.

It is book one out of a duet. Book 2, Surrender will be out in April 2023.

All scenes described in Hunger are consensual, though please be advised that a character discusses trauma connected to a previous non-consensual experience.

The experience itself is not described in any detail.

Reader discretion is advised.

*To those with wild hearts and messy hair whose pain has made
them perfectly imperfect.*

PROLOGUE

LOVERS, forget your love,
And list to the love of these,
She a window flower,
And he a winter breeze.

Robert Frost, Wind and Window Flower (1915)

Greyson
Washington, DC

I park the car, shaking my head as I turn the engine off, my hands trembling after having had to dodge the moron on a bike who abruptly drove into my lane not fifteen feet ahead of me. I take a moment to breathe before undoing my seatbelt and climbing out.

“Grey!”

I acknowledge Gideon standing across the parking lot next to Kennedy as I slam the car door shut, throwing an infuriated glance over at the idiot I nearly ran over who I now spy getting off her bike.

I press the key fob to lock the car and head towards my friends only for each step I take across the tarmac to leave me bristling with irritation at how recklessly these cyclists ride their bikes around DC.

As I get close to my friends, I find myself veering off course, pivoting to the left, deciding to give the cyclist a piece of my mind, if only to scare her into not doing anything that dumb or dangerous again.

“I could have hit you back there.”

She’s bent over a rusty old bike which looks like it was made twenty years ago, threading her bike lock through the

front wheel and around the metal bar of the bike station.

She looks up at me, her eyes dissimilated by the mirrored lenses of her sunglasses. “What?!”

“I said *I could have hit you.*”

“Oh, *you’re* the Bentley,” she scoffs as she clicks the lock into place. “Not into subtlety, hey?”

My body stiffens. I bought the fucking car because it’s one of the safest in the world and because around here, people drive like... well, with about as much self-restraint and competence as she cycles with.

“I suppose you think riding like that is funny, do you?”

She stands up straight, squaring her slim frame at me remarkably boldly. She must stand around five feet three, about a foot shorter than me, but apparently, what she lacks in height, she makes up for in attitude.

She tugs the frayed brown backpack off her back and drops it onto the seat of the bicycle. “Look, I put my hand up to say *Sorry.*”

Her head pivots to the right and I shoot a glance in the direction of her gaze to see Gideon and Kennedy now standing a few feet behind me.

When I look back, she’s reaching for the top button of her flowy white cotton shirt which is sticking to her sweaty flesh and that I imagine she’s wearing to protect her golden skin from unseasonably warm May weather.

“So what?” I bite as she undoes the first button. “You’ll get yourself run over one day, not to mention put drivers at risk when they have to brake to avoid you.”

“That’s all you *really* care about, isn’t it, sir?” she snorts facetiously as her fingers reach for the lower buttons before peeling the shirt off her frame and rolling the cotton up, shoving it into her tatty backpack.

As she stares down at the bag while pushing it in, my eyes can’t help but be drawn to the bounce of her tits. She’s wearing a navy-blue camisole and must have been riding her

bike for quite some time for the thing is drenched in sweat, the fabric around her pebbled nipples wet and translucent. Her breasts wobble as she does up her bag.

“What did you say?” I ask, trying not to growl at this vexing little creature.

“I said, that’s all you *really* care about, right? That I don’t inconvenience the precious out-of-touch Bentley drivers around here?”

The insinuation rattles across my skin, as does the event which led to me buying a car this safe. If this were a woman I was dating, her insubordinate ass would be being spanked raw in the washroom of the bar next to us right this fucking second—foreplay before I stood behind her and made her watch her own disciplining in the mirror.

“That you don’t have to brake for *two seconds*,” she continues, “and drive a bit slower behind me for half a block in your gas-guzzling car.”

“It’s a hybrid,” I reply flatly, only for her to arch a brow.

“Let me guess. A multi-millionaire with a conscience. How original.”

My muscles tense beneath my shirt. “You think you know a lot about me?”

“Oh, I’ve hung out with enough of your types to know the drill.”

“Is that so? And are you in the habit of telling strangers about their finances?”

“Well, who else can afford to drive a Bentley?”

“I bought it because it’s a safe car to drive.”

“Oh, sure,” she scoffs, “I bet safety was your primary concern.”

“It is. As was *yours*. Only some people are highly sensitive. Used to being coddled. They don’t like to hear the truth about their shitty behavior.”

Her full pink lips part as if in incredulity. “What the hell is *that* supposed to mean? If anyone’s spent their life being coddled, Mr. Bentley, I’d wager a guess that it’s you.” My body simmers inside as I stare down at this most audacious creature. “You don’t know the first thing about me,” she snaps.

“You’re right. I don’t. I’d like to start with your name.”

“¿Te está molestando, Tornada?”

I glance over at two women standing beside the bar to the left of my building. The first is the short-haired and muscular brunette who spoke the words, and who, from what I gather from her body language, is a highly protective friend of the woman standing before me. Next to her stands a pale-skinned redhead with one hand cocked on her hip.

“No, no. I can handle him,” she returns with a smile that she throws at me.

“*Tornada*?” I repeat. “Is that a real name or a nickname because you cause havoc everywhere you go?”

“The latter,” she sings.

My eyes are drawn to the chipped white nail polish on her slight fingers as she undoes the clasp on her bike helmet, pulling it off and latching it onto the strap of her backpack.

“And what’s your real name?”

She peers up, straightening her shoulders at me. “You won’t be needing it,” she replies irritatingly breezily, “unless you plan on harassing me with more *‘safety tips’*, that is.”

Her lack of consciousness about how quickly life can be taken from her on the road crawls beneath my skin. I can already tell she hasn’t seen what I’ve seen.

“There’s a reason there’s a bike line right next to us,” I continue. “If you were run over—”

But my words catch in my throat for a moment as she reaches for the hairband tying her hair back and pulls it loose, letting it cascade over her shoulders, back and tits. The wave roots are a very dark blond but the mid-section and ends are

dyed bright magenta which burns like embers in the early-evening sun.

She stares up at me, her heart-shaped face now framed by thick strands of pink. Great. Some fucking hippy.

“It would be your own fault,” I continue.

“Oh, I bet you must have been tempted by that idea, hey, sir?” she replies with a very ill-advised grin. “I mean, you’d have been within your right to run me down, right?”

My body hardens at her impertinent way of talking. “I’m trying to explain to you that bikes are banned on that stretch of road for a reason and what you did is illegal, so if you end up getting yourself killed, it will be your own fucking fault.”

“Well, the only reason I *dared* venture into your precious lane is because some drunken assholes walked off the pedestrian lane and into the bike lane with no sign of stopping, so I had to think fast. Is there any chance you could factor *that* into your righteous indignation?”

“¿Todo bien, Tornada? ¿Necesitas ayuda con el culero?”

Nice.

“Nope. All good,” the girl sings with a smile, picking up her bag in a nonchalant manner which would amuse me if her reckless conduct hadn’t rattled me so much.

Strangers don’t usually get under my skin like this, but there’s something about the impudent way her tight little ass moved on that bike as she forced me to brake, and the way she dares glare at me, which riles me much more than the average asshole I suffer through conversation with.

“Are we done?” she spits out impatiently.

“You should have stopped and waited for them to pass you instead of putting yourself, me and everyone behind me in danger and risking getting yourself mowed down.”

“Wow, you’re a perfect gentleman. I bet you were tempted, weren’t you? Hey, look!” She points over at a group of pedestrians dodging cars to hastily cross the street to my left. “The *plebs* are jaywalking! That’s illegal! Hmm... *I know!*”

Despite her mirrored sunglasses which reflect back at me, her expression flares like a firework detonating. “Why don’t you get back in your car, park it on the side of the road and the next person you see jaywalking, just *mow* them straight down.”

As much as she’s playing with me, I can’t help but smirk internally at the audacious manner she dares to address me.

“And I mean, foot *flat* on the accelerator. Just mow the suckers down. Then you go tell the judge that they were crossing illegally and you’re good to go!”

Her grin of curiosity at my reaction dissolves as I shake off my amusement and remember how easily her life could have been ended.

I take a step towards her. “You could have been run over and you’re incapable of taking rudimentary advice.”

She takes hold of the frame of her sunglasses, pulling them off, stunning me with eyes of the deepest green, set off by warm, glistening golden skin and the vibrant pink of her hair. Her lips are full and her cheeks plump as she smiles at me warmly as if we haven’t just spent three minutes getting under each other’s skin.

“Well,” she sighs. “You’ve gotten to feel superior to someone today, sir, so I’m taking it you’re now satisfied,” she smirks as I narrow my eyes at her. “So, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go spend time with my friends... if that’s alright with you?”

I glance over at her two friends, with the tanned brunette looking like she’d enjoy landing one on me.

I take a step back to let the spitfire past, assuming her and her friends are headed to the bar.

Instead, I watch as she enters my building, using her fob to open the door.

It couldn’t be...

Just as I begin to wonder whether she’s a new resident or someone’s guest, she shoots a glance behind me as she pulls

on the thick steel rod of the door handle, grinning most impertinently.

“You know her?”

I turn to observe amusement in the eyes of Kennedy and Gideon.

“Just someone else who doesn’t know how to operate a vehicle around here.”

“Cute,” Gideon replies, and for some unknown reason, the thought of his eyes taking in her body—that tight little ass in those beige shorts and her slim, toned legs which led down to tatty flipflops which look three years old—irks me for a moment.

“You ready?” Kennedy smiles, turning to walk towards the restaurant half a block away, one of the best sushi places in the city where we’ll eat before getting a drink.

I trail behind them for a few seconds before stopping in my tracks as Gideon turns around.

I wonder...

“What?”

“Order for me,” I respond. “You know what I like. I need to... check something at home.”

As Gideon throws me a knowing smirk which I reciprocate, I head towards my building, opening the door just in time to see the three women enter the elevator twenty feet away.

I run towards it, thrusting my hand out just as the stainless steel doors are about to close. The sensors pick up the movement and the door slides back open... and I enter, vaguely annoyed with myself. I don’t usually debase myself by following random women around, but I would very much like to know where the pink-haired spitfire is staying... because if my hunch is right, we’ll be spending a lot more time together in the next week...

Not to mention that something about that conversation felt unfinished. Perhaps that’s partly because I don’t know how

much I appreciate women giving me that much attitude, and doing it with that impertinent little smirk on those glistening lips of hers. I'm kind of an asshole that way. If I don't know whether she's just a guest here, I can sense I'm gonna be distracted all weekend.

The girl spins on her heels. "Hey, you can't follow us in here!"

"Why not?" I reply as her lips part in disbelief. "I live here."

I tap my fob against the reader and press the same button as I'm sure she just did... Penthouse.

Indigo

Fran and Rami throw glances at me and then at the ridiculously handsome asshole who's staring at me even more persistently than he did outside when he gave me that unsolicited little cycling safety speech.

His lips curve upwards at the corners as he studies me in a way that frankly should be illegal.

"You must be staying at Carrie and Tom's place while they're away," he says.

What the fuck...

Dammit, he must have seen the button I pressed.

"Um..."

"That's none of your business," snaps Rami, though her point is rendered kind of moot as the elevator chimes its arrival on the top floor of this exclusive building.

"After you," the stranger with the boundary issues says with a tip of the head and a courteous smile, the latter being a new arrival.

Fran, my naughtiest of friends, attempts to hide her smirk as she leaves first, followed by a glaring Rami in full-on mama bear mode... and then me.

I glance behind me, my gaze colliding with his as he exits, a foot taller than me and clothed in gray pants that a team of designer's must have worked on for them to fit him that freaking perfectly. Into them is tucked a crisp white shirt which shows off broad shoulders, which I just about notice, stunned as I am by the most luminous gray eyes I've ever seen.

As I make it to the door of the apartment I'm cat-sitting in for the next week, I fumble with the key, getting the wrong one again before dropping the set onto the floor in front of Carrie's door, cursing under my breath as Moody Prick walks past us.

My jaw practically unhinges as he slots his key into the door of the apartment right next door to this one, the only other one on this entire floor. His lips turn up at the edges as he opens it.

"Enjoy your evening," he says smoothly and in my perturbed state, my mouth decides not to cooperate, and instead, I practically fall over myself unlocking and pushing the door open.

As my friends grab my arms so I don't knock myself out against the wood, they file in behind me. I shut the door fast, locking it behind me as Fran breaks into a wide grin.

"Holy fuck," I mutter, plonking my backpack on the floor, suddenly feeling quite breathless at my run-in with a man who is now my temporary neighbor.

"What did he want?" drawls Rami, less than impressed with most men, but with a particularly piquant disdain for the dominant assholes of the world.

Albeit, in this case, a very, very hot asshole.

Smoking, in fact.

Which is probably the main reason he's an asshole.

That, and the money.

Deadly mix, Indie.

But, oh my God, the sullen way he glared at me. The prick should be arrested for public indecency with a stare like that.

I'm half tempted to interrupt Carrie and Tom's trip away to see the members of his family who aren't well enough to attend their wedding on Cumberland Island in six weeks, and ask her how the hell she could have omitted to inform me what ungodly specimen of a human was going to be living next door to me for the next nine days.

"Oh, just... being insufferable about the way I pulled out in front of him," I stammer as Fran leans over to pet Cookie, the gorgeous and very sociable tabby I'm watching till Carrie and Tom get back.

"Yeah, well, you wanna avoid that one," Rami says flatly. "Walking red flag from ten paces away."

I chuckle at the warning in her tone. "What do you girls want to drink?"

Indigo

I lie back in my beanbag chair, trying not to spill the water I switched to twenty minutes ago when I realized I was getting way too tipsy on the two bottles of white wine Fran brought over with her.

Small plates of olives, tortilla chips, guacamole, nuts and now-cold slices of cauliflower-crust cashew-cheese and tomato pizza I made from scratch in one of my exceedingly rare Martha Stewart moments are scattered all over the glass tabletop in the living room which stands just next to the balcony overlooking Southwest Washington, one of the most affluent areas in the DC area.

In my defense, I did ask Tom and Carrie if Fran and Rami, who they don't know that well, could spend a few nights here to keep me company, seeing as they're both currently driving me nuts moaning about the crappy house with the intermittently leaking roof they're sharing in the suburbs of DC, and I got the go-ahead from both of them, as long as they share their second guest bedroom, which they will.

I crunch on a tortilla chip as Cuban dance music blares a little too loudly, grinning at Frannie now dancing by herself in some salsa-freestyle combo, as she will usually do in any social situation we go to, her fiery red hair flailing wildly.

Meanwhile, Rami, AKA Martina Ramirez, my ride-or-die friend of almost five years, whines about all the ways she wants to murder her asshole of a boss, the owner of the painting company she works at.

She used to be a marine before an honorable discharge due to health issues, but the killer instincts drilled into her during her four years with them don't seem to have left her, and barely a day goes by when she doesn't fantasize about murdering someone in a way that usually leaves me in fits of hysterics.

"I swear to God," she groans. "If he asks me to wash his brushes one more fucking time, I'm gonna be dumping fifteen gallons of paint stripper all over his sweaty little pinhead."

"Stop," I laugh, nabbing another tortilla chip off the table.

And just like that, we all turn into stone statues at the sound of a bold knock on the door.

Fran, who I think has drunk the most out of all of us, covers her mouth, sitting her naughty ass back down onto the floor opposite me, trying not to snicker.

"Fuck," I groan, lowering my tone. "What time is it?"

"Past eleven," replies Rami, glancing at her watch.

"*Shiittt.*" I jump to my feet, half-wobbling over in the process. "Where's the remote?" I scan the table, floor and beanbag, not spotting it, and instead stagger over to the sound system, pressing furiously on the volume button to lower it.

I head towards the door.

"Fifty dollars says it's the asshole," shouts Rami so loudly that I'm sure whoever's on the other side must be able to hear it.

I stop in my tracks, pivoting as my heart begins to do a drunken salsa in my chest. "You think?"

My mouth goes inexplicably dry—both at the thought of him, and because the memories of my ex knocking relentlessly on my door all those months ago, forcing me to threaten to call

the police day in and day out still flood me to this day whenever someone knocks unexpectedly.

“I’d bet money on it,” she replies. “Torment him some more for me, will you?”

“Damn right I will,” I respond, promptly pulling on my figurative sassy pants and marching to the door in some feeble attempt to convince myself I’m not inexplicably jangling with nerves.

I grab my woolly gray cardigan from a hook on the wall and shove it on my body, messily wrapping it around me as I approach the peephole.

In a flash, the vision of Micah, my ex, startles me, slicing through my body until I blink, the image dissolving, replaced by an altogether different apparition: the stupid-hot and presumably very wealthy jerk from before.

I clear my throat, glancing all the way across the open-plan apartment to see both Fran and Rami now propped up on the same beanbag facing this direction, eyes wide as I prepare to open the door.

Here we go...

“Yes?” I say, plastering on my most innocent smile.

“It sounds like you’ve just turned the music down.”

“We have. We’ll keep it down.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to have to call security on you your first week here.”

My mouth snaps open, my outrage helping me to block out the asshole’s tall, dense frame, especially now that he’s wearing a black T-shirt that exposes the ridiculously thick and lean muscles on his arm, as well as charcoal-gray sweatpants which I’m making a medal-worthy attempt not to glance down at.

By some miracle, I manage to shake off the tingling of my body at his brooding presence and remember my entirely justified outrage.

I mean, I am in the wrong. I know that. It's way past eleven and I should have checked the time, but it's hard to be sorry when the person being mad at you is going about it in such an asshole way.

“Call *security*? *Are you serious?*”

“There's no loud music allowed in this building after ten o'clock,” he says.

“It's Friday night.”

“And?”

“See, I thought you were only uptight when it comes to your precious car,” I begin as the angles of his face harden a little. “Turns out you've got a stick up your ass *indoors* as well. You'd seriously have called security on your neighbor?”

“I've never had to do it before, but my neighbors have always shown me basic human courtesy.” The bite to his tone makes me steam inside. “Maybe calling security is the only way to teach certain types of people a lesson.”

Yep, steam definitely coming out of my ears...

“Or maybe...” His eyes form tight slits as his body tilts forwards a little, the proximity of him making me feel like I'm caught in some bubble. “I wanted to see if you were capable of controlling that attitude of yours when I said it.”

The most sinful smile tugs at those perfectly carved pink lips of his as my cheeks begin to betray me by flushing hot.

Before I can muster up something pithy to throw at him, he speaks again, the timber of his voice rich and very deep, the notes borderline devilish.

“What's your name?”

“How about you tell me yours first?” I bite back.

“Greyson Everitt,” he replies sternly as my hormones do a happy dance at the way his name rolls off his lips. “Yours?”

I lift my chin defiantly. “I don't think it's necessary for you to know it.”

“I’m sure Carrie and Tom will confirm it to me,” he replies so smoothly that it unnerves me.

I fidget a little, wondering how well he knows them.

I shrug. “I mean... if you’ve got nothing better to do with your time, I suppose you could find out.”

The devilish gleam in his eyes glitters. “Well, I’ll be leaving you. Make sure to keep the music down, unless... you want me knocking on your door again tonight. In which case, by all means, keep it up.”

I find myself gulping audibly before I collect myself and decide to glare back at him in lieu of saying goodbye.

He smiles, heading back to the apartment, his eyes catching mine before he closes the door.

I follow suit, taking a second to breathe, wondering if, in my drunken state, I conjured up that entire weird conversation.

I head back to the living room to find Frannie grinning and Rami scowling her lack of amusement.

I realize the music is now off completely, presumably so that Fran could eavesdrop.

“Did you hear that?”

“Um, yeah,” sings Fran, enthusiastic supporter of me getting laid again by a guy other than Kohl, the man I’ve very casually been dating in the last three months, my first attempt at intimate contact with a member of the male species since my ex decided to turn my life into a living hell for leaving him about eight months ago.

While Kohl is a breath of fresh air compared to him, Fran isn’t exactly a fan of his, seeing as he can be a bit overbearing, and because I told her that I don’t feel much pleasure with him.

Since then, whenever she spots any man who looks like he’s capable of giving a woman an orgasm, she forces me to talk to him.

“Can you believe that guy?” I huff, plonking myself down on the plush taupe rug beneath the coffee table that I’ll be tidying up first thing tomorrow morning, hangover willing. “First he berates me about my cycling, then he knocks on my door and tells me he was going to call freaking security.”

“Can we file him in the Asshole category and move on?” drawls Rami, who has little tolerance for men on the best of days.

“He was obviously looking for an excuse to knock again,” says Fran, sipping on some water through a straw, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “I mean it’s not even midnight.”

“Or maybe he just does have a stick that tightly wedged up his ass,” I retort.

“Hot as hell, though, huh?” Fran says, wiggling her eyebrows.

“And he knows it,” adds Ram, ruffling her short dark overgrown pixie cut. “Plus, he’s waving about fifty red flags in the air at any given moment.”

“Oh, shush,” chides Frannie. “He can’t be worse than—”

She stops, no doubt seeing my deep inhale and nervous swallow.

I hate these stupid waves of trauma which paralyze me whenever she brings Micah up, especially because it’s not her fault. She doesn’t know the full story of what happened on that last day that we split up.

And she also doesn’t know that I’ve been getting strange messages lately.

An anonymous number leaving me one single word: **Hello**

It’s hardly the stuff of horror movies, but I block it each time and shortly after, another comes through.

I should change my number again, but I’ve had to do it three times already and I just don’t want to have to go through all that again.

“Well, he can’t, can he?” adds Fran.

“Would you calm down, woman?” I chortle. “I’m only staying here another week, you know. I doubt I’ll even bump into him again.”

She throws me her most obnoxious grin. “By the look in his eyes tonight, I’m guessing you will.”

“And make sure you chew him up and spit him out again if you do,” deadpans Rami, making Fran and I dissolve into giggles.

In reality, as hot as he is, you’d have to have your head buried in the sand to not spot the dozen or so red flags that the self-righteous stranger was waving about... and after the year I’ve had, I’m not putting myself in the grasp of risky men ever again.

Indigo

The bright magenta droplets dribbling down his fresh white shirt are the only thing that exist for a few seconds, dropping as if in slow motion down crisp ivory cotton of what I'm sure is the very expensive variety.

The strong hand wound tightly around my upper arm that stopped me from faceplanting right into his steel plate of a chest and bloodying up his shirt just to add to the bright burgundy dye job I've inflicted upon him lifts me a little, helping me to straighten myself up.

I can't help but wonder if the pool of beetroot juice now lying just in front of his expensive—and rather large, I can't help but notice—black leather shoes could possibly transform into a secret portal to another dimension that I could jump into to escape the sheer hell of another trainwreck of a social situation I'm just a world-class expert at stumbling into.

He pulls a little more, helping me to my feet as my gaze staggers—against its will—up his long legs, sheathed in black suit pants, and up to what is without a doubt a prominent bulge, now dripping with red liquid.

Managing to drag my eyes away from it, I check out the pièce de résistance of today's work: the Jackson Pollock painting I've now transformed his shirt into.

As I get to my feet, and he releases my arm upon making sure I'm relatively steady and not about to faceplant into him again, my gaze finally pans one whole foot up to meet bright eyes that gleam darkly above a way-too-amused smile.

Greyson Everitt glances down at his crime-scene of a shirt before looking back up.

“Still upset about my cycling tips, I see.”

Holy God...

I'll be a good girl from now on.

Just please stop me from dive-bombing into these messes...

“I... I... It was an accident. I swear to God.”

I glimpse at the now three-quarters empty glass bottle with its wide opening at the top that, by some miracle, I'm still holding in my right hand.

Just to up the mortification factor nicely, on the other side of the lobby, I spot Fran holding her face as if trying not to give herself a hernia from laughing while Rami looks like she can't decide who to eye more suspiciously—me or him.

We'd left to go for a walk before I remembered the beetroot, carrot and turmeric juice I'd left on the counter. I went back up to get it, only in my rushed state, I couldn't find the freaking lid so decided to leave without it.

The plan was to drink it within a few blocks and then stick a tissue in my empty bottle and put it in my backpack, but on my way out of the elevator, I caught sight of my condescending walking orgasm of a neighbor, and immediately tripped, in the process managing to spray his entire front with the worst juice you could possibly ever conceive of in terms of stain removal.

I mean, you can add bleach and scrub on beetroot and turmeric stains for an entire moon cycle only for them to hit you with a very resounding *Fuck right off*.

“I believe you,” he says with a smirk, and I suddenly feel annoyed that I have to momentarily forgo my usual sass seeing as I've just tie-dyed his shirt without his consent.

I glance down at his pants, trying to pretend that I can't see the large bulge around the crotch.

"It's on your pants too."

"I know. Thank you."

"God, sorry," I groan, fumbling in my backpack for some tissues. I grab some and go to kneel down to mop up the cold-pressed juice extraction on the shiny black and gray tiled floor, which I pray won't stain, only for Greyson to stop me.

"No." He turns to look at the reception desk across the huge lobby. "Neil, can you—?"

"Already on it!" shouts the respectable-looking bespectacled man behind the desk. "Got maintenance on their way down."

"Thank you."

"Um... your shirt," I say, my brows creased into a frown which I suspect will be there all day as I cringe-relive this moment until I can start drinking in the hopes of blacking it out for a few hours. "Can I wash it for you?"

"What exactly is it?" he asks. "The blood of your enemies, by the looks of it?"

I try not to smile. "It's..." *Fuck*. "It's beetroot juice. And turmeric."

He smiles. "Oh, that's good."

"Yeah... It's gonna stain."

"Mmm."

"I could... buy you a new shirt," I suggest, saying a silent prayer that his shirt costs less than my monthly rent. My eyes are magnetically pulled back to his pants and the few drips of juice on them, although luckily the fabric is jet black. "And pants."

He shakes his head slowly. "That won't be necessary."

Crap.

“Well... I could try washing them. I’ve spilled more juice on me than the average person,” I say, to the raising of his eyebrows above mirthful eyes.

I glance down at my tatty white T-shirt with a faded print of a wolf on it and my loose magenta and navy-blue pants which are the most comfortable I’ve ever owned, in part because I’ve been wearing them for three years. “Although, granted, I don’t always get those stains out.”

“I think we both know the stains won’t come out, Indigo.”

My body turns to ice and my pulse kicks wildly in my neck as moisture decides to seep backwards from my mouth and into my salivary glands.

“How... How do you know my name?”

“As it turns out, Carrie had mentioned it to me before. I asked Tom today to confirm.”

His eyes narrow as he takes in my surprise.

I would ordinarily make quite the scene about how he had no right to, but in the beet-addled circumstances, I decide to take a raincheck on that.

“It’s a beautiful name,” he says.

“Well... thank you,” I manage. “Look, I really would feel better if I could at least buy you a new shirt.”

“No.” He borderline growls the word, the luxurious timber of his voice rolling through my chest.

“Then... can I at least try to wash it?”

“There’s no nee—”

“Look, I’ll honestly feel better if I at least try. I mean, I’ve bleached my hair enough times. How hard can clothes be?”

His gaze strays to my hair, which quite frankly is just about the same color as the juice that has now thoroughly seeped into his shirt, leaving it sticking to his skin and the hard chest behind it, the muscular grooves of which suddenly seem indecent, as does his nipple which I can now see through the cotton, stained pink no less.

Realizing I've spent a conspicuous amount of time checking out his teat, I dart my gaze straight up only to spy a spot of juice staining the skin next to his mouth.

Deciding I've just about reached my quota of social calamities for the day, I fight the urge to lick my finger and rub the stain from his face, although that would be preferable to the plan B floating through my head, whereby I lick his face directly and *then* rub.

Rami and Fran wander up to us, hovering behind Greyson as I insist, "Honestly. I'd like to just try."

"Very well, Indigo."

He reaches for the collar of his shirt, watching my face most sternly as he undoes the top button, then the next, his shirt opening up almost as wide as my mouth as he reaches the bottom buttons and peels the stained and still dripping cotton off his naked torso, sliding it down his arms.

He folds it so that my root vegetable paint job is on the inside. Consciously, I know he's holding the thing out to me, but I'm still not quite done being dickmatized by the kind of body that should only be legal when plastered on some traffic-distracting billboard somewhere and not standing in the flesh right before my eyes.

His shoulders are broad and thick, his arms defined, the skin like warm caramel. His pecs were clearly sculpted by angels above the ridges and valleys of a very pronounced eight-pack coated in barely an inch of fat.

But before I can relocate my brain once again, I spot something else which causes a jolt of pain to scrape against my skin in the same place—thick, deep scars etched across the side of his left ribcage, snaking around to disappear behind him, and others on the inside of his arm on the same side.

I swallow thickly, taking the shirt from him, meeting his eyes for a moment only for another figure to appear in my peripheral to the left, one who catches Greyson's eyes too.

We both turn at the same time to see the man standing twenty or so feet away outside the door of one of the three

meeting rooms you can hire at the bottom of this luxurious building.

Behind the glass of this one sit six or so men and one woman, all in suits, all peering over at us.

Greyson's profile seems to turn to stone, his body stiffening visibly as he looks over at the man—tall, well built, maybe twenty or so years older than him, early fifties probably. His hair is thick and dark but streaked with gray, framing tenebrous eyes, his whole mood a storm I feel from here. He's starting at us with all the civility of a wolf eyeing up its soon-to-be lunch.

His boss, maybe?

Shit. I hope I didn't get him into trouble.

As the elevator chimes and the maintenance man approaches, wheeling a mop bucket and a wet floor sign towards us, I take the shirt from a distracted Greyson before apologizing to the maintenance guy profusely and stepping back.

"Not a problem, miss. I'll sort it out in no time."

As my shirtless neighbor looks back at me, I say, "I'll leave it outside your door if you're not home... if I can get it clean."

He nods and Fran and Rami join me as we head back upstairs. I turn just in time to see the older man approaching Greyson who pivots his half-naked body a little to face him before he goes out of sight.

As the elevator doors close, I groan loudly, scanning my fob and pressing PH repeatedly.

For fuck's sake, beam us up, Scotty.

Fran's muted grin of glee at my humiliation has me facepalming as Rami quips, "Well, that's why I call you *Tornado*."

"Oh, stop," I moan, covering my face in Greyson's folded shirt, only to be hit by the fresh scent of his discreet cologne, now elegantly perfumed with essence of root vegetable.

“I must say, Tornada,” Rami adds with a smirk, “I did very much enjoy you drenching the asshole. I only wish I was recording that.”

Fran tries to restrain herself from laughing as we exit on the top floor and make our way to Carrie’s apartment.

“God, I thought I was done making an asshole of myself in front of that man.”

“Apparently not,” she snorts as I open the door.

“Let me just soak this in some bleach and then we can head out,” I say, stopping in my tracks as I spot the lid of the bottle I had been looking for sitting and taunting me right there in the freaking dishrack next to the cups and plates I washed earlier while tidying up.

“Fuck, it’s right there...”

“I hope you know that that stain’s never coming out, hun,” sings Rami, half chortling to herself as if enjoying my predicament.

“Oh, fuck, don’t say that. Where’s the freaking bleach?”

Greyson

“Thank you,” I say to the maintenance man who mops the juice from the dark floor, readying myself to converse with the man walking towards me.

Landon.

His intemperate glare wanders in displeasure down and then back up my body, his face contorting in vexation.

His snarls slices through the air. “*What the fuck* do you think you’re doing?”

Out of my peripheral vision, I spot the maintenance man look up, and I move a few feet away to spare him from what I

already know from Landon's foul expression will be as unpleasant an exchange as he can possibly make it.

"What's the problem?" I ask.

His execrable glower strays over my torso before he leans into me, his face the kind of merciless tempest I've come to expect of late in the last months... since I finally began to dare defy him.

"What's the fucking problem?" he repeats contemptuously. "There is a room full of people over there expecting you to do your fucking job."

The scent from the juice soaked into my skin soothes me inexplicably, adding light around the edges of his darkness.

"I'll need ten minutes to wash this off. Give them my apologies. I'm sure you can hold the fort without me."

"That's not the fucking point," he seethes. "What were you thinking taking your shirt off like that? Trying to impress the dumb cunt who threw that at you? The bitch probably did it on purpose. There's no shortage of worthless whores willing to throw themselves at you, is there, Greyson?"

My body goes rigid at the man's odious words.

"How are you supposed to have any authority over your staff if you take your fucking clothes off to impress the local whores?"

I tip my head, examining his dark eyes.

What don't you want them to see?

My body?

Or the scars?

"I'm sure they'll recover," I reply, wishing I had the guts to turn his own face red... with blood.

"Who is she?"

"No one," I growl, but his eyes flare in curiosity at the speed of my response.

What's more, unless I can keep him out of her path, he'll be seeing her on Monday... though based on everything I've seen of her so far, she has absolutely no fucking clue.

I tip my head towards our staff, my gaze caught by the glint of that silver goddamn ring of his in the process—the same one he's always wanted me to wear... to show *loyalty*.

“Go back to our people,” I say. “You've dragged them here on a Saturday morning once again. I'm sure you had good reason for that.”

My words arouse his ire, causing him to bare his teeth at me.

“You have responsibilities. Do I need to remind you of that?”

“No. I think I've been informed of that enough.”

The parting words which he gnarls at me before returning to the same room in which I'll be sitting opposite him in fifteen minutes would cause me pain... if I hadn't heard them a hundred times before.

It all depends on his moods.

There are good days and bad, depending on whether I've pleased him or not, and pleasing him consists of one thing: reverential submission, something I can no longer offer.

“You're a fucking embarrassment.”

As he walks away, I mutter words under my breath.

“Thank you, Father.”

Indigo

My eyes dart around the lobby as I push the door of the apartment building open, scanning the area for any signs of the man whose shirt is still soaking in bleach.

I pulled it out of its hydrogen peroxide bath earlier today, hoping that the stains would have miraculously disappeared, but I'm fairly sure that all it did is turn the elegantly creamy-white shirt a stark neon while turning the beetroot stains a delectable shade residing somewhere between highly concentrated urine and jaundiced liver.

"All clear!" I eke out in whispered panic, making Fran and my friend Yoshi, who's coming up for a coffee to sober himself up before going out to see a hot friend of his, burst into fits of drunken merriment, all three of us having consumed way too much saké with our sushi at dinner.

It's just before 8 p.m. so I have no idea why I think Greyson Everitt would be roaming around the lobby but knowing my luck, I'll end up body-slammng him by accident or something.

I push open the sturdy steel and glass door, grabbing Yoshi's arm and tugging him as we all scuttle along the shiny floor of the lobby, throwing a cursory hello at the receptionist who greets us before stopping for a second to check out the

spot where I gave Greyson the beet shower, thanking the heavens that the stain looks like it's gone.

Once inside the elevator, I jab at the PH button, breathing a sigh of relief when the doors close.

“Aw, dammit,” groans Yoshi. “I wanted to see the stud.”

Fran smirks. “You wouldn't be able to speak for days.”

“Stop it,” I chide as the doors open on the top floor.

“Seriously?” slurs Yoshi. “That hot?”

“Shh. Keep it down,” I snap as we approach the corner. I turn around to throw them my best drunken *Behave* look. “Let's try and be civilized for once. I have a neighbor who is *seriously* tightly wound.”

As I round the corner, I stop dead in my tracks... about six feet in front of the man I was just roasting.

Of course...

I glance up at the ceiling for a second, thanking God for the exquisite timing as Greyson Everitt's fierce gray eyes bore into me, a hint of intrigue softening his dusky pink lips despite the moody air to his demeanor, no doubt at my words.

Behind me, I hear Fran snorting and I close my eyes tightly for a second before opening them.

“Um... Sorry about that,” I manage, stepping around the man who doesn't say a word but merely watches me make another highly inelegant exit, only this time at least I haven't inflicted any permanent vegetable stains on his person.

I fumble with the key, managing to drop it not once but twice before finally managing to get the door open, glancing over to find him watching me in the corridor as I usher my friends in, closing the door behind me.

“God hates me,” I decide as my back hits the door.

“Holy shit, is that the man you juiced?” exclaims Yoshi, taking his light cream jacket off.

“The very same,” sings Fran.

I plonk my bag onto the floor and head to the plastic tub inside the sink in which is languishing the remnants of what was once a very refined piece of cotton.

“Is Rami here?” asks Yoshi.

“No. She’s on a date with some dancer chick from her self-defense class. I don’t think she’s coming back tonight.”

I begin to rinse, pulling the shirt out and locating the front. “Fuuccckkk. The stain’s still urine yellow. And I scrubbed it for about half an hour today.”

“Oh well, you’ll just have to go explain it to him tomorrow,” suggests Fran, her tone very naughty indeed.

“Yeah, you owe him a shirt, girl,” adds Yoshi.

“God, don’t say it,” I grumble. “I made the mistake of looking up the cost of this brand of shirt. It’s literally half a month’s fucking rent for me.”

“Maybe he’ll take alternative payment methods?” sniggers Yoshi.

“Yesss,” hisses Fran.

“Shut up, you two,” I moan. “Oh God, I feel like I owe him now. I hate that.”

The next morning, I stare at the shirt as I ready myself to give it to him, hoping he’s not at home so I can leave him a note.

Twenty dollars’ worth of stain-removal products and half an hour of scrubbing it with bicarbonate of soda upon my soul mom Marilla’s recommendation and all I’ve got to show for it is a very sore arm and the cotton now fraying slightly around the jaundicey splotches on what once passed for a shirt.

“Listen, do you want to pay him five hundred dollars?” Fran chides as she snatches my T-shirt from me for the third time.

She's refusing to let me put on a T-shirt over my long floral maxi dress with its swooping low-cut neckline which does magical things to the female body including making my tits look like two honeydew melons, according to my friend.

"I'd rather pay him the cash than debase myself like this. Anyway, Carrie's giving me her full salary for replacing her at work while she's gone. Three grand for just one week. If I have to give up five hundred of it just to hold onto my dignity, that's fine by me."

Fran cocks an eyebrow. "Who are you kidding? That man's most highly experienced dick knows full well it's not gonna get any if he makes you pay. He won't take your money."

"Jesus, you need to stop working at that fucking sports bar," I moan. "You sound just like the drunken hard-ons I've seen in there."

"I'm telling you," she grins.

"Okay, then why the *Fuck-me* dress?"

She grabs his freshly washed, dried and pointlessly ironed shirt which I neatly folded after multiple attempts and shoves it into my hand.

"Get your little ass out there and give the man his shirt."

She unlocks the door and practically throws me out, poking her head out of the door as I walk over to Greyson's apartment with his defiled shirt in my hand, hoping he's not at home so I can leave a note.

As I approach, I notice three cameras—one attached to the corner where the ceiling meets the walls, another just above the doorframe above a tiny doorbell camera to my right.

Why the hell does he have three cameras? Paranoid, much?

I glance over at Fran whose hazel eyes are widening from ridiculous levels of glee as she watches the show. I shoo her back inside, a plea she ignores as goosebumps prick up the

bare skin of my arm and upper back under the sudden sensation that I'm being watched.

An eerie charge crackles through me as I glance up at the black semi-dome above the door, the camera inside the casing angled down at me, and then at the bigger wall-mounted camera at the top before settling my unnerved gaze at the peephole.

As I press the doorbell, my body begins to tingle inexplicably at the idea that he's watching me, and as a thin layer of cool sweat mists my skin, I fidget, paralyzed by the thought that he's staring at me through the peephole.

It's creepy... or at least, it should be...

My heartbeat thumps in my ears, and I count five of them before one lock clicks, and then another, and finally... Greyson opens the door, looking like he's just put his T-shirt on.

"Look..."

This is the point at which I know my mouth is about to run away with itself, but I can't stop it, listening as if a third party as I ramble on and on, explaining the stain removers, the multiple bleach baths, showing the yellow ring and the frayed cotton where I scrubbed too hard.

The man is like a freaking statue as he watches me, his annoyingly perfect face unmoving but for occasional narrowing of his pale eyes or the slight upward tilt in the crook of his lips, or dark glimmers of mirth which dance across his pallid eyes.

His body barely moves, the thing giant and no doubt weighing twice what mine does, though I do notice his arms tensing as his gaze roams avidly down the length of my body one single time, pausing at my tits before finding my eyes.

The way he does is not quite lecherous, but more... deviant and unabashed.

I prattle on and on, wishing Fran would body-slam me to shut me up, but instead, I feel my little speech rolling to an end, which I'm frankly relieved about as I've had enough of

holding back the sass just because I made one innocent mistake.

“So, I’ve tried everything. It’s not coming out. I can pay you in cash. I just... need to wait till my next paycheck.”

He blinks at me slowly. “Pay me for what, Indigo?”

Christ, the way my name rolls off his full, large lips is kind of sinful. Although frankly, I’m still somewhat mad that he knows it.

“For the shirt,” I press on. “I want to pay you back.”

He holds his hand out and I hand it to him. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Well, I insist.”

His weight shifts. “Goodbye, Indigo.” He leans his head out, peering down the corridor just in time to see Fran duck her flaming red-haired noggin back inside the doorframe. “And goodbye to your friend,” he says, raising his voice deliberately loud so that she can hear him.

“Goodbye,” squeaks out Fran, hiding for a moment before ducking her head back out, causing both of us to unite in mortification.

He turns back to look at me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My spine snaps up and my mouth goes dry as I try to make sense of his words.

“I mean... maybe you will,” I stutter. “Maybe you won’t...”

He smiles, closing the door behind him and leaving me feeling like I’ve just gone three rounds with my favorite vibrator while on stage.

“Well, at least we were both mortified,” I decide as I get back inside and close the door.

“What was that *See you tomorrow* crap?” asks Fran.

“Lord knows. I offered to pay for the shirt. If he doesn’t want it, that’s his problem. As far as I’m concerned, we’re

even, and if he thinks I owe him *one more minute*, he's got another thing coming."

My phone dings on the countertop, and I see a message from Kohl, the guy I've been seeing casually these last few weeks.

Can I see you tonight?

"God, it's Kohl. He wants to see me."

"Still into you, huh?"

"I guess... I told him when we first hooked up that I wasn't ready for a relationship. I thought he got it, but I'm starting to wonder."

"Does he know about Micah?"

"Yeah. Bits of it," I say, not wanting to tell Fran that even she doesn't know the full story of what happened with him.

After weeks of helping me through the stalking and threats, and him and his deranged family knocking on the door of my basement suite in the middle of the night like a scene out of some horror movie, not to mention pushing me into walls, choking me, hitting me... and... other things, I couldn't face telling her about the rest.

My friends already went through so much trying to keep me safe, letting me stay with them, helping me find ways to help me stop shaking with panic when his threats to kill me came through, getting me to finally go to the police, not that that was in the slightest bit useful seeing as he was careful to convey the threats verbally, but never leave them in a message.

Even now, months later, I still feel guilty about them being dragged into it all, putting themselves at risk in the process, even though I know they did it because they love me and would do anything to protect me, just as I would them.

I don't want to tell them I'm still getting weird calls and unnerving messages.

Hello.

I mean, that's not strange, right?

Not unless you spent months being stalked and threatened and followed... and hurt.

Only then can you fully understand how one stupid innocuous word from a number you don't know can leave you pacing for hours.

I should have pushed harder with the police, but they barely seemed to take it seriously. Apparently, unless I'm actually assaulted, the state of Maryland doesn't really give a shit how deranged my ex gets.

And I'm not the only victim. He's done this to several of his exes, only two of whom have ever gone to the police to make a complaint, only to withdraw it out of fear for themselves and their families.

It sounds easy, right? You're being bothered, so call the police...

But when the man harassing you comes from one of the richest and most powerful families in the city, with connections to judges, lawyers, politicians, police and God knows who else, nothing is ever that simple...

And the sad reality is that he's now in jail not for what he did to me, or to his exes who have all been through the same shit with him, but for beating up a guy in a bar—one as well-connected as him.

And this time, no amount of strings his family pulled could get him out on bail while awaiting trial for the assault in light of the fact that the victim ended up with his eye socket smashed in, a broken nose, a hematoma on his brain, and his vision permanently impaired.

Someone from the DA's office told me they'll accept a plea deal of no less than five years for the assault. They know about me and the other women, but unless we cooperate, and ignore the threats he made against our families, there's little they can do, and I got the distinct impression that they had no intention of getting into that quagmire.

The only solace is that things have been quiet since he was arrested and detained without the option of bail seeing as this

is his third violent offense, a fact I had no idea about when I met him.

Or at least, it was quiet until these weird messages started to come in a few weeks ago, as well as the anonymous calls that I didn't answer, leading to long almost-silent voicemails.

I can't shake the feeling that Micah has got someone from his family to mess with my head again, a fact that makes me feel... contaminated. Like I can't take a full breath, like the air is filled with smoke.

I think that's why when Kohl asked me out a couple of months ago, I finally said yes after his third attempt. I was so desperate to erase the touch of Micah from my body, so desperate to trust someone again.

And while Kohl is kind and smart and lovely, I'm just not ready to be with a man in any kind of serious way.

And for a reason which I don't understand, I don't feel safer when Kohl's around, nor comforted, and his touch doesn't cleanse me of the feel of Micah like I prayed it would. Instead, it triggers me. It's not his fault at all, but I don't feel pleasure with him. I can't even get aroused, and I have to hide that fact so as not to hurt him.

I guess that's why I'm so perplexed at how the perfect stranger next door sporting the permanently disagreeable scowl could have reignited my libido after months of me assuming it was permanently rendered dormant.

"I told him I could only handle something really casual," I say.

"And you think he wants more?" asks Fran, taking the kettle over to the sink to fill it up.

"Yeah. He gets kind of annoyed if I don't text him back. He wants to know if I talked to other men. It's not his fault. He just wants... a normal fucking relationship, but I just can't give him that now. Not even close."

"You have to tell him."

"Yeah, I will."

I text him back:

Sorry, I'm starting that temp job tomorrow. These next two days are gonna be crazy. How about mid-week? Wednesday?

I jump at how fast he texts back.

OK. Wednesday. Your place?

I think for a moment.

Yeah. If that's ok? Like, around seven?

Okay. Sounds good. I've missed you, Indie. You, and that smoking hot body of yours.

Fuck.

I put a heart emoji under the message and put my phone down as Fran puts two sachets of tea into two empty cups.

“He's coming round Wednesday night.”

Fran's eyes dart to mine. “You don't want to do it over the phone?”

“Um, wasn't it you, madam, that told me I need to stop being so afraid of all men?” I retort.

“He's not aggressive?”

“No. Never. I'm not worried like that. I just want to explain that I need some space right now. Maybe we can just be friends or something...”

“He seems really keen.”

Yeah... and he really did kind of come out of nowhere. We met at my friend’s art gallery and exchanged numbers just out of politeness. I’ve never really had a man be that insistent before... other than Micah.

“I know. That’s why I don’t want to mess him around.”

“Plus it’ll leave more room for hot stuff next door.” Frannie wiggles her brows.

“Stop,” I chuckle as we wait for the water to boil. “I think I’m gonna avoid the red flag bearers for at least another year.”

Indigo
Monday

“**Y**ou’ll be using Carrie’s office while she’s away.”

I follow the perky blonde in the tight pencil skirt and wearing the kind of red heels you normally see on stage and gloriously wrapped around a pole down the corridor of ELC Public Relations Agency in the heart of Washington DC’s main political district.

I was already nervous after walking across the granite floor of the lobby with its cavernous vaulted ceiling and Art Deco design, followed by a trip in the shiniest elevator I’ve ever set eyes on which took me all the way to the top floor.

It doesn’t help that I’m wearing an outfit that I’d never normally wear. Carrie told me to pick out a blouse and pencil skirt from her closet, and I’m wearing one of only two pairs of high heels that I have.

My skirt isn’t quite as tight as Donna’s, the lady walking me down the corridor, past meeting rooms and offices, and mine at least goes past my knee, but it’s still awkward as hell to be wearing this.

Carrie told me I’d need stockings, which I bought myself. I honestly can’t believe women still wear these nylon torture skins on their legs yet here I am sashaying my little ass down this ridiculously clean top floor in them, pretending I know

what the hell I'm doing or that I even fit in. I tied my hair into a tight bun, but you can see the pink in the knot of hair, but oh well, I'm sure they'll survive.

Carrie filled me in a little on what she does here—logistics mainly, and while I'll do my best to do her proud, if it wasn't for the fact that I'll be paid her full salary—three thousand, or three months' rent for me—I'd honestly never consider a job like this.

Just walking past the buff men in suits and ties eyeing me up in the corridor or glancing at me as they make what I imagine is hive-inducing small-talk next to a coffee machine in one of two kitchens I've already spotted gives me the kind of anxiety that I associate with the rat race I hope to never find myself in, even if that means I'm destined to live in damp basement suites for the rest of my life.

However, with my finances in the mess they're in, I can't exactly afford to be picky right now. Plus, it was really sweet of Carrie to pitch the idea of me replacing her, and of her boss to agree to it when I'm sure he could have easily got a temp in for way less money.

Donna brings out a key and opens the door to the office marked Carolyn Hughes, her maiden name which she told me she'll change when she gets married to the lovely Tom in early July.

Her office door opens to floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking one of the quieter streets in this district. The room is spacious, its walls painted a warm taupe, the furniture, mostly glass, dark wood and steel, elegant. A few plants are dotted around and a painting of a meadow filled with wildflowers hangs opposite her large frosted-glass desk.

“Carrie's tidied it up and locked the important stuff away, so you have some space.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I take Carrie's black suit jacket off me and hang it on the hook on the door, glancing down at my shiny short-sleeved cream blouse, the likes of which I haven't seen myself in since

once performing the role of Annie at a school play in fifth grade.

She takes her clipboard out from under her arm, handing it to me. “This is our standard NDA. Are you okay to sign it before we start?”

An NDA? To temp for a week?

I scan the page, not exactly sure if there are any huge red flags, but I unclip the pen and sign it anyway, handing it back to her.

“Thank you, Indigo. Do you know what you’ll be doing here?” Donna asks, her perfectly coiffed curls bouncing as she talks.

“Um, honestly, no.”

“No worries. The boss’ll explain it to you. He told me you’ll be working with him all day anyway.”

“Okay.”

Carrie mentioned her boss to me—some mysterious brooding type, the son of the company owner. Apparently, he never talks about his private life and based on the way she raves about the effect he has on her and every other woman in the office, I’m fairly sure that if it weren’t for Tom, she’d have a major crush on the guy.

Personally, after my run-ins with Greyson Everitt this weekend, I think I’ve had my fill of the sullen unreadable types, but I’ll make it work.

A week of discomfort in exchange for a three-month emergency fund—I’ll happily grin and bear every minute of it.

“In fact,” she adds, glancing down at her smartwatch, “he wants you right now.” She hands me a key. “For this office. Make sure you hold onto that.”

I tuck it into a pocket inside my phone case.

“You can keep your stuff in here, just lock the door afterwards. We have cameras down the corridors. Haven’t had a theft here in almost a year, so it’s all safe.”

I drop my purse onto Carrie's chair and leave, locking the door and following Donna down one corridor to the right, and then down another.

As we approach the large glass wall of a humungous meeting room and voices drift through the space, my heartrate inexplicably spikes and my mouth feels like I mistook my morning oatmeal for sawdust.

My steps falter as I enter the room, my feet not wanting to advance but doing it anyway as I slowly walk towards the long mahogany table, at which sit four men... including one I already know.

Holy fucking shit.

As the man I know gets to his feet, I contemplate my options, running for the door being by far the most appealing of them right now.

Donna walks us all the way round to the far side of the table near where he's sitting.

"Indigo, this is Greyson Everitt, one of our senior directors. You'll be working with him all week."

"Greyson, this is Indigo—" She turns to me. "Sorry, I forgot your last name."

My surname emerges, not from my mouth, but from Greyson Fucking Everitt's.

"Nilsson."

I feel the tremor of my breath in my chest, both at the fact that this man is going to my boss for the next week, and at the fact the he knew my legal name.

I did not give it to him. That much I'm sure of.

Nor has he seen the form clipped to the board tucked under Donna's arm.

Streams of icy water run beneath my skin as a thought seeps into me: Did he already know while I was busy trying to de-beet his shirt that I'd be working with him?

Is that why he was watching me so intently?

Kind of like he is now...

He holds his right hand out for me to shake and after glancing quickly at the three other men sat around the table watching us, I comply with the taciturn request, my fingers clumsily sliding across his palm before he squeezes my hand firmly, his eyes ablaze as he watches me.

I withdraw my hand, pretending to ignore the full-body tingles that just washed over me like warm ocean water.

“Thank you, Donna,” he says as she departs. “Indigo, this is Andre Williams, Steven Bradshaw and Ian West. We’ll be discussing their plans to open a new casino in Virginia next year and the possible PR fallout from it.” He turns to them. “Indigo has signed our NDA.”

The men all smile, saying hello, though in my tight little skirt, I suddenly feel like some little doll brought in to amuse them, the opposite of the powerful inner goddess I tell women to embrace when I’m giving yoga classes or leading kirtan meditations.

“You can sit here.”

My apparent boss for the next week points to the chair at the end of the table right next to him in front of which sits a notepad and pen. “I’ll need you to take some notes about any concerns raised, any problems that could arise and suggestions we make along the way. It doesn’t have to be verbatim—just the ideas in note form.”

“Okay.”

He fixes me with a stern regard. “First, we’ll need some tea and coffee. The machine’s at the back.”

He gestures towards the back wall, but I don’t look, my whole being flooding with most probably unjustified outrage at the fact that he’s turning me into his own personal tea-making slave.

I mean, granted, I’m here to be his freaking assistant apparently, and he is paying me, but it’s not so much the request as the bold way he required it of me, as if his

superiority to me was without question and I'm supposed to just waddle along and do anything he wants.

I attempt not to glare at him too uncivilly as I begin to contemplate whether debasing myself in a minor fashion for the next week is worth the three grand I'm going to be paid.

In one ear, I hear Rami's voice telling him that he can go sit on the spout of that tea pot over there, and in the other, I hear Fran's telling me to just suck it up and be his little tea maid and in exchange, milk him, not literally hopefully, for more money than I usually make in three months.

Fuck.

Throwing him my boldest glower of indignation, which if I'm not mistaken causes a sliver of amusement to dance in his eyes, I turn on my heels and head to the back wall, switching the full electrical kettle on which I presume I'm supposed to put on the mat in the middle of the table next to the sachets of tea all neatly sorted and stacked, no doubt by one of his minions, in a box on the table.

I turn my attention to the coffee machine, suddenly feeling like my ass is really on display in this tight skirt.

The machine has about eight different buttons on it and looks like something that could blend in on the International Space Station.

I think my mother had something similar at her house, though I was always so eager to get out of her company that I very rarely sat around the kitchen table long enough to watch her sulk her way through the most mundane of tasks in her fancy kitchen.

By the time I've figured out that this thing has its own built-in grinder, the water in the kettle has already boiled and I decide to take it over to the table to take the heat off me as I figure out how to work the coffee machine of my nightmares.

As I place it on the table, Greyson's voice stops me. "There's a clear jug for the hot water."

"Oh."

“This will do... for today.”

I arrow a pointed look at him before heading back to the coffee machine, opening the grinder at the top and pouring in what I imagine is an appropriate amount of beans from a metallic bag next to it, adding the water from the dispenser nearby and spending thirty seconds trying to figure out which button to push.

But before I can do so, a shadow darkens the wall before me and I angle my head up, my gaze colliding with the arrogant prick I have to be subordinate to for what I sense is going to be a week that requires me to draw on every single one of my zen meditations to get through.

Not that I was ever that good at those, frankly.

“It looks like you need help.”

“No, thank you,” I sing as the men at the table keep talking. “I am capable of making coffee, believe it or not.” I let out a sigh. “Unless you need it before the end of the meeting, that is,” I mutter, realizing I’ve earned an E for effort for my first task as personal assistant, or whatever PG-rated Dom-sub fantasy Mr. Everitt’s going to subject me to this week.

Out of my side vision, I see the corner of his lip tip up a little as he presses a button near the top causing the beans to grind in the clear hopper remarkably quietly.

“You didn’t like that, huh?” he says, his voice low so as not to be overheard. He takes a filter from a box, opens out the filter housing, and places it inside. “Being ordered to make tea.”

I glare up at him, realizing I’m going to need a chiropractor if this freaking tree of a man keeps standing so close to me that I have to crank my neck back each time.

I’m also realizing, much to the chagrin of my self-esteem, how hyperaware I am of his proximity to me, of the white shirt sheathing the heavy muscles that are still seared into my vision, of the charcoal-gray pants wrapped around long legs... and the hint of his erection that I saw.

I know I didn't exactly have my wits about me that day, but I know I didn't imagine the size of the thing. As I realized when I was alone in bed last night, the thing has imprinted itself on my brain.

Indie...

"I don't recall Carrie ever telling me she got her MA in Business Management so that she could be your little drinks slave."

His eyes beam though his face remains unmoving. "Carrie works in logistics. You're not qualified for that. We'd spend longer training you than you'd spend being useful."

"Charming," I mutter, watching the ground beans drop into the clear filter.

"I've given my assistant Carrie's job for the next week. And you'll be doing her job."

"Which, from what I'm gathering, consists of waddling around in tight clothes and serving you beverages as if you're Henry the XIII."

"Not really," he replies smoothly. "I'm reserving these tasks specifically for you."

My mouth falls open.

"And speaking of clothes," he continues, eyeing me severely, "we'll be having a word about yours... in my office before you leave."

I glance down at my outfit. "Carrie told me to wear this. She said she does."

"I don't care what she does." The hint of a growl claws its way into his voice. "You're not wearing outfits like that around here. We'll be discussing it later."

"Oh, will we, now?"

"Yes. We will." As the jug at the bottom of the machine fills three-quarters of the way with dark amber liquid, he adds, "I trust you can take it from here."

Without thinking, my fingers reach for his arm to stop him. He halts in his tracks, looking down as I pull my hand away.

Sharp eyes flick to mine and for a second, I lose my voice before finding it somehow amidst the weight of tension so irritatingly thick it's a miracle my brain can even conjure up words.

"If you think I'm pouring it for them as part of their sick little assistant fantasy," I whisper, "you've got another thing coming."

"I'm sure they can manage the pouring, Indigo."

"Well, good."

As he returns to the table, I turn back, staring as chestnut droplets splash into the well of coffee below.

Fuck, I mutter internally, realizing that my plan to act professionally has already gone a bit sideways and that you'd never think he was paying me with the amount of attitude I can't seem to stop myself from giving him.

Maybe it's to make up for my weekend of bleaching servitude after I juiced his clothes. I mean, I do still feel bad about that, but I did offer to pay him back for the shirt. It's not my fault if he refuses to accept it.

I take the now-full jug of coffee over and place it onto a mat in the center of the table, sitting down and deciding to check my mouth at the gate for the duration of the meeting.

Almost an hour later, I've come to the realization that it's very hard to write when there's a man watching you intently, deciding when and where he'd like to sink his teeth into your neck.

I'm trying to concentrate on the meeting, on the potential for protests against another casino, on the senators who are amenable, the permits still needed and solutions to the numerous obstacles in their way, but it's not easy when every

time I glance in Grey's direction, his ferocious gaze burns my skin.

His eyes wander between the men, my face and my hand as I write, his subtle but singular scent slipping through the air towards me.

Every time he leans his weight forwards on the table, I'm aware of the honed bulk of muscle that makes up his torso, figuratively kicking my own little ass for wondering if the lower half is equally as impressive.

As I write down some suggestion about a contact in some government office, my phone, on silent, lights up, and the preview of a message appears.

I only see four words, but they make everything around them dissolve to white, entrapping me in a bubble with the person who sent them, with only the sound of the raging beat of my heart and the sickening crawl of malaise into my belly for company.

I see you. Whore.

The vision of Micah, his ocean-blue eyes, his golden blond hair and perfect skin, his outer beauty a foil for the rageful maniac inside, explodes before me like a keg of gunpowder as the insidious creep of his obsession makes its way inside me.

He knows the effect his words have on me, or rather the words one of the sinister members of his family is enjoying sending to me on his twisted behalf.

I guess this is what entertainment looks like for Micah Korhonen when you're incarcerated, and he knows exactly what effect he'll cause.

He saw with his own eyes the way I would cry, beg, bargain for him to leave me alone, threaten to go far away, to call the police, to tell everyone he knows.

He witnessed my distress, my tears, my torment, my transparent attempt at calm. And as I learned later in the few therapy sessions I could afford, he feasted off every morsel of my distress, my tears his sustenance, my pain the charge of a battery.

He knows that a single message like this will leave me weakened from panic for hours... if I let him. I mean, he is in jail. He can't hurt me from there, and I don't think even his rich degenerate cousins would risk hurting me for him.

He wants to see the reaction.

Don't give it to him.

I inhale the words my therapist spoke to me, lifting my fingers to the screen and blocking the number. I don't even know if that works with anonymous calls, but I do it each time anyway, until they get too bad and I have to change my number again.

That's what I don't get. There are only a few people who I give my number out to, and yet he seems to find it each time...

I turn my phone over, realizing I missed at least a minute of conversation. I stare back down at the page and the words which came to a halt mid-sentence, before looking up, only instead of seeing the men talking, my gaze is caught by that of Greyson who is staring straight at me.

For a second, I think he might be mad at my lapse in concentration, but there's something else altogether chiseled into the smooth angles of his handsome face...

He inspects me, concern causing his eyes to darken as they wander over my surely ashen face.

I swallow, collecting myself, my fingers wrapping more tightly around my pen, as I look up at Ian who is speaking and try to follow what he's saying.

I write a few lines only for the door of the meeting room to open and a man to enter, one whose presence is immediately so bold that it shifts the air in the room.

It's the same man I saw watching us on Saturday—the tall, handsome one, early fifties, roughly.

As he enters the room, his footsteps seem to slow as he sees me, his turbulent gaze storming between me and Greyson before he finally approaches the table, greeting the men with authority.

He takes a seat in the large leather desk chair at the far side opposite me, sliding his hands onto the table as he regards me with about the same warmth he was observing me and Greyson with after I spilled my juice all over him.

I prepare to be introduced, but instead, a stone-faced Greyson says, “That’s all we need from you, Indigo. Go and find Donna. She’ll set you up with a computer. I need your notes typed up in Word format and emailed to me. She’ll give you the address.”

All trace of warmth seems to have been siphoned from Grey’s face, so instead of questioning him, I take my notepad, getting to my feet.

“It was nice to meet you,” I say to the men, who all respond courteously, but for one at the far end, spying me with about as much civility as a wolf tracking a deer he’s intent on consuming.

I leave the room, feeling Greyson’s eyes on me as I close the door.

Indigo

I stare at the gold-rimmed clock on the wall, the big hand approaching five.

It's been hours since I saw him, but that might be in part because I've barely left the room other than with Donna's supervision. She's shadowed me all day long, popping up with a frankly creepy smile on her face every time I leave the room.

Honestly, if I didn't know better, I'd say she was watching me or something, making sure I don't roam wild around the halls of their precious company.

Lord knows what she thinks I'm going to do—steal top-secret government information, by the looks of it.

I didn't even get to go out for lunch. Donna insisted that they order something for me, which they did, and I ended up eating in my office alone, getting the distinct impression from her that it's best I don't eat in the larger of the three kitchens I've seen here.

I've spent the afternoon doing various admin tasks that she's given me which have ranged between the monotonous and the straight-up mind-numbing, constantly reminding myself that I'll be getting Carrie's full six-hundred-dollar-a-day salary.

I didn't hear from Greyson after I left the meeting room other than four emails, the first thanking me for emailing him the notes I typed up; the second asking me if all was okay and

if I needed anything; the third to tell me he'd be driving me home, to which I replied with a very resounding, *No, you will not*, mainly due to my irritation at the fact that he didn't even ask if I need a lift.

The fourth email is why I'm sitting here now waiting for Donna. I glance at the screen, my fingers drumming the glass desk as the words he wrote ruffle my feathers once again:

Indigo.

I need to see you in my office immediately.

We need to discuss some things.

Including your choice of clothes and your attitude.

Donna will come and get you.

Greyson Everitt

"Who the hell does this guy think he is?" I mutter under my breath, my foot twitching in aggravation.

My spine snaps up straight as a rod as my fingers position themselves on the keyboard.

I'll give him "attitude".

Dear Greyson,

Is there a reason I need a chaperone every time I leave the office? Are you afraid I'm a foreign agent sent in to steal classified information? Because if so, I can assure you that espionage is not on my list of skills.

As for my clothes, I find them perfectly appropriate for my current position.

The same goes for my attitude.

Sincerely,

Indigo Nilsson

Send.

The unexpected ring of my phone has me jumping out of my skin, especially since I've spent half the day checking it to make sure no more of those fucking messages have come through... which they haven't.

I pick it up.

Carrie.

"What took you so long to call me back?" I whisper, having waited all day for her to get back to me.

"*Sorrrryyy*," she sings. "Dealing with a shitload of family crap over here."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Ah, nothing a crate of wine won't fix. What's up?"

"You got my messages," I stammer. "How the fuck did you omit to tell me that your boss is also your hot neighbor?"

She laughs. "I'm sure I did, hun."

"No, you did not!"

"Well, Tom's always around. I can't exactly go into all the details, if you know what I mean. Has it gone okay?"

"Yeah, except I had no idea your neighbor was your boss and I kind of gave him some shit."

"Oh God, Indie." She breaks into a chuckle. "Oh well, he's a big boy. And I did warn him you were a bit... feisty."

"You have to be with him. He can be such a domin—"

A knock on my door has my palm slapping my thumping chest. "Shit."

"What?"

Fuck.

"Come in!"

I exhale a thundering sigh of relief to see Donna there and not Greyson who I feared had overheard some of that.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Carrie, I have to go.”

“You enjoy, babe.”

I hang up, getting to my feet. “I feel like I’m being summoned for execution,” I groan.

“Oh, he’s not that bad,” smirks Donna. “He likes you.”

“Likes me? He’s calling me in there to discuss my *clothes* and my *attitude*.”

Her eyes widen as if in shock.

“Has he ever done that to you?” I ask.

“Nope. Never.”

“Great,” I groan as I head out, locking the door behind me.

The trip from my office to his seems interminable, especially in these high heels which I swear, once this job is over, I’m donating to a charity shop.

I don’t care that I’m only five foot three and practically need a stepladder to converse with Grey. I’m never subjecting my feet, legs or back to this foot torture ever again.

Aware of the hammering in my chest as we approach this darker part of the floor, with fewer rooms and dimmer lights, I inhale deeply as I prepare to “discuss my attitude” or whatever else Grey’s got a stick up his ass about today.

As we reach the end of a quiet corridor, a dark-brown door looms up before us. Donna knocks on it three times before being instructed to come in.

She holds it open for me and I enter what may be the largest office I’ve ever seen. On the right is a wall of glass overlooking a park and beautiful old Washington buildings.

On the left is a dark wall featuring shelves, a printer, some plants and an abstract and frankly unsettling oil painting of a

wolf staring out from a thicket of trees, a full moon blazing above it.

And frankly the wolf's red-eyed glare is civilized compared to that of the man sitting in a black leather office chair in front of a desk that's about the width of my entire little apartment. And I get the feeling that Grey knows how to stalk, pounce and ravage way more effectively than any wolf...

"Will you be needing anything from me?"

"No. You can go home, Donna."

"Okay. Bye, y'all."

I turn toward her and smile before coming to face the man whose eyes haven't left me since I entered the room.

"Sit down."

I forego the urge to tell him I'd rather stay standing and instead sit in a leather armchair opposite him.

He expels a long, slow breath, his chest undulating as the air leaves him.

He doesn't speak for a moment, eyeing me with such focus that if I wasn't annoyed by him, I'd frankly find it intimidating.

As it is, I muster my best glare up from somewhere deep inside.

"How was your day?" he finally asks.

Um...

Restrictive, tedious and mundane... apart from the moments I got to be with your moody self which felt like someone had fed a lit firecracker down my esophagus.

"It was fine," I reply breezily just to annoy him.

"Apart from being asked to make drinks for my clients."

My body steams in annoyance. "For your information, it wasn't the request itself, it was the *way* you asked it."

"How?"

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “Just kind of... annoyingly dominant.”

“Hmm.” His eyes narrow, causing my lips to part, a habit I need to get out of around this man. “I’d have thought you’d have liked that.”

Holy shit.

My heartbeat rages through my neck at his insinuation. And it’s true... I do like that. Or at least, I used to.

After my dating experiences this year, I’m fairly sure I’ve lost my sub kink, one I used to enjoy.

His eyes slide to the monitor on his desk and back to me.

“I got your email.”

“Oh, good,” I reply. “I hope it clears things up.”

He shakes his head slowly, that thundercloud of a voice of his clapping through my body. “I’ll decide when they’re cleared up.”

He finally tugs his gaze away from me long enough to begin to read and oh my God, having your own brazen words read back to you is a new exercise in mortification.

“Dear Greyson.”

He pauses to look at me.

“Is there a reason I need a chaperone? Are you afraid I’m a foreign agent sent in to steal classified information? Because I can assure you that espionage is not on my list of skills.”

His mercurial gaze settles on my face, which I’m fairly sure is beginning to flush pink. Again.

“We’ll deal with the chaperone part in a minute,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “So... espionage isn’t on your list of skills. I’d like to know what is.”

The devilish shadow to his voice is determined to steal my ability to speak.

“What?” I manage.

“I’d like to know what your skills are, Indigo.”

I pull my best defiant look. “Um... in what context, exactly?”

“All contexts,” he replies with a scowl, the word inexplicably setting off firecrackers in my panties.

“Well, let’s see... I can do a mean Kakasana,” I say about a yoga pose I know full well he won’t know. “I can lead a class in Kirtan chanting.” *Another word Mr. Designer Suit won’t be able to understand.* “I make the best cashew cheese you’ve ever tasted. I have a white belt in judo.” His brows rise at that one. “And I can call out bullshit when I see it. Are those enough skills for you?” I add in a mutter, “I mean, if you understood any of that...”

His elbow bends, resting on the arm of his chair, his fingers finding his chiseled jaw which he rubs slowly.

As he ponders me in the kind of silence that most people would find uncomfortable but that he seems to own without the slightest discomfort, I finally break the tension. “I’m a temp here. Why do you want to know about my skills anyway?”

“Because I want to know more about you... and about how you can be useful to me.”

I sit up straight, my breath shortening. “*Useful?* Charming. I’m not some piece of software, you know?”

His eyes brighten as he takes in my hair-trigger reactions before slipping to the monitor again as he reads.

“As for my clothes, I find them perfectly appropriate for my current position. The same goes for my attitude.”

The specter of a smile dances around his sinful lips, lips I can’t help but stupidly glance at, mesmerized by the way they move.

Considering I haven’t felt arousal like this since Micah and was sure I’d never feel it again, I can’t help but bathe in his presence for reasons of pure sexual therapy if nothing else.

“That’s right,” I reply. “I think my clothes are entirely appropriate.”

“Well, I don’t,” he growls.

I glance at the cream blouse tucked into a gray pencil skirt combo, my gaze heading down to my heels which are squeezing my feet.

“What’s wrong with them, exactly? What, did you expect me to turn up in a bikini so you could all get your jollies off to the new tea slave?”

His face turns to stone. “Get up.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Indigo.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to look at you... and explain to you the problem I have.”

My brow creases in outrage. How dare this arrogant prick expect me to do some kind of fashion show for him where he picks me apart?

Only, dammit... I do want to stand up.

I do want him to look at me.

In fact, my body is tingling at the very thought of his predatory eyes wandering over the curves of my body, a fact made all the more potent by this fledgling arousal I thought that trauma had stolen away for good.

Curiosity plays around his eyes. I know to him this is some test—to see whether I want to stand for him, want to show off my body. I can’t after all deny that part of the reason I chose one of the tightest skirts in Carrie’s wardrobes and not the numerous pantsuits she has is because I wanted to rile him up a bit.

I guess it worked.

I swallow, contemplating which is stronger—my pride, my ego or my desire to feel his lustful eyes sliding over my body.

Well, I guess we know now, I mutter internally as I push my hands on the side of the chair and get to my feet, taking a

few steps back so that he can see me.

His hands slide down the arms of his chair as he studies my face, and then my chest, my waist, my hips, my thighs, my legs, going all the way down to my feet.

It's wildly inappropriate, but nerve endings I really thought dead as a dodo are now firing all over my body. That's all I care about right now.

He inhales his satisfaction at my acquiescence sharply. "Turn around for me."

Only this is where I draw the line.

I shake my head. "No way. You can see enough to appraise my outf—"

The word dissolves as Greyson gets to his feet, slowly walking his mammoth frame towards me. He stops six feet away.

"Turn," he repeats.

I lift my chin and reply with as much nerve as I can muster up. "Absolutely not."

I freeze to the spot as he begins to walk around me, a breath floating from him in a hoarse groan, caressing my neck, I swear.

That woody, citrusy scent of his envelopes my senses, distracting me from wondering whether my ass looks good from behind, and whether there's any chance if I asked nicely, that Greyson could bend me over his desk right fucking now and fuck away the memories that haunt me at night, leaving me tossing and turning, unable to keep my eyes closed, taking showers in order to get the feel of someone else out of me.

I surely can't be imagining it when another quiet groan rasps from his throat, the sound so delicious that it almost makes me close my eyes.

By the time he comes to stand back in front of me, I'm amazed I'm still standing at all, between the crackle of electricity zapping its way between our bodies and the sudden realization that my libido wasn't actually guillotined, but

just... put to sleep, waiting to be glared back to life by this man.

His hands tense as he watches me.

“Well?” I say, pretending that this man isn’t currently giving me a minor orgasm. “What exactly is the problem?”

“I don’t want you dressing like this in this office.”

“And why not?”

“The clothes... They’re too tight.”

“These are Carrie’s clothes. She told me to wear them.”

“She doesn’t have your... *attributes*.”

My nipples tighten into hard points beneath my blouse as I try to keep a lid on my indignation... and my arousal.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I spit out, although I already know.

Carrie’s body is more the ectomorph type—long and lean and goddess-like, the kind of lithe body you’d see walking down a runway.

I guess I’m as slim as her, but my waist is small, my hips a little broader, and my tits definitely a handful more bulbous.

“You know what it means,” he replies, eyes half closed as he inspects me. “I don’t want you walking around like this. This is a male-dominated office and I don’t need them distracted all day long.”

“*Distracted?! Isn’t it their* responsibility to control their dicks? I hate to point this out, but there are several other women I’ve passed around here in mini-skirts and fuck-me heels. Do you take issue with them too?”

“I don’t give a fuck what anyone else wears,” he responds in rough irritation. “I won’t have men around here looking at you.”

That’s when it hits me—he’s not telling me to not wear these clothes because he’s a puritanical asshole with boundary issues, but because... he’s jealous.

“Isn’t that my business, not yours?” I ask just to annoy him.

“Don’t test me, Indigo.”

“Why? What are you going to do if I do?”

I know I’m practically daring him to bend me over his desk, spank my ass, and teach me a lesson I won’t forget—and right now, whether that makes sense to anyone else or not, to me, there would be no better therapy.

“Tomorrow you’ll dress modestly.”

“Oh, will I, now?”

He takes a step towards me, narrowing the gap to three or so feet. “Yes. You will.”

What are you so afraid of, Grey?

As the thought crosses my mind, another replaces it, one which makes me wilt a little.

“Who was that man?”

A shadow crawls beneath his vibrant gray eyes, which, in the bright light of the sun through the large windows, I now see are flecked with shards of dark blue.

He blinks slowly. “What man?”

“You know the one. The one who makes Voldemort look like a cheerleader and looks like he’s just feasted on human flesh.”

He glances down, his eyes finding my waist. “His name is Landon Everitt. He’s the owner of this company.”

“Everitt?”

“Yes,” he replies soberly. “He’s my father.”

For some reason, a frigid wind billows through my body, easing strength from my limbs. Maybe it’s the fact that all light seemed to extinguish from Grey’s face the second I evoked him, as if a candle had been snuffed out leaving nothing but a trail of smoke.

I decide not to probe... *much*.

“He seems a bit...”

Of an asshole...

“Disagreeable.”

“He is,” he replies coarsely. “Which is another reason I don’t want you walking around here dressed like that. In fact, I don’t want you talking to him at all.”

It would sound strange if I didn’t have my own hellscape of a relationship with my mother, one so challenged in the maternal instincts department that her almost-daily mantra to my childhood was, “*I wish I’d never had you.*”

I don’t know what exactly is going on between Grey and his father—maybe it’s all good and the guy is just moody, but I can’t help wanting to know more... and to tell him I get it.

Not everyone does when it comes to parents who hurt you.

“What, is he dangerous or something?” I ask.

His body stiffens. “You’re going to stay away from him.”

“And what if I bump into him?”

“I’m going to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Is that why you have Donna appear every time I leave the room?”

“One of several reasons,” he replies possessively. “It’s also the reason I’ll be driving you home tonight—that and your outfit. I’m not having you walk the streets of DC at happy hour dressed like that. Which brings me to my next point... about your attitude.”

My jaw tightens. “What about it, exactly?”

“For as long as you work for me, when I tell you I’m taking you somewhere, you will comply.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but the second I step out of the building at five o’clock, I’m no longer your employee.”

“I’m driving you home, nonetheless, Indigo.”

“What if I have plans?”

“Do you?”

I sigh. “No.”

“Good. I’ll walk you to your office so you can get your things. Then I’m driving you home.”

Greyson
Tuesday

“Take a seat, Indigo.”

Before she can sit next to me as instructed, she looks over at the client, Johan, whose greedy eyes light up at her presence. If he weren't my client, I'd seriously consider teaching him some fucking manners.

“Black, Earl Gray, English breakfast?” she asks in that bratty way of hers.

I know what she's doing—payback for yesterday.

I blink slowly. “Excuse me?”

“Just wondering what kind of tea or coffee you'll need today.”

“I'm good with my water,” says Johan with a smile.

“So am I,” I add. “Now, sit down. Now. *Please.*”

She does as she's told, throwing me a faux-innocent little smile before picking up her pen as my mind wanders to the various ways this girl would benefit from some very thorough and intensive disciplining by me.

Half an hour in, I'm really trying to listen to what the insufferable asshole in the too-tight shirt is saying, but it's remarkably difficult when Ms. Nilsson is sitting next to me, wearing the exact kind of curve-enhancing outfit I thought I'd made myself very clear about her not wearing to this office.

I've never called a woman up on her choice of outfit before. And I'm fully aware that several of the women around here wear lower-cut tops and shorter skirts, not something I've ever cared about.

But for some reason, when she does it, it rankles.

I know enough about the men around here to know exactly what they'll be thinking when she sashays that tight little ass of hers down the corridor, wobbling around on heels she's clearly not used to like some fucking baby deer not realizing she's being watched.

Her breasts hang low against her shirt, whose buttons she's opened to the top of her cleavage, as she leans over the page and writes down anything remotely pertinent that the wealthy CEO client sitting opposite me is telling us about his plans for next year.

I can't stop myself from taking in her hand as she writes, her fingers slim, encased in numerous stone-topped silver rings, her short nails painted white. I can't help but imagine taking them in my mouth.

I'm only having her sit in on meetings that couldn't compromise any of our clients, but I'd forgotten quite how lecherous this particular one is, and every time he glances over at her ample tits, I have to restrain myself from ramming her pen into his eyeball.

As the meeting comes to a close, my fingers harden around the pen in my hand at the sound of a knock on the door. With half an hour to go, I was hoping we'd make it to the end of the day without him and her being in the same room together.

Without waiting for a reply, my father enters, liking to see our less important clients himself for a few minutes at the end.

“Johan,” he says, approaching, eyes fixed on the girl staring back at him, one whose presence in the same room as him I barely tolerate.

“Hey, Landon. Greyson and I had a great meeting. We got a lot sorted out.”

“My son will fill me in shortly.”

“Indigo, go wait in my office,” I instruct. “Ask Donna to show you the way if you’ve forgotten. I’ll be in to see you shortly.”

“Actually, you can stay,” counters my father, staring me down as Johan gets to his feet.

As we say our goodbyes and my father leads him out, Indie leans over to me, her impossibly bright green eyes wide as if with trepidation.

I know she feels something wrong when he’s near. At least she has that instinct.

“What do I do?”

“Nothing,” I respond, realizing I share some strange complicity with a woman I barely know. “Let me do the talking.”

My father walks slowly back to his chair opposite her, sitting down and turning the room to black.

“Indigo Nilsson.”

He says her full name deliberately—to let me know that he knows it, a taciturn threat that I will understand but hopefully she won’t.

She sits up straight. “Yes.”

“I hear you’ll be with us for a while.”

“Just until the end of the week,” I interrupt.

“Good. I hear you’re staying next door to Greyson. In Tom’s place.”

“And you are?” she asks, causing his brown eyes to darken.

He pauses as if outraged at the audacity of her daring to make him introduce himself. He leans back in his chair, taking up more space in the room by the second.

“Landon Everitt. Greyson’s father.”

Her throat moves as she swallows. “Well, nice to meet you,” she says. “And yes, I’m cat-sitting at Carrie and Tom’s till Sunday.”

“And then you’ll be leaving us?” he adds.

Her eyes flit quickly to mine. “Yes.”

“Good.”

“Go wait in my office, Indigo. Now. I’ll text you the password to my computer. You can type up the notes in there. I’ll be in to see when I’m done here.”

She pauses as if paralyzed, locked into the unrelentingly uncivilized glare of my father before collecting her things and leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

“I wondered how long it would take for you to find out her name, father.”

“Why wouldn’t I have the right to it? Our company is paying her. *Overpaying* her. She’s sitting in on important meetings with clients. It seems I have *every* right to know who she is.” His strong fingers drum the desk. “Is there some reason we’re using her and not a temp who would cost us half as much?”

“Carrie mentioned she could do with the extra cash.”

“So, what, are we a fucking charity now?”

“Tell accounting to take her pay out of my salary,” I retort.

“Hmm...” He tips his weight back in his chair. “Is there a reason you order her out every time I enter the room?”

“Just sparing her the bad vibes, Father.”

“Bad vibes caused by you not respecting your father’s wishes.”

“You mean not capitulating to *every single one* of your unreasonable demands?”

Ire roughens his rugged face. “We need to talk about Gabriella,” he says, and my features tense.

“I’ve said what I have to say about that matter. She means nothing to me, as you well know. We’ve tried... repeatedly. It doesn’t work. I want nothing more to do with her.”

“I don’t care what she means to you. Not everything is about *you*, Greyson.”

When was it ever, Father?

“The union will be happening... and I won’t let some ten-a-penny whore fuck it up.”

My fingers coil tightly around my pen. “Who are you talking about, exactly?”

“I know you,” he drawls. “What, did the bitch feed you some sob story? Make her feel sorry for you? You can fuck her if need be. She certainly looks thirsty enough for you... but once you’re done, you’ll discard her like the trash that she is.”

It takes a second to get to my feet, my body raging, my fists tensing as I try to control my breathing.

I haven’t physically fought with him since I was a child and forced back kicking and screaming... until he started to beat what he perceived as the insubordination out of me.

After years of that, I stopped being brave enough to stand up to him. Only now, I’m as tall, as strong, as rough.

His eyes widen, but he doesn’t move an inch, watching carefully, his fingers coiling around a pen, as if readying himself to use it.

I know you would...

You’d do it...

I drop my head as the realization hits me that I gave him what he wanted—confirmation that she does mean something to me.

I just don't fully understand what. I can't exactly deny that my body hardens, my cells lighting up when she comes near me, hitting me with that audacious little glare of hers. Nor can I exactly explain why every cell in my body is drawn to a woman who gives me the kind of attitude others would never dare to.

But is there more to it than that?

There can't be...

I'm not capable of more...

"I barely know her," I whisper, finally sitting back in my seat, working my way up to meet his foul glare.

He watches me, unmoving, only this time, I match his animus.

"The whore clearly wants to know you," he responds. "Or is my own son that fucking naïve? Do you think that little stunt in the lobby was an accident? I don't think so..."

You and that famous paranoia of yours, father.

"She nearly fell on her fucking face," I reply. "If I hadn't caught her, she'd have broken her nose, at best."

"That's how they fool you. But then, you always were weak and foolish when it comes to seeing what women are..."

The shared knowledge we have of one particular woman from long ago rattles the air between us, plunging the room into frigid darkness.

"What do you want?"

"You may amuse yourself with your little deer. Make it *thorough*, but by the end of this week, she'll be nothing but a memory. If you don't see to that, I will..."

I bite down the ire encasing my body at the threat, not wanting him to know that his words render me murderous.

"I don't see why that would be a problem," I reply, though I already know it to be untrue.

“Good. I don’t need another fucking embarrassment in this family.”

Greyson

Heading down the corridor a few minutes later, I'm hyperaware of the fact that my body is a hissing, snarling livewire in need of grounding as I walk in brisk strides towards my office, desperate to make it back there after half an hour of unpleasantries with my father, punctuated by the occasional gesture of approval and slivers of warmth that he sends my way when he perceives signs of my capitulation, just enough breadcrumbs to sustain me in a relationship which hurts me.

I curse to myself upon the realization that I ache to converse with the pink-haired girl sitting in my office, my steps quickening as I make it down the corridor.

I'm too irritated to knock despite knowing I should, opening the door to find her not typing at my computer but instead staring at her phone on my desk, her body hunched over.

As she lifts her head in surprise, I find her face pallid, the color drained from it, the fingers of one hand coiled around her upper arm. The expression is not dissimilar to the one I saw envelop her in the meeting room yesterday.

"Sorry," she mutters, turning the phone over.

I close the door behind me. "Something wrong?"

“No,” she responds, but the vigor seems to have bled from her voice. “All good.”

She goes to stand.

“Stay,” I instruct. “You can keep the chair.”

“I haven’t finished the notes.”

“They’re not urgent. Sit.”

She sits back down onto my chair, looking tiny in it, some fairy encased in obsidian leather all around her.

“That took longer than I’d—”

“How did you know my surname?” she interrupts, scouring my eyes ferociously, her body trembling a little. “Yesterday. In the meeting room. You said it before I could.”

“I asked Tom... as soon as I realized that it was you who would be working for us.”

She regards me with suspicion. “Is that true?”

“I don’t lie, Indigo.”

“When did you know it was me who’d be replacing Carrie this week? Or whatever I’m doing. Did you know it when you gave me shit about my cycling?”

“No.”

“Then when?”

Her suspicion unnerves me.

“I knew it when I saw you were going to my floor. Carrie had told me that the person staying at their place would be replacing her. That’s when I knew it.”

“So, you knew when I doused you with the juice?”

The memory makes me smile internally. “Yes. I knew.”

She peers across the desk, concern still etched into her stunning delicate features. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It amused me to watch you as you are. People don’t behave the same around their boss as they would ordinarily.”

“You’re only my temporary boss, you know.”

I know, Indigo.

In fact, I’ve been counting the days till her employment with me is over. As much as I enjoy helping her financially, I can’t do what I want to do to her, and what I believe from the ways she moves around me, that she wants from me, until she’s no longer my employee, temporary or not.

I nod.

“What else do you know about me?”

Her earnest plea for information has me leaning back in my chair.

“I know that you’re twenty-three.”

“And you’re twenty-nine,” she mutters.

“How do you know that?” I ask.

She lifts her chin in that impertinent manner of hers. “I have my sources too. What else?”

As I stare at her, I realize that her suspicion is etched with desperation... and fear.

“I know that you’re single.”

“Carrie told you that?”

“Tom did.”

She frowns. “What else did he say about that?”

“Nothing. Just that you’d been single for a while.”

She leans forwards, her presence huge despite her tiny body. “I don’t want you digging into anything else about me. Is that clear? It makes me feel uncomfortable. Like I’m being watched. I hate the feeling.”

“I’m in the business of finding out information, Indigo. Finding it, and hiding it. Normally when people come to work for me, however fleetingly, I do a check on them to make sure they’re not a risk to the company or to me. In your case, I decided this weekend not to have someone do a thorough check on you.”

“How good of you,” she scoffs. “And I wouldn’t consent to that anyway.”

“You don’t have to consent. There are ways to get information.” She shakes her head in the kind of panicked exasperation that comes with feeling out of control. “But our relationship will be better if it’s based on trust. I’m not going to find out any other information. And I’d like you to do the same for me.”

She breathes fast, her breasts moving as her chest expands.

“Fine,” she finally says. “You don’t look into me. And I won’t look into you. It’s not that I have anything to hide. I just... I don’t like being... spied on. I hate it.”

I can’t tell if it’s the light or if her eyes are misting. She drops her chin, settling a little, sitting herself back in my chair.

After a few breaths, she speaks. “What did he want? Your father.”

“To talk business.”

“The business of getting rid of me? He seemed to be hinting that he couldn’t wait till I leave. I don’t even know what I did to upset the man.”

“You did nothing.”

“Then, what? He just picks a name out of a hat to disapprove of each day?”

“I don’t think he likes the way I look at you, Indigo.”

She swallows thickly. “What way is that? *Irritated?*”

Her delivery makes me smile, distracting me from what I want to tell her—that I have no memory of feeling desire that feels quite like this.

What’s more, I cannot understand why this peculiar creature, one so opposed to everything that I am, does what she does to me.

And right now, all I can think about is bending her over my desk, ripping that tight little skirt she dared to wear again today off her, whipping her ass raw until she learns to obey me

more effectively, and fucking her until she screams with pleasure, alerting the whole damn building to what I do to her.

Right now, all I can think about is getting this woman out of my system and freeing myself of the displeasure of feeling out of control.

But I can't. Not yet anyway.

"I told you yesterday what clothes were acceptable around here," I say.

She glances down. "And despite that being none of your business, I put on a shirt today, instead of a blouse."

"It's still too tight."

"Well, I had to wear one of Carrie's and she's... well, let's just say we don't have the same body type."

My cock throbs as I think of those perfect round curves of hers.

"And I'm not gonna go out and buy a whole new wardrobe just for one week of work, so you'll get what you get," she announces. "I mean, don't bosses usually get off on having a scantily-clad secretary being their own personal slave? Isn't it an obligatory ingredient of every midlife crisis?"

I blink slowly, concealing my amusement at her animated delivery. "I'm twenty-nine, Indigo. Not yet ready for my midlife crisis."

"Oh well, I can already tell you're going to be unsufferable when it happens. And seeing as this is likely the last office job I'll *ever* have, I've decided to live out my little secretary fantasy, pencil skirt included, and you're all gonna just have to *deal*."

I ache to ask her what else her fantasy includes, but the current hierarchy makes that impossible.

Before I saw my father in the same room as her, I had considered offering her a job here, but once again, for as long as I'm her boss, that will make what I want from her impossible. And based on how persistent this fucking erection of mine is around her, I'm already sensing that restraining

myself until the end of the week from pulling down her panties and fucking her with my tongue is going to be a trial.

“I don’t want you wearing a skirt like that tomorrow.”

“Well, her pants don’t fit me properly.”

“I’ll have some clothes dropped off for you tonight.”

“Like hell you will!”

“You’ll wear them for the rest of the week.”

“What, like a potato sack? Am I supposed to wear a veil over my head as well?”

As vexatious as her attitude is, it’s mitigated by the fact that I suspect she’s pushing my buttons on purpose—pushing, pulling, testing the waters to see if I’ll bite... or when.

“You’ll do as you’re told, Indigo.”

Splotches of red seep into the exposed skin of her chest.

“And if I don’t?” she asks, her jade eyes toying with mine.

If you don’t, Indigo...

Well, the lesson I’d like to teach you is highly uncivilized...

“I’m curious to know,” she says before I can respond. “Do you treat your other employees like your own personal slave?”

I shake my head slowly. “No, Indigo. Only you. Now go and get your things. I’m driving you home.”

“And what if I don’t want you to?”

“Let me put it this way—I’m driving you home or carrying you. You pick.”

Indigo

My fingers seize, coming to rest on the keys of the harmonium as the knocking on the door stops.

I throw a glance at the balcony, wondering if I opened the door too much and have aroused the wrath of one particularly insufferable neighbor-slash-boss for having dared play my instrument for all of fifteen minutes.

And then there's that recurring fear every time someone knocks, even though I know that Micah's in prison now and can't get near me. I can't shake the feeling that he has enough money to send someone to mess with me, especially after today's message that shook the ground beneath me.

I know you're fucking him, whore.

I knew it would only be a matter of time before Micah heard about my casual relationship with Kohl. He once told me he'd kill me if I ever touched another man, and even though the sex with Kohl has been less than overwhelming, this is just another reason to set him free so that he doesn't have to go through my panic as I try to keep a lid on things.

As long as things stay like this—the occasional unhinged message—I can cope with it... until I can't anymore and change my number.

Only after the events of this year, the anxiety over changing my number is worse than the logistical hassle,

because within days, somehow, Micah manages to get hold of it again and I spend days tormented as to how he did it... and if someone close to me could be the one giving it to him each time...

“Oh, to be a cat,” I sigh at the gorgeous tabby lounging insouciantly on one of the large beanbags dotted around the living room.

I get to my feet, grabbing a white T-shirt I’d draped over a chair earlier to cover my bra. I glance down at my soft mauve house pants, pulling the T-shirt down so it covers my crotch.

Peering through the peephole, my heart hitches at the sight of the moody asshole who thinks he’s my boss. It’s only been a couple of hours since he dropped me off after work. He must have an issue with the music.

Through the distorted reality of the peephole, I see he’s wearing a white T-shirt which shows off his muscular arms and, as I glance down further, gray sweatpants which I make a mental note to ignore when I open the door.

Fuck.

I unlock and unlatch the door, my mouth taking off before he even has a chance to say hello.

“Look, I was playing it as far from the window as possible, and on the other side of the apartment from yours. I’ll be done in fifteen minutes if you can show a modicum of pati—”

“I’d like you to play for me.”

My jaw unhinges, the movement catching his eager gaze.

This would be a good time to close your mouth, Indie...

I somehow manage to shutter it, staring up at this towering mass of unapologetic masculinity, feeling like a garden gnome in my bare feet opposite him. By another miracle, given that my mouth now feels like I’ve spent an hour chomping on a sawdust sandwich, I manage to swallow.

“Um, excuse me?”

“I can hear you play from next door. I’d like you to play for *me*,” he repeats.

The way he says it... Not, *Can I listen?* but *Play for me...*

Why is it that fifty percent of the things that emerge from between this man’s lips sound sinful?

“Well, sorry, but I’m not on the clock right now. The second I step out of that office, you’re not my *temporary*”—I make sure to really spit that word across the hallway—“boss anymore. You’re just my annoying neighbor who thinks owning a penthouse makes—”

“Who told you I owned it?”

“No one,” I lie, not wanting to admit that before our little “*trust each other*” conversation today, I grilled Carrie about his enigmatic self when she called on Monday night to ask how the day went. “I just... assumed it,” I stammer, “from that... arrogant energy you strut about with?”

He raises an eyebrow, his eyes aglitter. “Strut?”

It’s true that the word is utterly unattributable to Greyson Everitt. He doesn’t strut. He glides through space like some freaking machine beamed down from the future, poised and deliberate, bowling people over energetically like bowling pins.

“Yes.” I raise my chin. “*Strut.*”

“I’m not asking you to play because I’m your boss.”

“*Temporary* boss,” I correct.

“I’m asking you to play because I like watching you.” His voice suddenly gets low. “And listening to you.”

I have to remind myself to close my mouth once again as it falls open, only this time, the slight tremble in my body gives way to the smoldering heat of pleasure seeping between my legs as he stares down at me, unmoving as if examining the minutiae of my facial twitches.

“Why?” I ask, trying to ignore my treacherous body and its wholly inexplicable desire to have him watch me play.

“You’re making me repeat myself, Indigo. As I said, I’d like to observe you play for me. I’d like to listen. I’ve never watched anyone play the harmonium before. I’d like to see it.”

“Do you play an instrument?” I ask.

“Piano.”

Grey’s gazes dances with mine as I contemplate letting him in.

It’ll be the first time I’ve been alone with a man since Micah, other than Kohl, my friend Yoshi and my surrogate dad Harris, Marilla’s brother. As I peer up at him, I realize something strange... Despite him being undeniably on the insufferable asshole spectrum, I feel unafraid at the idea of letting him into the apartment.

I know Kohl wouldn’t exactly like it, but then I can’t count the number of times I told Kohl I wasn’t ready to date seriously. In truth, he kind of caught me when I was vulnerable and praying for anything to erase the horror of my last months with Micah. I’m starting to realize that he never really seemed to hear me, and in my trauma-fuelled state, I didn’t manage to set the boundaries I wanted to.

That’ll change when he comes over tomorrow.

“Fine,” I decide. “One song.”

I open the door wide and he edges his slippers off to reveal large feet in navy socks.

I close the door behind him, heading over to the harmonium sitting in the living room on the right side of the room, as far from the wall adjoining his place as possible.

I sit down cross-legged behind the instrument, my lips finding the glass straw of the celery and ginger juice I left on the side table and sucking it in to quench my thirst as his humongous frame makes it past me and sits on the rug on the floor, no less, leaning his back against a huge chocolate-brown beanbag... right opposite me.

As I place the glass down onto the table to my right, I remember my manners.

“Would you like something to drink? There are some tea bags in the kitchen. You’re welcome to make yourself a cup.”

I hold his mirthful gaze as he shakes his head slowly, settling his weight into the sturdy fabric, one leg bent over the other.

Even when sitting on the floor, he does it most annoyingly, as if he owns the space and I’m some peasant he’s paying to play. This man’s poise is frankly borderline vampiric... well, the elegant prelude to them you see in movies before they start ripping everyone’s throat out.

I watch as Cookie the tabby gets up off her beanbag and saunters over to Grey, rubbing her little head against his thigh—*lucky bitch*—before lying down and nestling herself against him. His hand reaches for her belly, stroking it gently while watching me most intently. There’s something about the slow manner in which this man is caressing that pussy while studying my face that does socially unacceptable things to my clit.

Indie, please relocate your brain.

“That’s Cookie,” I say.

“I know,” he replies. “She likes to escape over the wall separating our balconies and hang out with me.”

I glance down at the little ball of fluff. *I know your game, miss.*

I clear my throat.

“The only songs I play are kirtan songs. They’re repetitive.”

“I don’t mind what you play. I just want to watch you.”

Is it just me, or is there something deviant about phrasing it like that?

My right hand finds the keys as my left reaches for the bellows at the back.

I just want to watch you...

I look up. “This isn’t some weird kink of yours, is it?”

“I don’t know yet,” he replies, utterly unironically. “If it is, it would be one of the *tamer* ones, Indigo.”

Holy fucking shit.

“Well, in fairness, I did ask,” I mutter to myself, glancing up to find his eyes luminous in the muted orange light seeping into the room with the hot late-May sun sliding low over DC behind us.

I look down at the keys and then at my body. I’m realizing my white T-shirt is very weathered and you can definitely kind of see my bright magenta yoga bra underneath it. And as for the position I’m sitting in, it isn’t exactly the most elegant. I’m sitting cross-legged and feel kind of... exposed, despite my pants.

Thank God the wooden body of the harmonium sitting on the ground before me is blocking the view, but it does feel a bit indecent in light of the fact that this man is basically a walking vibrator pulsing the air around him and the bodies of everyone in his vicinity.

Plus, I’m used to playing in front of a dozen or so people, not performing impromptu one-woman shows for random hot pricks.

Deciding to play the melody to the *Ho’oponopono* meditation of reconciliation and forgiveness that I sing at the end of some of the yoga classes I give as it at least has a distinct melody, I begin to play, my right hand slow-dancing over the keys, my left pushing and pulling on the bellows which produce the sound—kind of like an accordion but much deeper.

As I play, I recite the words of the meditation in my head.

I love you.

I’m sorry.

Please forgive me.

Thank you.

I call upon them at times when the anger caused by my maternally challenged mother or my abusive ex gets too much,

singing the words over and over until the worst of the rage and resentment passes and the emotion travels through me, emerging more often than not as tears that stream down my face and leave me basking in a fleeting sense of much-needed peace... until the hurt builds up again, at least.

As my fingers and the instrument create the music, my body can't help but move a little, swaying backwards and forwards, as I hear the words in my head.

After a minute or so, I glance upwards to find Grayson watching me, utterly focused, his eyes either locked onto mine or drifting to my hands.

As I come to the end of the song, I refrain from putting my hands to my heart and peer up at him, waiting for what seems like forever for him to speak.

"That was beautiful," he says, a breeze from the open balcony door to the left making his thick chestnut brown hair ruffle.

"It's not quite the same without the words."

"It reminds me of when my mother used to play music to me when I was a child."

Wow, a tiny glimmer into the personal world of Mr. Everitt...

"She doesn't anymore?"

"No. She stopped."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'd like you to sing for me, Indigo."

"What? Look, no offense, but I'm not putting on a private concert here."

"I hear you singing from my apartment."

I scrunch my face up in embarrassment. "You do?"

"Yes. Only I can't hear it well. I'd like you to sing for me. I'd like to hear the sound."

"Kirtan is call and repeat."

“But you sing alone, right? To practise. So, just do the same for me.”

Dammit, the way he says “*For me*” makes my body light up like the freaking Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

“I’m singing a spiritual meditation. It’s all very hippy dippy yin energy that men like you won’t compute.”

“Maybe you can educate me, Indigo.”

Yeah, right, I mutter internally, wondering if a multi-gazillionaire, or whatever he is, who looks like God and no doubt has gaggles of women throwing themselves at him could open his mind enough to even understand chanting meditations.

I frown, taking note of his earnest expression. I inhale a deep breath, my fingers taking their place on the instrument as I close my eyes and I begin to sing my favorite kirtan meditation.

Om... Namō... Bhagavate... Vasudevaya

My voice is weak at first, but gets stronger each time I repeat the line, my chest and throat opening up, my diaphragm dropping, loosening, my voice reaching high then low, my body undulating gently, goosebumps tingling my skin as I feel the words.

After a few minutes, I sing the line for the final time, the sound of my voice mixed with the beautiful instrument reverberating through my chest before stopping. Despite the vague ridiculousness I feel at this not exactly being my target audience, I inhale a breath of gratitude and open my eyes.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say he looked... moved.

“That was beautiful. Thank you.”

I smile lopsidedly.

“What do the words mean?” he asks, still gently stroking the very happy pussy.

“Well, there are different interpretations, but... to me, it means... *I bow down to the divine light within*. It’s really

about... *surrender*. Surrendering to something more powerful than us.”

“Thank you, Indigo.”

He lifts Cookie, gently placing her to the side of him.

“You’re welcome.

He gets to his feet and I begin to do the same.

“Don’t get up,” he says, his body seeming to bristle.

As he makes it to the door and puts his shoes on, he turns around to look at me before leaving and closing the door behind him as my body tries to make sense of what this near-stranger does to me.

I sit for a moment, closing my eyes, the hum generated by the sound, by the visceral kinesis of his powerful body, by the fact that I not only had the guts to let a man I don’t know that well into my apartment but also to actually sing in front of him, make my body vibrate with energy that has nowhere to go.

For months, I’ve felt consumed by dark lethargy, having on some days to force myself up, out of bed, to force one foot to step in front of the other, to force myself to speak to people again, to go out, to have sex with Kohl in the hopes that I could feel vaguely “normal” again.

A yoga friend told me I’d “lost my chi” and would get it back unexpectedly.

I don’t know if Greyson is the conduit or if it’s just time, but I suddenly feel my nerve endings firing and heat pouring into me, making me want to move, to dance, to feel... to feel pleasure.

Ten minutes pass as I sit with the arousal still coursing through me and I do something I haven’t for a while. I slide my fingers into my loose mauve pants, delving into the folds of my sex to find myself wet. Not just wet, I’m utterly soaked, the flesh swollen and almost aching from a need for relief.

I press my fingers into my clit and pleasure spikes through the knot of nerves, causing more glossy liquid to pool at the

entrance to my sex.

A thought hits me and I get to my feet, heading over to my guest bedroom and closing the door behind me so as to spare the cat from my urges.

I pull something out of a bag on the floor. It was a gift Fran brought over on her first night here—a brand new vibrator that she swears can make her see Jesus.

She and Rami both know I haven't been able to orgasm since Micah, either with Kohl or on my own. I can feel a tiny bit of arousal but either my body tenses up too much if I touch myself or I get so triggered that I have to stop, never being able to get close to climaxing.

I pull the brand-new vibrator out of its box, heading over to the ensuite bathroom to wash it before finding the batteries included and inserting them into the housing.

I take all my clothes off, another thing I've struggled with of late, and lie myself down on the bed, spreading my legs and beginning to slide my fingers up and down my clit, using my own wetness to lubricate the movements.

And then, my mind begins to do its work as I imagine Greyson in his apartment next door, wondering how he felt after I played for him, wondering if he was as aroused as I was, whether he too suddenly has energy he needs to disperse before it drives him mad.

I can't help but picture him heading to his bed like I have, peeling every square inch of clothing off that sturdy frame of his, lying the muscular mass of his body down onto his mattress.

I see his fingers wrapping around his hard cock, which I'd bet money is very big, working the shaft until it's a solid baton of wood.

His head tips back as he slides his hand up and down, his balls contracting as he thinks... of me? Of my body? Of my pussy? Of what he wants to do to me?

Whether my fantasy has any basis in reality, I don't really care right now. All I care about is the pleasure I can finally

feel detonating in tiny explosions as I slide my fingers to the opening to me and imagine his cock... beginning to push inside me.

Fuck, I want that...

I want him on top of me, pinning me to the bed, pushing his cock in and then out, over and over. As I think it, my fingers curl and I insert two, exhaling as I breathe through the triggering sensation and seek pleasure, focusing on nothing but him, imagining him working his cock until he's ready to shoot his load deep inside me.

My hand fumbles for the vibrator which I turn on, holding the tip against my clit only for my body to dissolve into warm waves of pleasure which I bathe in until I hear the ghost of him groaning, working his cock harder, squeezing the head, sliding his firm grip down the shaft, wondering whether he's picturing it inside me.

And then I do something unfathomable to me six months ago—I lower the head of the vibrator and push it inside me... just a little, keeping my eyes tightly closed as I imagine his cock there instead, hearing him groan like an animal into my ear.

A moment later, I pull it out, holding it against my clit before tipping my head back and arching my back as I feel his cock pulsate, shooting his cum deep inside me and the waves of the first orgasm I've felt this year reverberate through me, making me pant in pleasure and relief.

My legs turn to jelly and my skin mists in sweat as I keep my eyes tightly closed and revel in pleasure I haven't felt for so long, stupidly wondering whether Grey's hard abdomen is now covered in cum... or if it will be later...

I guess it doesn't matter.

Something has shifted.

I need to get myself back.

Opening my eyes after a few minutes, I tip my head to see my phone charging on the nightstand.

I pick it up and dial.

“Hey babe,” sings Fran. “How was work?”

“I did it.”

“Did what, babe?”

“I made myself come.”

She bursts into loud laughter. “Yesss... Girl, you’d better tell me about your day.”

Indigo

Wednesday

I pull down on the blue lever, dispensing water into my glass bottle, amazed I was able to leave Carrie's office without Donna miraculously popping up to check on me.

I saw the monitor on her desk earlier today, the one that shows a live feed of what the cameras in the corridors record, and I swear she's been sent to accost me whenever I venture out.

I'm just glad she didn't spot me this time. After Micah, the insidious fear that crawls into you when you know you're being watched is not a feeling I want to experience again.

As my water bottle fills up, I close the lever and goosebumps rake across my skin. I turn, only for a sharp inhale to fill this smaller of their kitchens as I find myself face to face with a man I already know I don't want to know better.

Landon Everitt, Grey's father.

To say the man is an imposing figure is the understatement of the century. He has that shark-eyed stare that comes with power and ruthlessness and the same kind of poise in his muscular body as his son has, only without the edges of warmth that smooth down the rough.

He looks so much like his son. There are a few creases around the eyes and the skin is a little more weathered, his hair mottled with smoke, but they're practically twins, save for his eyes which are the color of pallid winter earth.

He's also a freaking giant compared to me, a foot taller and one of those men who seem to fill an entire room just by his presence.

His ravenous eyes wander to my lips before his cruel gaze almost knocks me down.

"How's your day, Indigo?"

Filing, printing, sorting, stapling, date entry...

Oh, it's been heaven...

"It's been fine. Thank you."

"Good. Not long to go now."

"Another two days," I say, aware that I felt an ache somewhere to think it.

Don't get me wrong; I'm happy to leave the monotonous admin work behind, but... Greyson.

Maybe we can stay friends or something...

Or maybe I need to stop letting my stupid imagination get the better of me. For all I know, he just sees me as this weird little pain in the ass he has to deal with for a week.

My therapist told me I need to be careful about not latching onto another man as some kind of safety vest, assuming this one could even keep me safe, that is. That's why I tried my best not to let Kohl get too close to me. I guess I need to apply the same logic to this man I barely know.

I feel myself quiver inside as he inspects me like some freaking dragon rotting away in some dank cave, smelling human flesh for the first time in years.

What do you want?

"I spoke to Carrie yesterday," he says, that deep gravel of his voice consuming the air in the room. "I've informed her

she's needed back."

What...?

"If she returns tomorrow, we won't need you for the rest of the week. You'll be paid in full. In fact, because I'm a generous man, I'll be kind enough to pay you for two weeks here for your trouble. I have your number. I'll confirm with you shortly."

My mind spins.

Back tomorrow? What the hell?

"How... how do you have it?"

He encroaches a step, a wall of flesh blocking me off from the door behind him. "You filled out our form. I have the numbers of all those who enter this company."

"Well, it's... Greyson who hired me, so... he can tell me what he wants me to do."

"And it's *my* company, Ms. Nilsson. He'll inherit it one day, but until then, I decide who comes and goes."

I gulp down my unease, deciding not to let this man see what I feel. I stare back up at him as boldly as someone facing a rancorous, ravenous beast can do.

"Fine," I respond. "I'll let him know."

His chest undulates as he exhales a strong breath. "Your mother is Gretchen Nilsson... isn't she, Indigo? And your father... deceased, sadly."

I swear the floor almost falls out beneath me.

"How... how do you know that?"

"It's my job to know about people. And I'm amazed a woman as wealthy as her would allow her daughter to debase herself by acting like some temp... and by living in the shithole you do."

No...

As the knowledge that he's checked out my address floors me, a shadow fills the doorway. My eyes slip to it to see Grey

enter the room, eyes fiery and tempestuous.

“What are you doing?” he growls at his father.

“Just having a little talk with our soon-to-be-ex temp. I’ve informed her that her services won’t be needed after today.”

Grey’s face creases in confusion. “That’s not your decision.”

“Oh, yes it is. I own this fucking company and everyone in it.” He takes a step towards his son. “Including *you*.”

Realizing that the frosty energy exchanged between them that day in the lobby or yesterday in the meeting room wasn’t just some bad-week blip, and that there isn’t just tension but straight-up animus between them, I decide to get them away from each other.

“It’s fine,” I say.

Grey’s eyes find my face. “Indigo, go and wait in my office.”

“Look—”

“*Now!*”

I manage not to jump out of my skin, leaving the room, half tempted to go to Carrie’s room, grab my stuff and get the hell out of here.

But concern over Greyson has me heading to his office instead, though how I’m managing to worry about a man I’ve known for less than five days is beyond me...

My mother would call me soft as shit if she saw me... among other choice words.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket to indeed see a message from Carrie.

Hey babe. It looks like I’ll be driving back tonight. I’m gonna leave Tom with his family a bit.

They want me back at work, so I don’t think you’ll need to suffer through the grunt work anymore.

I think they’re gonna pay you for the full week though.

You're welcome to stay at ours until Sunday though. It'll be fun. Just us two.

I'll text you later to tell you what time I'll be back.

It's gonna be pretty late.

Love you.

The phone tremors a little in my hand, from knowing Landon tried to get rid of me, and from hearing my mother's name come out of his mouth. I told Grey I didn't want to be spied on, and yet here we fucking well are.

I write and delete a few responses before settling on:

Okay. I'll see you tonight. Drive safely, babe.

No sooner have I pressed *Send* than the door opens, making me pivot. Grey walks in, not just closing, but locking the door behind him before marching up to me, his breathing ragged.

"You're staying till the end of the week."

"It doesn't seem like your father wants that."

"It's not his choice."

"Look, I don't want to work somewhere where I'm clearly not wanted."

"You *are* wanted. My father is... difficult. Ignore him."

"Ignore him? Have you seen the man?"

"I'll make sure he doesn't get near you again."

"Well, thank you, but believe it or not, needing a bodyguard to leave the office doesn't exactly instill a feeling of safety."

As Grey lets out a breath, I take a step backwards, my arms wrapping around my waist as hurt blisters through me.

"He said my mother's name. Your father did. He told me I lived in a, quote, *shithole*. Like he had it checked out or something. I thought you said you wouldn't be checking into me without my permission."

Grey shakes his head, confusion roughening his features.

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I don’t,” he utters breathlessly. “I don’t know your mother’s name, I swear to God. As for where you live, I saw the address. I know the area a little, but not what your place is like.”

My demeanor softens as I take in the earnest plea in his voice.

“Well, your father had no right to look into my family.”

“No,” he replies. “He didn’t.”

As Grey turns a little, glancing over at the door as if to make his way back out, my hand reaches unconsciously for his arm, pulling on it, my fingers pressing into thick, tense muscle.

He turns slowly, blazing eyes meeting mine. “I don’t know about your family, Indie. I’ve respected that boundary despite wanting to know... more about you... than I do.”

I swallow, removing my hand from his arm.

“Well, paying someone to get information is not any way to go about that.”

“I agree,” he responds, his jaw tight. “Which is why I’ll be respecting your wishes and not doing that... in the hopes you don’t do it to me either.”

“Well, I wouldn’t.”

He nods before glancing down at my body and the thick but tight gray cotton wrapped around my torso and thighs. “I told you I don’t want you wearing clothes like that around here. I know what the men are like around here.”

“The men?” I ask. “Or your father?”

His fingers tense. “You’re driving me fucking insane, Indigo.”

I thought wearing Carrie's stretchy gray sleeveless dress which hits me just below the knees would be acceptable for Grey's puritanical tastes... or at least, when it comes to me.

"I had clothes sent round to you last night to avoid this fucking problem," he continues.

"Yeah, thick shirts and long black pants. You know it's ninety degrees outside, right? What do you want me to wear, a freaking snowsuit? And anyway, as I told you on Monday, it's not our responsibility to not look 'distracting'. It's men's to behave half-decently. I mean, we don't go around harassing you when you wear tight shirts and pants."

"Tomorrow, you'll be wearing something more decent."

"Oh, will I, now?"

He takes a step towards me. "Yes. You will."

I shrug. "What are you gonna do, dress me yourself?"

Another step, and my body lights up with effervescent energy as the thought of the orgasm I reached yesterday thanks to the vision of Greyson's hard body rocks through me again.

My eyes stray down the stone wall of his frame, finding the bulge beneath his pants as I wonder if he made himself come last night... or this morning... as I picture the size of him, the taste, the feel, and suddenly want nothing more than him to bend me over his desk.

A week ago, sex with Kohl left me feeling triggered, a fact I hid from him as I found myself shaking in the shower afterwards as his touch aroused memories of the man who came before him, through no fault of his own.

And now this... How is this near-stranger capable of sexual recalibration I thought impossible.

Not that that means he's into me. Maybe this is all some silly fantasy in my head...

"Don't tempt me, Indigo," he snarls.

"You know, it's not exactly very PC of men to be telling women what to wear at work."

“I don’t give a fuck if it is. I don’t want my father looking at your body.” His gaze descends down my body. “And when you dress like that, I know exactly what that fucker is thinking.”

“Well, he can go screw himself. Why do you let him talk to you the way he does?”

Grey’s chest expands as he stares down at me.

“Stop, Indigo.”

“I’m sorry, but the guy’s a colossal prick. And you being his son doesn’t give him the right to treat you like shit.”

“Stop,” he growls.

“I mean, he should be down on his fucking knees thanking God every day that he has a son like you. Just the way he looks at you is totally outrageous—”

“I’m warning you, Indigo.”

“You don’t deserve to be—”

“My family is off limits,” he snaps. “As you requested yours to be, remember?”

I know I’m getting under his skin. I can’t help it. In fact, I’ve never felt so safe to push a man’s buttons before. After being scared for months last year once I realized that getting out of the relationship was going to be more dangerous than staying in it, I thought I wouldn’t be able to give men shit the way I used to.

Even with Kohl, I’m not quite myself. I kind of just let him take the lead to avoid rocking the boat, another reason I’m going to tell him I can’t see him anymore tonight.

But from the second I met Grey, I’ve felt like myself again—the cheeky asshole who says what she thinks without being terrified of having my place smashed up for doing so.

Plus, I don’t know if anyone else is going to tell him what was once said to me to wake me up—that just because someone is your parent, it doesn’t give them a free pass to hurt you at will for the rest of your life.

“I’m not trying to delve into your private life,” I counter. “I’m just saying that no one has the right to ever make you feel worthless or—”

“*Indigo.*”

“Like you can’t please them or—”

He closes the gap between us until I smell his mint-laced breath. “Indigo, I’m warning you. One more fucking word about my father and I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” I say, my respiration accelerating as my blood rushes to my pussy, making it ache, desperate for the release of him. My fingers hunger to reach for his cock... but I can’t do it.

Instead, I wait...

“Don’t tempt me, Indigo.”

My cheeks heat, the warmth spreading throughout my body as I try not to drown in the silvery lake of his eyes, to wilt in the presence of his powerful body as the percussion of my heart counts down the seconds until his self-control weakens as much as I have. “Why not?”

It only takes him one frantic second to have me bent over his almost-empty desk, his full weight pressing into my back.

A high-pitched exclamation flutters from my throat as he growls into my ear while his erection presses greedily into my ass.

And oh my fucking God, the thing is huge... and about as hard as I am wet.

His lips brush against the side of my face as one hand curls around the front of my throat, beginning to squeeze air from me as he very slowly dry-fucks my ass, his stiff cock pressing hungrily into me over and over.

“I warned you to behave, little girl,” he groans into my ear.

“Yeah, well, I’m not the behaving type,” I counter, hardly able to believe the audacious words falling so easily from my

lips. And then I add something I know is going to piss him all the way off. “What are you going to do about it?”

“You couldn’t handle it, Indigo.”

“Hmm,” I manage despite the kinky bastard squeezing my throat, intermittently releasing it to allow me air, something I thought would make me panic... but with him, it doesn’t. “I’m pretty tough,” I whisper. “Try me.”

His palm hits the desk behind me as my head swivels to see his other hand unbuckling his belt which he pulls out in one swift stroke. His free hand squeezes my ass cheek tightly and my forehead hits the top of the desk as the belt jangles as if being positioned.

From my peripheral vision, I see him sweep his hand back, ready to whip my ass. I brace myself, ready and desperate to be punished, only the lash doesn’t come.

I wait and wait... turning my head to see him staring down at me, but before I can speak, he lifts me from the table, wrapping his arm around my neck to pull me into him.

He speaks into the side of my face, just out of sight. “I lost control. I’m sorry.”

Fuck...

Greyson, don’t be...

Lose it...

“This isn’t how we’ll do this,” he whispers. “You working here makes it wrong. We’re going to be patient a little longer.”

I manage to turn as he loosens his grip on me.

Right now, all I can think about is the aching in my sex, one he’s refusing to relieve. I mean, I know he’s still technically my boss, and maybe he’s doing the right thing, but dammit, I’m going to need the help of Fran’s special vibrator to make it through the night after this.

I frown, searching his luminescent eyes which peer into me, his head dipping a little as if wanting to kiss me... or am I imagining that?

When he finally speaks, it's quiet, the words unwanted.
“I'll take you back to your room.”

Indigo

“I’m so sorry. I told you from the start I wasn’t ready for anything serious, remember? I told you that you could see other women for a reason... so you didn’t get too attached.”

Kohl’s brown eyes burn despite the restraint carefully bound into his body. I thought he’d take this well given how many times I hammered home that I was too fragile to be in a serious relationship after my last, but instead, the last half hour has felt like some kind of negotiation exercise, and every time I feel like he’s getting it, the goal posts shift and I have to explain it again.

I spoke to Marilla, my spiritual mom who is like a real mother to me before letting him in this evening. She offered for her and her partner Ophra to come around for moral support in light of the shitshow that exploded when I tried to end things with Micah, but I reassured her everything would be fine.

Kohl isn’t dangerous or abusive like he was and our relationship has never been serious, consisting of occasional dates and some pretty unsatisfying sex when I’ve been able to, but I can’t help feeling uneasy.

He leans his bulky frame forwards, the waning sun turning his designer shirt a silvery gold and casting shadows under the

cheekbones of his handsome face.

“Indie, I know about your issues, alright. I told you I could work around that.”

“And I told you I’m just not ready. I mean, I went on and on about that when you first asked me out, remember? You said you got it.”

“Well... things have changed. I like you. I want to work this out.”

Vigor leeches from me at his words.

It’s all my fucking fault...

Rami told me the *fuck buddies* thing rarely works out as smoothly as planned. I should have listened. I was just so fucking desperate to get the feel of Micah off my skin. I thought it would be mutually beneficial—he’d get no-strings-attached sex from me, and I’d get some form of sex therapy and learn to share space with a man again without hiding in the bathroom, concealing panic attacks.

I was so stupid to think this could work.

The words Marilla spoke to me earlier echo through the room.

You have the right to set boundaries.

No one has the right to have access to you.

I shake my head. “I’m so sorry. Honestly. It has nothing to do with you. I said I wasn’t ready. I meant it. I need to be alone and sort myself out.”

“So, I’m paying because your ex was a bastard?”

His words wind me.

He wasn’t just a bastard. He *hurt* me.

And there’s no fixed timeline for feeling healed from that.

“Honestly, just look at yourself. You could have any woman you want. You shouldn’t have to deal with me in this state.”

“I want to deal with you.”

“Look, I’m sorry.”

He gets to his feet, pacing before me as if losing control, his breathing erratic, his movements frenzied, making panic constrict my throat.

Stay calm...

“It’s because of *him*, isn’t it? That piece of shit new boss of yours.”

“What?”

I shake my head in confusion.

Granted, feeling the explosion of sexual heat around Greyson has made me realize that that’s still possible with a man, but I’ve been building up the courage to tell Kohl we’re not a good match for weeks, before I even met Grey.

“How do you know about my boss?”

He squares his body at me. “Because I looked up the company. I saw the profiles of the directors. I recognize him from the lobby.”

When did they even get a chance to see each other?

His brown eyes blacken, turning the color of his soot-colored hair. “That’s why this is happening now, isn’t it?”

“Of course not,” I snap. “This has nothing—”

“Are you fucking him?”

“No,” I say, trying to sound earnest. I mean, technically we have only done that in my head. “Look, you can tell everyone it’s all my fault, okay?”

“Don’t patronize me,” he snaps.

“I’m not. I’m sorry. I just—”

“It’s because of him. I know it.”

“It has nothing to do with him. Honestly. I explained why. I’m not ready to be with someone and... we’re not... a good fit anyway.”

“Why not?”

How do I even explain it?

I just don't feel anything when I'm with him, physically or emotionally.

"I don't know. I just—"

"Is it because I pressure you to speak to your mother?"

"I mean... that doesn't help. I hate when you do it. It's invalidating and makes me feel unsafe. And it doesn't work anyway. You can't force people to talk to those that have hurt them. They have to do it in their own time."

"Look." He sits down opposite me, his body still simmering. "I'll stop doing that, okay?"

"It's not just that."

"I can give you money, Indie. You don't have to live in that shitty basement suite anymore. You can move in with me."

Oh my God, we're going backwards here...

"I like my place."

"It's not safe. Your ex had a fucking field day with it."

"Yeah, well, he's in jail."

"Not forever."

"Fine. If he gets out, I'll move."

"You don't need to—"

"Look, stop. Please. We're better off as just friends." I put my hand to my chest, realizing my breathing is erratic. "You told me months ago that you knew I wanted a casual relationship, that you knew we wouldn't be a permanent thing and wouldn't give me shit if I couldn't do it anymore. I warned you about all that. You said you got it."

"Things have changed. Please, just—"

"Kohl, I'm sorry. Honestly."

"Why don't we just keep things going as they have been? I mean I barely fucking see you as it is."

The knock at the door has us both turning in that direction. It's firm and strong—three knocks in quick succession.

Fuck.

I feel Kohl's eyes searing me as I get to my bare feet and wander over to the door, fearing who it is.

I curse under my breath I peer through the peephole, before opening the door just a little to find Grey standing there, his expression sober.

“Hey, I'm kind of—”

“I wanted to apologize,” he says smoothly. “For what happened earlier.”

“You don't have to,” I reply, keeping my voice low. “Sorry, I'm kind of busy now.”

“Yeah, she's kind of busy,” says a deep voice just behind me.

I pivot, loosening my grip on the door which opens wider, to find Kohl standing just ten feet away, his face as vicious as thunder.

Fuck.

I find Grey's eyes. “I'm sorry. I can't—”

“Do you need help?” he asks, sliding his increasingly harsh glare onto the man behind me.

“No. She doesn't need any fucking help.”

“Kohl, stop.”

“I'm sorry,” responds Grey after a moment, “but I don't believe you.”

“Indie,” growls the man behind me. “Close the fucking door so we can finish talking. I'm not done here.”

I shake my head. “I'm sorry. I tried to explain. I'm done.” I turn to face him, hoping to create a barrier between him and Grey. “I'm sorry. I don't want to drag this out.”

“I swear to God, if you let him into this apartment.”

“I won’t. I promise.” My gaze locates Grey’s. “Can you just go back home?”

“I’ll wait outside. That’s the best I can do.”

I open the door wide. Kohl’s expression pleads with mine but I shake my head, watching as he yanks his coat off the hook after a moment, puts on his shoes and leaves.

As he sees Grey standing fifteen feet away near his door, Kohl stops to face him, taking a moment to breathe as if restraining himself before leaving, turning the corner until he’s out of sight.

As the elevator dings and I hear the door slide shut, I thank Grey, who takes hold of my arm as I turn to go back inside.

“Wait a minute.”

“I can’t talk now,” I say. “It’s not fair to him. I just need to be alone for a bit. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“Indie...”

“I’m sorry.”

I close the door, sitting down on the floor, still a little shaken but glad it’s over.

Two hours, two glasses of white wine and a truckload of guilt later, I hold my stomach with my hand, feeling a little nauseous.

I mean, that could have gone worse, but it still left me unsettled.

What’s worse is, I got myself into that mess thinking I could handle something casual when I clearly can’t.

If I’m going to heal, I’ll do it alone with my family and friends and not count on a man to help me through, even a man as decent as Kohl.

I get to my feet, scanning the living room, picking up a glass from the coffee table and putting it into the dishwasher.

I take a sponge from the sink and wipe down the kitchen cabinets for the third time, wanting to make sure the place is spotless for when Carrie gets here in an hour.

She offered to let me stay till Sunday, but I don't think I will, especially if I'm not working there anymore.

I know Grey said I could, but I don't want to do anything to aggravate his father.

Maybe it's best this way anyway. I mean, it's not like I'm ready to date and he doesn't exactly strike me as the emotionally available type.

As I wash the sponge and then my hands, there's a knock at the door. I glance at the clock above the stove as I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel.

9.10 p.m.

Wondering if Carrie has got here early, I head to the door, only for a shiver to roll through me as I see Grey on the other side.

I decide to forgo slippers as I pause for a moment, wondering if I should even open the door.

"Hey."

"Hey. Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah. I'm good."

"I, um, I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

"I don't. I mean, he wasn't my boyfriend. He was just... someone I dated casually. I shouldn't have. It turned into a mess."

"He seemed pretty angry."

"Oh, I've had worse break-ups," I mutter. "It's okay."

In fact, this one barely registers on the trauma scale compared to the hell of my last.

"Well, I'm sorry if he scared you."

“He didn’t. Not really.”

He nods, his floppy brown hair falling over his golden skin. “I... Can I come in?”

I recall Kohl’s request from before. “I’m sorry. Carrie’s going to be home soon. Plus, I’m kind of running on empty at this point.”

“My father told me about her return.”

“I’m guessing he had something to do with that.”

“No doubt,” he replies. “I’m sure she’ll be getting a nice bonus at the end of the month. It’ll help with her wedding.”

“I don’t think she meant any harm.”

“No, I’m sure she didn’t.”

“Look, Greyson, I... I don’t think I’m going back tomorrow.” His eyes drop for a moment. “You don’t have to pay me for the week or anything. Just the three days I was there.”

“We’re paying you for two weeks.”

“Why? I don’t want that.”

“We’ve inconvenienced you.”

“Hardly. The three days is fine.”

“It’ll be two weeks.”

I would protest but that’ll be six months of rent, six months of breathing space. Plus, from his resolute tone, I doubt much I say will make a difference.

“Thank you.”

“Are you... staying here for a while? With Carrie?” he asks.

“She said I could, but... I don’t think so. I’m gonna go home tomorrow.”

“Look, Indie, I know things got weird today—”

“It wasn’t weird,” I reply quickly.

“I’m... I was your boss. It was an abuse of power. It shouldn’t have happened.”

His words irritate me because at that moment, I’ve never wanted anything more.

“Well, you’re not my boss anymore.”

“No...” He takes a step towards me, his figure dark, sheathed in a black T-shirt and loose black pants.

As he closes the gap, I realize that my arousal reignites the second he comes near me, just as ferociously as before.

Except after breaking things off with Kohl and the guilt I feel over that, this suddenly feels wrong...

“What is it that you want from me, Indigo?”

“Way to put the onus on me,” I bite back.

“I know you feel what I feel,” he replies.

“And what is that?”

He leans into me, his mammoth frame blocking out everything else. “This heat. Do you feel it?”

Feel it?

I can practically feel nothing else...

As I nod, caught in the warmth of his body, the sound of a loud click coming from near the elevators resounds through this floor. We both hear it, turning at the same time, waiting for someone to appear... only no one does.

He looks at me before walking in his bare feet down the corridor. I follow a few feet behind, my heart racing as I hear the chime of the elevator and then the doors rattling closed.

Grey’s steps quicken and he rounds the corner just as I hear the elevator doors close. By the time I make it around, he’s pressing the button hard, but the thing has left.

My appearance catches his eye. “Indie, go back.”

“Was someone there?”

“No. I... I don’t know.”

“It was probably nothing,” I say, turning to go back to Carrie’s apartment, aware she’ll be arriving within the hour.

Grey comes to stand before the door. “I can give you what you want,” he says in a hoarse whisper. “If you tell me...”

“What *can’t* you give me?” I ask, making his countenance soften.

Our gazes dance a slow dance, sometimes wandering to the lips of the other, sometimes to the neck, to the cheeks, to the eyes.

“I’m not relationship material, Indigo. I can’t offer you that.”

His words slice through me, though I knew it well.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because I’m very fucked up, in many different ways. And a woman like you shouldn’t be subjected to them.”

“You’re not the only fucked-up person around here. I’m not exactly a walking billboard for impeccable emotional health.”

“Not like me, Indigo.”

“Then... what?”

“I can’t give you a relationship,” he replies. “But I can give you pleasure.”

Just the mere mention of the word from his lips has my body vibrating with energy.

And I so fucking want it... if I didn’t have this voice in my head telling me I was going to end up hurt and in an even bigger mess than now.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I need some time to work things out. Be alone.”

“I’m not asking you to be with me.”

“I know,” I reply. “You’re asking to *fuck* me. No strings attached. Only I know I’m going to get hurt if that happens. I’m just... not ready. I need to heal.”

“Heal from what?”

I drop my gaze, wanting to tell him about my psycho ex, but afraid that I’ll be tainted with the same brush that Kohl tarred me with—some abuse victim, messed up, someone who’s not an equal.

I need to be alone.

“Just... life,” I respond.

Before he can speak, the elevator chimes again, only this time there’s a distinct rolling sound and a moment later, Carrie appears in the corridor, carrying two bags and rolling a suitcase behind her.

“Hey, you two!” she sings.

“Hey, hun,” I reply, wrapping her in a hug as she gets to the door. “How was the trip?”

“God, his family drove me fucking nuts. I was honestly glad to leave him to it. Hey, Greyson.”

“Hi, Carolyn.”

“Sorry, was I interrupting?”

“No,” I reply quickly. “Just saying goodbye. I’m not needed after today.”

She looks taken aback. “Yeah, I hope it wasn’t just because of me.”

“No,” Grey replies. “It wasn’t.”

“Okay, well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve been driving for four hours. I need a very long hot shower.”

“Sure, babe.” I open the door wide for her.

“See you tomorrow,” she says to Greyson as I close the door, readying myself to say goodbye as well.

“Look, thanks for the job and everything. It really did help.”

“I want to see you again, Indigo.”

The constriction of claustrophobia wraps itself around me as I feel myself spiraling stupidly into panic and irrationality. Grey isn't who I should be afraid of. I know the fear is coming from someone else with Grey being nothing but a conduit, but right now, I can't fully explain it, but I need this pain to stop. I need to be alone. "I know. I'm just... The timing isn't right. I need to sort myself out."

"I can help."

"No. You can't."

"Indie."

"Look, I have to go." I open the door, hearing Carrie pottering about a few feet away. "Thank you."

He bows his head. "Bye."

Two weeks later, amidst a flurry of anonymous calls and strange messages, I change my phone number once again, not responding to Grey's last text, nor sending him the new number before I close down the old one.

I need it all to stop.

Indigo
Cumberland Island
Early July

“**W**hat do you want?” asks Rami, standing over our table as Frannie slides into the bench opposite me, plonking her purse down onto the long black and slightly torn cushion of the booth we’re in.

“Half lager, half lemonade, please,” I respond as Rami rolls her eyes. “I have to cycle home,” I protest at her unimpressed look. “I came here by bike, remember?”

“You can get a fucking cab home. Pick the bike up tomorrow. No one will steal that rusty old relic of a bike anyway.”

“Hey!” I swat at her arm with the coaster on the pock-marked table as she grins at me like an asshole.

She does have a point. The squeaky thing with the shitty brakes came with the house we’re renting and at this point, the lock is probably worth more than the bike.

“What are you having?” I ask.

She blinks at me flatly. “What do you think?”

“Mezcal, extra lime?” I ask, knowing her penchant for Tequila’s smoky cousin.

She grins. “You know me too well, Tornada.”

I ponder my drink...

Technically, we’re not supposed to drink on this yoga retreat we’re attending while I’m not on wedding duty, but by this point, I think all three of us have decided that the vow of chastity the yoga master running the retreat asked us to adhere to is deprivation enough.

Yoga isn’t really Rami’s cup of tea to put it mildly, but Fran and I talked her into it, after first talking her into this trip to the island off the coast of Georgia for Carrie and Tom’s nuptials.

I wouldn’t ordinarily have asked them to join me, but A, neither of them has left the DC area in almost a year, and B, I really need some moral support, especially now I know from Carrie that Greyson Everitt will definitely be attending.

Apparently, he’s already on the island, a fact that is making me jittery as hell and the reason I’m drinking alcohol when I should be sipping on wheatgrass juice and generally treating my body like a temple during this inner goddess worshipping retreat we’re supposed to be on, and already failing spectacularly at.

At least this vow of chastity is something to keep me focused when I see him at the wedding.

Well, chastity when it comes to men. Women can pleasure themselves if they want apparently—a fact that made me burst out laughing when the retreat leader told the group.

But dick is off the menu.

A dick detox, if you will.

We’re here to worship Gaia, Mother Earth, and our feminine power.

And not men.

Which is fine by me.

We’ve taken a solemn vow, so *no going back on that one*, I mutter internally as I throw an irritated thought back to the

godlike six-foot-three-inch prick with the *no-lube-required* glare hanging out somewhere on this island.

And then another thought hits me, one that leaves my body ice-cold: Carrie told me she'd heard rumors about some on-off girlfriend of his. She doesn't know much more because Grey's discreet and even Tom doesn't share what he knows about him with her, but it makes my stomach turn nonetheless, even though I have absolutely no right to be jealous.

He sent me many texts after I left, tried to call me. I barely answered apart from to tell him I needed space, which I did.

I'm glad he's got someone, if that's the case.

Or at least, I might be *mildly* glad once I've had enough vodka.

"Get me a vodka and coke," I say. "And some olives."

"God, you're like some throwback to the nineties," Rami snorts.

"Actually, make it a double vodka," I say to Rami's grin.

"Me too," pipes up Fran, looking gorgeous in a lilac halter neck dress and dangly turquoise earrings which offset her gorgeous red hair, all crinkled from the swim we took in the ocean together earlier this afternoon.

The bar we're in, about a twenty-minute walk along the coast from the ridiculously cheap but gorgeous beachfront house we're renting for the week, is half-empty, which is fine by me.

Chastity vow aside, after weeks of dealing with my psycho ex's steadily escalating bullshit, I'm happy to give men a wide berth and will call it a successful night if we can avoid getting hit on by some belligerent asshole drunk on cheap beer and agitated after getting too much hot Georgia sun.

There's a flurry of movement as a few people walk past our booth, making me look behind me to check that Rami's doing okay at the bar. She's tougher than both Fran and I put together, but she takes no shit at all, which means she gets into scrapes more than the average person.

I turn back to chat to Fran about today's yoga and meditation session and the various aches and pains our bodies are now afflicted with, as well as some of the more colorful characters at our retreat.

"Arlo's on another freaking planet," Fran moans about our extremely earnest and committed walking encyclopedia of a yoga master who wants us all on vegan diets and not consuming alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs on this trip. Not to mention wanting us to pleasure ourselves as a form of feminine self-love while we're on our week-long dick fast.

He's running the retreat from a Shala that he made himself on his land, and while Frannie and I are used to the talk of mudras, chakras, gods, and goddesses at the retreats we've done together, Arlo's a starseed who says he's readying himself for his next adventure on the Andromeda galaxy, which I think is a new one for both of us.

"Yeah, I *really* need to know what that man is smoking and where I can get some," I reply to her fit of giggles.

I commiserate as she moans about the red skin currently peeling on her chest after spending too much time in the sun after our last class today. In her defense, the sky was hazy and even I didn't think I'd end up as tanned as I am now.

Indie...

As she talks, I realize that my chest is tightening, some minor panic attack that I'm used to and good at hiding by now, only this time, my skin chills with it, the hairs standing on end as my body seizes.

I look out onto the small dimly lit dancefloor nearby where a few animated souls dance to 70's pop only to be jolted back to our table by the arrival of Rami with our drinks. She returns to the bar to get the rest before sliding onto the bench opposite me.

"Cheers!" Fran sings, lifting her glass as Rami and I follow suit, clinking our drinks, all three of us chugging half of them in one go.

"Fucking Arlo better not see us in here," Fran hisses.

“Screw him,” drawls Rami. “He probably goes home and snorts coke, and fucks all the bitches he’s made horny with his cock ban.”

“Honestly, I bet that’s it,” I chortle, trying not to spill my drink as Rami’s unimpressed look makes me burst into giggles, relieving the worst of the panic I’ve been feeling of late. I take another sip of my drink and pop a pitted olive into my mouth.

“God, totally,” affirms Fran. “Like why the fuck else would a straight man be running a freaking Inner Goddess retreat?”

“To get laid,” deadpans Rami. “Literally the only reason for that anomaly.”

“Yeah, as if straight men really want our freaking inner goddesses empowered,” I snigger, already slightly tipsy from my double vodka.

“He really sounds like he means it, though,” says Fran... but I don’t respond.

I can’t.

For as I take in Rami’s wry grin, my hands go clammy and my mouth dries as my eyes slip to the left and the dark figure behind her, his eyes flaring in the dim light as he watches me.

My lips part as I see him, sitting two booths down, one friend in front of him and one to his right.

Our eyes lock onto each other amidst the chatter and music, neither of us smiling, the tension wracking my body as palpable as I remember it being those weeks ago, only this time... he looks kind of angry, and not in the way that leaves room for glimmers of amusement.

Greyson.

Rami and Fran slamming their glasses down onto the table at the same time has the bubble we’re in splintering into pieces and I jump, my eyes darting to their empty glasses.

“Right, your turn!” barks Fran to me.

I swallow. “I... I haven’t finished yet.”

“Well, drink up, woman. If we’re disrespecting Arlo’s rules, we may as well go all out.”

“Stop,” I manage breathlessly, trying to smile as I pull my gaze from Grey and down the rest of my glass, deciding I’m definitely taking a taxi home and not my bike. I’ll pick that up tomorrow. “Same?” I ask, my vision hazy, my movements slow.

“Same,” my friends sing in unison as I reach into the back pocket of my long flowy cerulean skirt to check that I still have a couple of twenty-dollar bills left.

“Oh, and get us some chips,” adds Rami.

Grabbing our three empty glasses, I head to the bar, placing them there and waiting as the barman tends to some patrons at the far end, my body stiff as I try to breathe.

It’s must only be fifteen or so seconds before I see an arm place itself onto the bar next to me, thick, lean, dense and muscular, his skin tanned beneath the sleeves of a gray T-shirt.

Although I haven’t looked, I know from the height and the shock of dark hair I see out of my peripheral vision who it is.

Frankly, I didn’t need to even see that. I feel it in every fiber of my body, my hyperawareness of his dense body frankly ridiculous at this point.

And I knew when taking every faltering and woozy step towards the bar that he’d come.

So, why can’t I look?

Jesus, Indie, get a fucking hold of yourself.

Why are you being such a freaking weirdo about this?

As his head turns in my direction, my heart begins to careen, and my mouth suddenly feels as though I’ve spent the day sucking on the sand I was lying on.

Seeing as I can’t seem to control my respiration anyway, I decide to look at him, not usually a gargantuan feat, but something about making eye contact with this man I kind of

convinced myself I'd dreamed up suddenly feels like climbing the north face of the Eiger.

Fuck...

In the low light, his eyes gleam as he takes me in, making blood beeline its way to my cheeks which begin to burn.

Just freaking fabulous.

Deciding that the only way I'm going to make it to the end of the week with my chastity vow and any sense of dignity or self-respect intact, I decide to default to climbing onto my sassyhorse.

A major deflection, yeah, but I'm really running out of ideas on how to handle Greyson Everitt, seeing as I'm fairly sure the effect he has on me is now so palpable that it can be seen from the other side of the island.

“What—”

“Hello, Indigo. How are you?”

God, why does his voice have to be even more arresting than I remember?

“I'm fine. What are you doing here?”

Oh God, what a genius question.

“What does one normally do at a bar?”

“I'd have thought a place like this would be beneath you,” I respond, throwing a glance around at the weathered wood and the low-key décor. “Wouldn't you feel more comfortable hanging out at some obnoxious *lounge* and sipping on ridiculous cocktails with moody lighting and progressive house music?”

God, please render me temporarily mute.

His lips twist up a little before he takes the bait. In truth, the reason I'm giving him shit instead of conversing like a grown adult is because of what Carrie told me about this woman who's always on the periphery of his life, apparently waiting until they make it official or something. I mean, he's

single, I'm single, it's allowed, but something about it makes my skin crawl in irritation.

We don't speak in what feels like forever, my body buzzing beside him while Mr. Equanimity here doesn't move, doesn't flinch, doesn't fidget. He doesn't do one goddamn thing but stare at my face, which just happens to be completely bare of makeup after my swim, which also turned my loose hair into a wild mess of various shakes of pink, some bright magenta, some faded into rose gold.

The welcome arrival of the long-haired barman with the cheery smile has me turning to face him, the room tipping a little thanks to my buzzed state. I haven't eaten for a couple of hours, and this vodka is already making me giddy.

“What'll it be?”

“Hey. Um, two vodkas and coke.” I cringe at how unsophisticated that drink is. “A Mezcal, extra lime. Oh, and some potato chips. Three packets.”

“Coming right up,” he sings, forcing me to pivot to look at Grey again, if for no other reason than to cut through the overbearing tension.

“You're here for the wedding,” I say. “Did you bring your date? I hope I get to meet her.”

Oh, Christ, Indie...

I regret the words as soon as I say them, but after that quickly downed double vodka, a drink I almost never consume, I'm not exactly in control of what my mouth is doing tonight, it seems.

He flinches as I say it, ire roughening his face, which is even more deathly handsome than I recall.

His eyes are the shape of almonds and their color a bright gray flecked with blue around the center, like an arctic ocean.

His angular cheekbones cut to a strong, straight nose and slice through his heart-shaped face, and his full lips frame a strong chin with a dimple in the center that suddenly begs for me to push my tongue into it.

For God's sake, Indie. Day one of the chastity vow and I'm already salivating over an overbearing prick with a stick up his ass and some girlfriend on the side.

Well, in my defense, I haven't had sex since Kohl, while simultaneously spending every night making myself come by thinking of this man.

Or most nights. Of late, I've managed it less, still chewed up by memories of my ex, made all the more challenging as once more, he managed to get hold of my number, and those messages have begun to come through again.

And once again, I find myself freezing at various times of the day as the thought of the events of my last day with him hit me, with sound dissipating to nothing, the scenes around me shuddering until everything's a featureless blur.

As I remind myself to call the trauma therapist Rami recommended to me when I get back to the mainland, I vaguely see the barman putting a couple of glasses on the bar and as my vision unblurs, I find myself staring at the light-gray cotton of the lucky T-shirt draped over Greyson Everitt's chest.

My gaze wanders up his strong neck, across the beautiful panes of his face to meet eyes dripping with vexation.

I glower back boldly, deciding dignity be damned. I'm going to ask him if he has a girlfriend, even if that makes me look pathetic and needy. I mean, he's a big boy. He can decide if he wants to answer me or not.

"What did you hear about that?" he asks, a coarse bite coarsening his elegant voice.

So it is true...

My stupid heart sinks.

"Not much," I shrug. "I hope I get to meet her."

"There is no *her*. I have an ex that I see sometimes. Despite rumors, that is all." His eyes narrow. "Is that why you didn't take my calls?"

“I told you I needed space. I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“And is that why you changed your number without telling me?”

The displeasure scribbled into the faint crease around his brows seems to have morphed into something else. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he looked hurt.

I didn’t mean to do it that way. I thought about giving him my number before I changed it, but I’m too aware of how much of a red flag this man is, and how potent the effect he has on me is and I can’t shake the feeling that this man is going to hurt me one day, so badly that I don’t recover.

I look down, knowing it was kind of an asshole move and done in a moment of panic and fear.

“Why did you change your number?” he asks.

I don’t answer, lifting my gaze to find his eyes now tainted with concern.

I haven’t told him I’m still being harassed by a man who hurt me. Part of it is the sheer embarrassment of me, a smart woman, managing to fall for someone like that, to miss so many red flags. And I just hate talking about it.

When I don’t answer, he speaks. “I could have got your new number any number of ways, Indigo. I decided not to out of respect for your wishes, and because I knew I’d see you here. I want you to give it to me now.”

“Won’t your so-called ex object?” I ask, still simmering with unjustified jealousy and not entirely sure I can believe him. Apparently, Tom told Carrie he and this woman were engaged at some point, and trying to work it out.

“I don’t give a fuck if she objects. We’re not together. I haven’t touched her in months. The rumors are not true. Not even close.”

I try to conceal the sigh of relief that I have no right to. “Well, you don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“And yet, you asked, Indigo. Clearly it would bother you... just as it would bother me if you had a man to replace the fool I saw you dump.” I gulp down his words and the unmasking of pretense as we get straight back to the dynamic we were in before. He leans into me. “Have you touched a man since I last saw you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh yes, it is,” he bites. “I need to know if there’s a man whose life I need to make a living hell.”

The way he growls the words possessively makes me shudder, the skin on my bare arms and bare belly below my tight white cropped T-shirt prickling into goosebumps.

The way he is sometimes is scary... and intoxicating. He doesn’t do it with the same bitter, unhinged rage that my ex did, but instead feeds me possessive words in a way which stuns my senses and plays into my need for protection.

“I want an answer,” he continues.

“Well, sorry, but I’m not your property, so—”

“Indie! Any chance of getting our drinks?”

I glance over to our booth just ten or so feet away in this now busier bar to see Frannie concealing a smile while Rami blinks slowly, clearly highly unimpressed by Grey’s unexpected appearance on day one of our retreat. Her strong hand is slid down the top of the back cushion, her expression amusingly terse.

“Good evening, ladies,” Greyson shouts over the 80’s rock song currently playing. “Here for the wedding?”

“Yoga retreat,” shouts Fran with a smile. “And to make sure Indie doesn’t get herself into too much trouble,” she jests.

“Or get caught up with any undesirables,” Rami throws at him in that usual piquant way of hers.

“Ah, I’ll be doing the same,” Grey responds, causing me to pivot in a flash, looking up to find his eyes laced with possessiveness above a rather sinful smile.

“Do you think we’ll get our drinks sometime today?” asks Rami.

“Fuck,” I mutter, just in time for the barman to place Rami’s Mezcal and three packets of chips next to my and Fran’s drinks.

“That’ll be twenty-seven even, please,” he says, and I dig out the two twenties from my back pocket.

“I’ll get these,” says Greyson.

“No, you will not!” I snap and speedily hand the two twenties to the barman who stifles a smirk. “We’re quite capable of paying for our own drinks, thank you,” I assert before carrying Fran and Rami’s drinks over to them and placing them on the table.

“Just give me two more minutes,” I say taking in Rami’s slow blink of disapproval.

I turn to find Grey behind me. He places the potato chips onto the table before following me back to the bar. I glance over my shoulder at the booth Greyson was sitting in when I first saw him to find his two friends leaning back into their bench watching us, and I recognize them as the men standing near him when he first bugged me about my lack of cycling skills.

The handsome dark-haired one tips his head a little as he sees me, and the blond guy lifts up a pint of beer, grinning widely.

“Your bodyguards?” I scoff.

“My friends.”

“Oh, well, Rami could take them both, just FYI.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

I grab my vodka and coke from the bar, my eyes finding his over the rim of the glass as I drink down two mouthfuls before placing it back down.

“I don’t want you drinking more than that tonight.”

“What? You have *serious* boundary issues, you know that?”

“Perhaps if you didn’t make such a habit of getting yourself into messes, *Tornada*, I wouldn’t feel this protective.”

“*Possessive* more like. On what planet do you think you have any agency over me?”

“I’m not used to acting like a jealous asshole, Indigo. That’s something very unwanted that you do to me, so you’re going to have to indulge my requests for you to behave.”

I shake my head, practically trembling from outrage. “*Behave?* Sorry, you most definitely have the wrong girl for that... which I’m *sure* you must have picked up on by now.”

His features roughen. “Have you touched a man other than me since you left?”

“What?!”

“I want a fucking answer.”

“Are we back to that?! That’s none of your business.”

“Oh yes, it is.”

“I have, actually,” I say, plastering on an obstinate smile. “Just one, though.”

His frame stiffens visibly but I decide to proceed with my little joke anyway. If I think back to Micah, I’d never in a million years even have dared joke about other men, but despite Grey’s possessiveness, I realize I still feel safe joking with him. I don’t fully understand why.

“Who?” he growls.

“His name is BOB,” I reply, lifting my chin in defiance as I reference the Battery-Operated Boyfriend Fran got for me to help me relocate my orgasms.

His eyes narrow but there’s a slight tug of mirth on his lips, as if he gets the joke.

I guess we’ll see...

“He’s amazing,” I continue. “Tall. *Greeaat* body. Really hard. He’s discreet and very faithful. I never have to worry about what he’s up to. One-woman man, for sure. And he *really* understands my needs, and... well, knows how to satisfy me.”

I bat my eyelids, smiling innocently as his eyes taper up at the corners before dropping to my lips for a moment that feels annoyingly indecent amidst the crackle of electricity zigzagging between us.

“I’d like to meet this *BOB*, Indigo. Though I highly suspect”—he leans into me so closely that it steals my breath, his eyes wildly beautiful, his frame closing me off from everything but him—“I can do a much better job than him at meeting your needs.”

If all the entire five liters of blood circulating around my body hadn’t just rushed to my clit, making the thing ache and throb, I’d maybe find the brainpower to shoot back a pithy response.

As it is, I remain dumbstruck, imagining the tongue hiding behind his straight teeth, just waiting to come out.

He glances down at what I know are red splotches painting themselves into the skin of my chest. It always happens when I’m aroused, and when I orgasm, they turn a bright burgundy, not that a man has ever seen that since orgasm-procurement has always been a solo activity for me.

“If I find out that a man has touched you while you’re here ___”

“Well, you won’t,” I interrupt indifferently. “Because I’ve taken a vow of chastity.”

“A what?”

“We’re on an inner-goddess-worshipping yoga retreat... or something like that.”

His very, very slow blink tells me everything I need to know about his feelings on that matter.

“And we’re all on a dick fast this week. Well, Rami’s is permanent, but Fran and I won’t be going near any men till the retreat is over on Friday. And we intend to stick to it. Sorry if that’s an inconvenience.”

Seeing as today’s Monday, the wedding’s on Wednesday, and most people are leaving this weekend, I suspect it might be.

And frankly, for both of us, because for as many red flags are stuck to this man, he does something to me that even BOB can’t manage during the best of orgasms—he makes my entire freaking body ache to be fucked. Mercilessly.

“I’m a patient man, Indigo.”

I feel my brows folding into a frown. “And I’m not into casual sex,” I respond, still ruminating over his promise to “give me pleasure” and nothing else. “I’ve tried it once and it didn’t work for me. And not that you’d care, but I’m not interested in getting hurt which I know full well is going to happen if I spend time with *you*. So, sorry, but you’re going to have to find another little plaything to amuse yourself with this week. Because it’s sure as hell not going to be me.”

With that, I grab my drink and head over to the booth, scooting myself along the bench until my arm hits Fran’s as I try to catch my breath.

“What an asshole,” I mutter, entirely irrationally, just loud enough for my friends to hear me... though I don’t really mean it. I’m just hormonally challenged by him and hear the words he spoke back in DC echoing through the logical part of my brain over and over again.

I’m not relationship material.

I can’t offer you that.

I know what you want, I mumble to myself.

You want your fun in the sun with me as the perky little conduit, with the added bonus of me being a challenge unlike the other women who I bet just roll over for you as soon as you look at them.

I think I saw at least three of those types eyeing him up at the bar. In fact, it's a miracle I got away from there without throwing my beverage into someone's face.

I glance behind me to see him leaning against the bar, staring in my direction, and I already spot a half-dressed woman who seems to have popped up out of nowhere to take my place.

In his defense, he does seem to be ignoring the horny bitch I suddenly want to strangle, but I know full well he's used to getting away with this dominant asshole routine.

Well, it's not gonna work with me.

As the barman addresses him and he finally turns to presumably order, my eyes can't help but wander illicitly up the impossible angles of his tall, athletic frame. The sleeves of his white button-up short-sleeved shirt are rolled up to reveal a slab of curved muscle that just begs me to squeeze it as I did in his office to stop him from going to find his father.

As I bring my glass to my lips to the sound of Rami saying something over the soft rock buzzing from the speakers, I contemplate the front of him currently out of sight... and how hard it is, and whether it's in proportion to his height.

I already know it is.

He has big-dick energy for days. There's no other explanation for that insufferably arrogant attitude of his.

Jesus Fucking Christ, I groan at myself as I take a swig and put the glass down.

I've never in my life been this attracted to a man, and it just had to be a pompous prick who thinks he has the right to boss me about and taunt me with the suggestion of what could well be the most orgasmic holiday fling known to womankind... or leave me in floods of tears at the end of it.

I'm just glad our boundary-stretching yoga master told us, with no hint of irony or self-consciousness in his soothing voice, that he doesn't mind if we pleasure ourselves, because that miniature vibrator I brought along with me might just be getting a workout tonight.

Oh God...

I facepalm energetically.

First day of the chastity vow and my pussy is currently throwing a pool party at the thought of what's hanging beneath those knee-length navy shorts of his.

I take another sip, absorbing the sight of his legs, his tanned calf muscles a sculpture, down to his sandalled feet, which even from here look very big.

As my gaze climbs upwards, I manage not to sputter out my drink, swallowing instead as his eyes collide with mine and, I shit you not, he licks the inner seam of his bottom lip in a way that makes the happy pool downstairs begin to overflow.

Managing to pull myself together, I decide that his glower is a bit too stormy for my tastes and I return one back to him before deciding to ignore him for the rest of the night and instead focus on my friends.

I mean, we are all here for a feminine power yoga retreat after all and not to drool over Mr. Probable Big Dick.

Well, that's the plan, anyway.

"Oh, nice of madam to join us," Fran jests as I lean into them. "I thought you were gonna be dick-stracted all night."

"God, sorry," I wince.

"It was *your* idea to do this Inner Woman's retreat, *Tornado*," says Rami flatly. "You said it would be the perfect detox from dick, or whatever you straight women obsess about day and night."

My spine snaps up straight. "It will be! Sorry, it's just..."

"You have a thing for assholes," she deadpans with a smirk, but her words make me flinch without meaning to as she conjures up Micah's face.

"Sorry," she sighs out as I peer at the dark liquid in my glass.

Micah wasn't an asshole at first. In fact, he was sweet and kind. It's only with time that he became more controlling,

more possessive, to the point that I was being told what to wear, who to see, and if I wanted to go out, even with Fran and Rami or other female friends, he'd park outside the bar we were in, texting me non-stop until I was so on edge that the entire evening was a bust.

I've had my first and last taste of *asshole*, and I never want to go near one again.

"I don't like assholes. And I've only dated *one*. *One*."

"We know you don't, hun," replies Fran, elbowing Rami in the arm.

"Sorry," Rami repeats. "I'm just mama bear over here. And as for the other one"—she tips her head in the direction of the man now walking through the bar in the direction of his friends carrying three drinks—"my spidey senses are tingling and they're saying *Asshole, Asshole, Asshole*," she whispers, making me burst into a grin.

As Grey takes a seat opposite me, with one booth between us, I can't help but catch his eye, my gaze feeling like it's magnetically drawn, constantly checking to see if he's looking at me... which he invariably is.

I've been watched a lot in the last year. Micah has stalked me on my way home from work, on the way to the grocery store, has sat outside my basement apartment waiting for me to come out.

At times I've confronted him, shouted at him, pleaded with him, played nice, and at others, I've threatened to call the police, actually going through with it once. I've ignored him, gray-rocked, shown no emotion as I've been told to do. Nothing seemed to make any difference.

Which brings me back to the man staring at me from one booth away. His stare isn't like Micah's was. It's not desperate or unhinged. It's bold, sullen and borderline indecent, but there's some hint of warmth to it—a self-assuredness that Micah doesn't have.

What's more important is that it doesn't make me feel less than human.

I drag my eyes away from him.

“Look, I know, okay? Big red flags. Moody prick energy. I get it, believe me. It’s just”—I dip my head a little, lowering my voice—“it’s the first time I’ve been attracted to someone since... you know. I honestly thought my libido was gonna be dormant for the next five years. This guy just... awakens things.”

“Oh well, it’s good you made that vow of chastity this morning then, isn’t it?” cackles Rami, making me and Fran burst into giggles.

“Fuck off,” I snigger, sliding my eyes to his to find them bright as he watches me before making a concerted effort to keep them positively glued either to Fran, Rami or my glass for the rest of the night.

“Your lady parts are waking up because you can finally relax now that he’s in jail,” Fran says with a smile about my ex.

“Yeah.”

I don’t dare tell her quite how bad the text messages have got this week. It’s not him—it’s some piece of shit he’s paying or one of his sadistic family members, but still, every message shoots that same freaking arrow of despair and panic into me as when he was banging on my door demanding to see me.

“Enough about that piece of shit,” snarls Rami. “I’ll throw him off a fucking bridge if he ever goes near you again.” She raises her glass of Mezcal high. “Come on ladies, let’s drink. To Arlo!”

Fran and I follow suit. “To Arlo!”

Indigo

Half an hour later after a couple more drinks each, the last of which we did our best not to spill amongst fits of giggles during which I tried my best to ignore the sear of my erstwhile boss's glare, Frannie and I pivot to face each other, mouths widening into the goofiest grin as "our" song begins to blare out through the bar.

My Sharona.

Yeah, it's kitsch and a hundred years old, but years ago, a couple of guys tried to seduce us at a bar by dancing to it with one of them falling flat on his ass and of course, leaving us in fits of hysterics, and ever since then, whenever we hear it, we jump to our feet and grind it out.

Only this time, I know full well that Mr. Uptight with the megawatt body will be watching us. Watching me. My body is restless with pre-emptive embarrassment as Frannie shouts, "Come on!" grabbing my hand.

"No, I can't."

"Bullshit!"

"You go," I implore. "I'll watch."

"This isn't because of Hot Prick, is it?"

"I—"

“Get the fuck up!” Rami orders in full-blown general mood. Despite her grin of naughty amusement, I reluctantly make it to my wobbly feet.

There are only a handful of people dancing on the wooden dance floor in the middle of this kitschily decorated bar, and I purposely drag Fran behind them so Grey can’t see me as we face each other and begin to tipsily dance our clumsy asses off.

When I got up, I thought there was no way in hell I’d be able to dance in front of the man I see out of my peripheral vision, but after a year of feeling like I’ve been wearing a concrete overcoat, stiff and heavy, stealing my breath, tonight my body suddenly feels light. Free. Nimble.

I mean, that’s probably mostly the alcohol and the fact that I feel safer on an island that you need a boat to access, but still...

I flap my hair about, jutting my hips, jumping a little, twirling around Fran as we reenact the same silly dance we’ve done every time we’ve heard this song since—in airports, at parties, even in a field once when it came up on someone’s playlist.

Fran and I try to be serious while not falling on our behinds as we spin around, showing off our best moves.

As we bounce and strut and spin to the music and just generally make asses of ourselves, I do what I swore I wouldn’t, my gaze reaching for him over Fran’s shoulder, wondering if he’s watching and is now convinced I’m thoroughly ridiculous.

But maybe not, for despite my beer goggles, I find him leaning back against the leather casing of the booth, one hand around his drink on the table, his lips turned up slightly at both corners and those luminous eyes of his tracking me like a wolf, glimmering as if enjoying the show.

I swear my heart skips a beat as his lips twist up a little as I find myself grinning, half out of drunken giddiness and half

from the unexpected feeling of being free for the first time in months.

Partly just to provoke the man lurking in the shadows stalking me with his eyes like a wolf, my hips twist and I hoist my arms into the air as Frannie and I spin around each other, our fingers interlocking, our eyes burning into each other—just for fun... though he doesn't have to know that.

But just as we're getting to the deliriously ecstatic stage of mid-third chorus dancing, a large shape fills the space next to us and a stocky man faces us both, grinding his hips in our direction and I swear, licking his lips for good measure. It's as if he first read the manual on how to be a lecherous creep before coming up to us.

His glassy eyes and the slight stumble to his step tell me he's had one too many and Fran throws me a look that I can read like a book and tips her head, turning to walk back to the booth.

I follow her, side-stepping the guy with one of those "*We're all good here*" smiles women feel obliged to plaster on to keep themselves safe, only to feel an unfamiliar hand on my arm. I pivot to find the drunken stranger's hand gripping my bicep.

"Wanna dance, sexy?"

Although I'm hardly unsafe in this room half-full of people and I doubt he means much by it, the callous grip of his fingers on my arm leaves bitter cold seeping into my gut, taking me back to the numerous times that Micah, would grab me, or push me into a wall, or stop me from leaving when I tried to. Not to mention, other things...

Frannie's voice jolts me from behind. "Hey, let her go."

"Come on, sweetheart. One dance."

I tug my arm away roughly, while knowing full well that women aren't supposed to do that. We're supposed to placate men, not bruise their egos, just in case... they're one of the dangerous ones.

But in this case, I can't help it. The urge to get the feel of him off me is too visceral.

"I'm done dancing, thanks," I say firmly and go to turn only to feel his hand on my arm again.

I pull mine away once more, taking an inelegant step back only to collide with something hard behind me. I shudder as a hand reaches forwards from behind and winds itself around the drunken man's wrist so tightly that I see the muscles tensing furiously.

I know who it is without needing to turn and watch as the sloppy man's eyes climb a foot upwards to the man whose firm chest is pressing into my back.

"You heard what she said," Greyson growls. "Now step the fuck back or I'll throw you into the fucking wall."

As he speaks, Grey's hand grips the top of my arm, only this time, I feel neither the revulsion nor sense of intrusion I did when the stranger touched me.

If anything, a torrent of relief washes over me as Grey gently eases me to the side of him before taking a step in front of me.

The drunkard staggers a little. "What's it to you?"

I pull on Grey's arm, not for the first time. "He's not worth it."

The sweaty man grins at me before taking a step forward. "Looks like she wanted a good time."

Under my palm and fingers, Grey's muscle contracts into stone, and I tug on it again, utterly ineffectually seeing as this man is about two hundred pounds of muscle and feels like twice my size.

"Go on. Put your hand on me," Grey snarls. "I dare you."

But before a word can even come out, the creep pushes Grey hard in the chest, only for Grey to grab him by the front of his shirt, literally tipping the cockroach onto his back and dragging him by the neck through the dancefloor.

As he makes it to the door, Rami rushes up, opening it widely so that Grey can throw the pig out.

As the drunken creep rolls over, easing himself onto his knees and then his feet, the barman bounds up, coming to a stop in front of us on the wide sidewalk overlooking a small tree-encased parking lot and pushing the man back.

“I warned you, asshole!” he shouts, grabbing the man by the shoulder and walking him as best he can towards a small line of waiting cabs, followed by Greyson.

“You okay?” asks Rami as Fran links her arm into mine. “Sorry, I was in the washroom. Just caught the tail end of that.”

“Yeah, all good.”

Frannie rubs my arm. She knows I’m jumpier than I used to be, a fact that I hate. The woman’s a blinding ray of sunshine, but I was always the more spontaneous one, the more carefree, the sillier of the two.

I don’t want to lose that to fear or trauma.

I can’t lose it.

We watch as Grey and the barman practically shove the man into a cab with Grey pulling out his wallet and handing the driver some money through the open front window.

As the car drives off, relief ripples through me as I shake off the malaise I felt at that fleeting moment of powerlessness.

As Rami hands Fran and me our purses, I watch Grey stroll back, eyes on the floor, hands in his deep pockets as the two guys he was with follow us out.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t see the fucker slip back in,” says the barman breezily, opening the door to go inside. “Local. Pain in my fucking ass.”

“No worries,” I respond, catching the eyes of the mysterious Mr. Everitt currently igniting a hormonal firestorm inside me with his sullen protectiveness.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Never mind me,” Grey replies sternly. “Are *you*?”

I nod. “All good. Thanks for, you know, not turning the dancefloor into a crime scene back there.”

“You’re welcome, though if he hadn’t been drunk, I might have smashed his nose through his skull for touching you.”

I shake my head nervously and step towards him when I see his wrist pink as if having been grabbed, stopping myself from reaching for it to check that he isn’t hurt.

“Your hand. Did you hurt it? Maybe you need an ice pack or something.”

He shakes his head before gesturing to the two men now next to us.

“This is my friend, Gideon,” he says about the tall handsome one with the floppy black hair. “And this is Kennedy,” he adds, referring to the shorter blond guy with the cute chubby cheeks. He turns to me, his gaze so focused that it makes me fidget. “And this is Indigo.”

Both of their faces light up as they consider me, and I manage an awkward smile in response.

“And Fran,” he continues. “And... Rami.”

“*Ramirez* is fine,” snaps Rami, funny, smart, protective, brilliant, but not the most socially enthusiastic of creatures.

Fran and I cast each other a sideways glance of amusement at her delivery.

“How about we call it a night?” says Rami swiftly.

“Yeah, the class starts at 8 a.m. tomorrow,” adds Fran.

“Are you gentlemen done here?” asks Greyson to his friends.

“No, we’re gonna go back in,” replies Gideon, eyes gleaming mischievously. “We’ll get a cab home if you want to leave?”

Grey nods, turning to me and the ladies. “Okay. I’ll drive you home. I didn’t drink alcohol tonight.”

“Like hell you will,” snaps Rami. “Look, thanks for helping our girl out, but we’ll be getting a cab.”

“Rami,” chides Fran gently as I throw her a pointed look to chill.

“Look, thanks,” I say, “but we’ll get a cab.”

He bows his head and we say our goodbyes.

A minute later as we pour into a taxi, I turn to find him watching us on the sidewalk.

Indigo

“Can you tell the instructor I’m only gonna be there for the afternoon session?” I say as we pull up to the ridiculously beautiful oceanside vacation house Fran, Rami and I are renting for the week. “I’m on wedding duty tomorrow morning. And all day Wednesday.”

“Oh, fuck, enjoy *that*,” snorts Rami sarcastically, having heard all about Carrie’s bridezilla ways for the last few weeks.

Her, um, attention to detail, to put it mildly, is one of the reasons I decided to do a yoga retreat in the first place—to help me stay sane while trying to keep her from losing her freaking marbles.

Watching her spend months poring over that wedding binder of hers has only cemented what I already knew, which is that if I do ever get married, it’ll be in a barn somewhere with everyone wearing what they want, getting drunk and stupid-dancing all night.

I know her wedding is going to be spectacular, but that level of planning is just not in my DNA. Even getting my bridesmaid dress right felt like a conquest. It took three long fittings before it was acceptable to Carrie. I love the woman dearly, but dear Lord, I’ll be relieved when this one is over.

To top it off, a month ago, she hired a Type A wedding planner with a stick permanently lodged up her behind who

seems to think she can text the bridesmaids lists of demands at all hours of the night.

“My turn,” says Fran, handing the driver a ten-dollar bill.

As we thank him and spill out onto the sidewalk behind our house, my eye is drawn to car lights pulling up about fifty or so feet behind us.

It’s dark now, so I can’t see who’s in it, but something about the four round headlights looks familiar, making my body go rigid.

As I take a step towards the car, it pulls away from the curb and in that moment, I recognize the Bentley and its distinctive headlamps.

“Hey!” I shout, indignation pulsing in overbearing waves through my veins as I begin to run towards it, which would have been a bad idea even before the four shots of vodka.

I don’t like feeling stalked.

Apparently, he sees me for he pulls over, rolling the window down.

Grey...

I’m aware that the panic surging irrationally through my system has nothing to do with him, but I can’t seem to rein myself in. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“You three have had too much to drink,” Grey replies, his tone entirely too measured for my loose cannon mood. “I wanted to make sure you got home safely.”

I should be grateful, and I am, but his words still grate at me, making me feel watched, something I’ve had enough of this year to last a lifetime.

“Excuse me, but we’re on vacation, so we can drink whatever the hell we want. And moreover, it’s none of your goddamn business how much we have to drink! And finally, you don’t have the right to stalk women to their doors!”

The way he watches me curiously, showing no hint of anger, only makes me feel more out of control.

“If it helps, Indigo, this isn’t exactly how I enjoy spending my time.”

“Well, it doesn’t!”

“*Indiiiee.*”

I throw a glance behind me at Fran. Even before seeing her face, I hear the soft reproach in her tone warning me that I’m losing it. She tips her head, gesturing for me to come in.

Fuck.

I shake my head at him just so he doesn’t think he can get into the habit of stalking me to my door. His eyes glitter in the shadows before he rolls the car window up and drives away.

“*Un-fucking-believable,*” I sneer as he drives off, only to slow down just thirty feet away...

No.

...and turn into the driveway of the house next door. It’s separated from ours by just a short fence and as he gets out and slams the door closed, he shouts over, “Goodnight, ladies,” in provocation before taking out his key and heading to the back door of the house adjacent to ours, his gaze catching mine as he enters.

“Oh, my fucking God, he is *not* our neighbor,” I groan as I catch up to Fran and Rami.

“Of course he is,” returns Rami. “Just our luck. Oh, and I know he’s one hot piece of ass, but if he comes over here without an invite, I’m gonna shoot him for trespassing.”

“Oh my God.” A thought hits me, making my limbs dissolve into a pool of jelly. “You don’t think...?” My palm reaches for my chest. “Carrie arranged this place for us. You don’t think he got her to make sure it was next to his, do you?”

“It does sound like something that brand of prick would do,” groans Rami.

“Do you think that’s why it’s so cheap?” asks Fran and my hand slides up to my neck.

We couldn't believe it when Carrie told me we'd only have to pay \$450 for ten days, \$150 each, for a stunning modern 4-bedroom detached house with a private balcony overlooking the ocean and a fridge stocked with food when we arrived.

"You don't think," I mumble, "that Grey would have paid towards the house, do you? So that we could afford to live next door to him?"

Their silence and my intuition gives me my answer.

"Oh my God, he has no right to do that," I say.

"Well, we don't know he did," replies Fran. "But I mean, it is kind of romantic if he *did*. It means he really wants to see you."

"Yeah, it's romantic, if you've never been stalked," I respond.

I catch the gentle reproach in Fran's expression.

"What?" I sigh.

"You know what," she replies.

"Look, he had no right to stalk us to our front door like that."

"Maybe he really was just checking to see that we made it home okay."

"Oh, whatever would we have done without him?" I scoff. "Lord knows how I've survived twenty-three years on this planet without his bodyguard services."

Frannie loops her arm into mine as we stroll towards the front door of the rental. "Don't you think you were a bit harsh on him?"

"Hey, whose side are you on?"

Rami unlocks the door and we head inside.

"I'm just saying, do you think you would have reacted like that if all that stuff hadn't happened with Micah?"

Her words only reinforce what I already know—that that outburst out there had nothing to do with him, and everything

to do with the trauma I still feel over my ex, a man I'm still not free of, even if I hide the fact from my friends so as not to turn their vacation into some hellscape of various shades of anxiety.

A sigh billows from my lips as I plonk my purse onto the bench by the door as Rami locks us in for the night.

I head to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water, wondering what he makes of me being so stupidly jumpy, wondering whether I should tell him that half the reason I constantly chew him up and spit him out is because every time I feel a man watching me, my stomach turns in trepidation.

I guess it doesn't matter that much anyway. The cantankerous glare of his mixed with that utterly indecent specimen of a male body sporting illegal-levels of muscle means that he's wholly incompatible with my vow of chastity, so I guess the sensible thing would be to give him as wide a berth as possible.

If *sensible* were in my repertoire, of course.

"You're right," I grumble. "As always."

"Look, it's not your fault, babe. I have my own trauma responses. It's just something to keep in mind as you chase away every single hot man that comes near you with a stick."

I manage a half-smile, bringing the water to my lips in the hopes that it sobers me up at warp speed.

"I'll try," I reply. "Anyway, enough man talk. We're here to *'reconnect to our sacred feminine energy'*, remember?" I say, half-mocking our yoga teacher's painfully earnest voice.

"Yeah, pack it in, you two, before I clunk your heads together," adds Rami.

"Right," I decide. "From this moment onwards, no more man talk."

Rami throws me an unconvinced smirk, shaking her head as she heads upstairs. "Goodnight, bitches."

Greyson

Tuesday

“So once everyone is seated and the groom is in position at the front,” says Anne, the extremely forthright wedding planner Tom and Carolyn have gone for, “the music will start and the bridal procession will begin. Each bridesmaid will walk down the aisle with one groomsman, so four couples in total.”

I glance down at Carolyn’s friend, Sarah, aware that she’s been throwing glances in my direction since we got to the reception hall at the hotel this morning.

Unfortunately for both of us, my mind is utterly and completely consumed by someone else...

“I can’t match them up until all four bridesmaids are here,” snarls Anne, exhaling heavily in exasperation as Gideon, Kennedy and I exchange glances. “Where is she?”

“Sorry. She said two minutes,” responds Carolyn who seems a lot more composed than the wedding planner she hired. “Punctuality is not her strong suit.”

“Well, she’d better not be late tomorrow or I’m throwing her in the fucking ocean,” snaps Anne.

“She won’t be,” smiles Carrie whose eyes suddenly widen as she spots something over my shoulder. “Indie!”

At the sound of her name, my heart thuds heavily in my chest as a rush of adrenaline rages through me despite a concerted effort to keep my body still.

I turn to see a somewhat disheveled young woman rushing up the garden stairs towards the reception hall before barging her way through the open doors, almost tripping as she does.

Her pink hair flails about as she bounds up to the group.

“I’m soooo sorry,” she blurts out breathlessly, inhaling sharp lungfuls of air. “I got a—” She clutches her chest, only her profile visible to me. “I forgot we had to wear a long skirt to practice, so had to go back and get it,” she utters sheepishly to Carrie’s good-natured grin.

Two of the bridesmaids smile at her warmly while the other watches her, her expression flat.

“The hair’s still pink, then?” says Anne, doing little to hide her disapproving tone.

Indigo raises her chin in a rather defiant way, which turns me on as much as when she does it to me. “Yep,” she asserts boldly. “Still pink.”

“Well, it’ll be tied up tomorrow, so we won’t have to see it, at least,” replies Anne, and I spot the eyeroll by Indie in the direction of Carolyn whose hazel eyes glisten mischievously in response.

Indie throws an unimpressed look at Anne before grabbing an elastic band from around her slim golden wrist and pulling her long hair into it, wrapping the ends around the band into a messy bun at the back of her head.

My eyes are drawn to the neck I can’t help but want to kiss... to lick... to bite.

“Better?” she asks.

“Much.”

“So what did I mi—?”

But as Indie turns to look at the groomsmen, her sentence grinds to a deafening halt, despite her plump lips remaining

nice and parted as her gaze hits mine.

Confusion registers on that pretty little face of hers above the rapid rising and falling of her chest.

“Indie, you remember Greyson,” says Carolyn innocently, as if she didn’t follow my instructions to ensure I spend the week living next to her friend.

“Um. Yes.”

“He’s one of Tom’s groomsmen.” Indigo slides her eyes across to Tom before closing them for a long second.

“Of course he is,” she mutters, much to my merriment, before glancing around at Gideon and Kennedy, her lightly freckled cheeks flushing so perfectly.

“Thank you for turning up,” Anne spits at her before turning to the group. “So, now that everyone has *finally* graced us with their presence, this is what we’re doing. The bridesmaids will be spending tomorrow morning in Carolyn’s room getting ready and helping her. Then we’ll walk over here together. You ladies will be waiting behind that partition over there. When the music starts, the four bridesmaids will each join arms with one of the groomsmen on my instruction, and one after another, you’ll walk down the aisle. The groomsmen will line up at the top of the steps to the right of the altar, the bridesmaids to the left.”

She takes a step back, throwing a rather objectionable look at Indigo who, from what I gather, has a personality diametrically opposed to the highly organized wedding planner.

Even so, her hostility rankles me.

“Right, let’s finally match you up,” Anne says, slipping her eagle eyes up and down the face and body of every bridesmaid and groomsman.

“Hachiko, you’ll be with Jermaine. Nisha, you’ll be with Kennedy. Sarah, you’ll go with Greyson. And Indigo, you’ll be with Gid—”

“I’d like to go with Indigo,” I interrupt. “I can help keep her out of trouble.”

Out of my peripheral, I see Indie’s mouth gape in outrage.

“You’re much too tall for her,” whines Anne. “It’s not a good match.”

“I think they’re perfect together,” responds Carrie.

My eyes meet Tom’s who responds accordingly. “I agree. Let’s have them together.”

“Fine,” sighs Anne, shaking her head in irritation as Indie glares up at me. “So, Gideon and Sarah, you’re together. And Greyson and Indie. Done.” She scribbles something onto a pad clipped to her clipboard. “Follow me.”

As we settle behind the screen concealing the back of the aisle we’ll be walking down tomorrow, Anne requires us all to stand next to our partners before taking out her phone and playing the song that is the cue for the first couple to walk.

“You’re outrageous, you know that?” hisses Indie.

You have no idea, Indigo...

Indigo

I feel highly irritated by how aware I am of how unyielding his bicep is as my fingers wrap around it. He's wearing a shirt, but still as my fingertips press into it, it feels like stone sheathed in a thin layer of flesh.

I keep my eyes fixed on the altar ahead, my hangover and associated pounding headache making every painful step feel like I'm walking around Everest base camp and sucking in half the oxygen needed to sustain human life.

The events of this morning have hardly helped my mood and the last thing I really want to be doing right now is holding onto the arm of another dominant prick, especially one who has way more control over my pleasure centers than I do.

As we walk in step to the classical music with my other hand clutching some cream-colored flowers to my waist, his words steal my breath, and my head snaps towards him despite me supposed to be playing the role of prim and proper little bridesmaid.

“So why were you really late, Indie?”

My respiration grows shallow as I glare at him in indignation for the arrogant, presumptuous question.

How dare the man think he can read me like a book?

“It’s Indigo to you,” I shoot back, trying to keep my tone hushed.

“Oh, is it now?” he says, his gaze kept straight forwards on Gideon and Sarah ahead of us.

“Yes, it is.”

“Why were you late?”

I throw him a most impolite stare, inhaling a deep breath and continuing to walk, deciding to ignore his question, not in small part because I don’t even want to think about the answer.

My stomach has been tied into a hundred knots in the last two hours since I woke up, and all I want to do is crawl back into bed and forget that I turned my phone on after my morning swim to see four voicemail messages, all almost a minute long with nothing but silence on the phone, and over two dozen text messages from my ex-boyfriend, no doubt sent by some lackey of his. He can certainly afford to pay them.

I don’t know why I was stupid enough to think that if I didn’t file charges, didn’t get a restraining order, he’d actually feel a modicum of gratitude and move on.

How fucking naive of me.

Today’s messages have been a total shitshow of rage, threats, pleas, and some incongruous Nice Guy™ sideshow which I’m assuming I’m supposed to succumb to or something...

I know full well I’m not supposed to answer, but when he began to threaten to have someone turn up to fuck with the wedding, I finally cracked, texting whoever is sending them that if they keep going, I’ll be calling the police.

The thing is, I saw when I threatened him repeatedly at the end of last year when everything turned to shit, that he barely flinched, seeming totally unafraid of that possibility. It’s like he’s so used to his powerful family cleaning his messes up for him that he can’t fathom that one day he might actually have to face the consequences of his actions.

I thought about telling Carrie and Tom, but I'm sure he's bluffing just to freak me out, and I really don't want to put a horrible raincloud over their day.

They've already got enough to deal with, what with juggling their challenging families, and certainly don't need my unhinged ex on their minds.

I should call the police, call a lawyer, start the process to get a temporary restraining order... if they can even match these texts to him. I mean, he's in jail, without access to a phone. If these calls are from some foreign internet number or something, there's no proof it's even anyone who knows him, as the police very curtly informed me the one time I built up the courage to go to them.

Even if I do involve the authorities, I'll live in terror of him getting out. The reality is that the system isn't designed to help victims. It's designed to give abusers never-ending chances.

Grey's words bring me back into the room. "Not answering, Indigo."

"What makes you think I was late for any other reason than I forgot my skirt?" I snap.

"Because I watched you come out of the sea early this morning grinning from ear-to-ear, and an hour later, I watched you pace on the balcony as if... something had happened."

My mouth goes dry.

How dare he watch me?

I want to tell him to stop observing my every move, but before I can speak, we reach the end of the aisle.

I unloop my hand from his arm and turn to the left, silently seething both at him and how powerless and vulnerable I suddenly feel.

Rami was right back in December when she told me to press charges. I don't even know if these messages are enough to go on now. If the judge finds out I did nothing for months, depending on how informed he or she is, they may not

understand that women are programmed to placate dangerous man out of fear. If I bring up the events of last year, they'll ask why I waited, assuming I'm exaggerating. It'll just kill my chances of getting a permanent restraining order.

I turn to watch a casually-dressed Carrie walking down the aisle with her uncle. Although her wedding day isn't till tomorrow, she still looks radiant.

I look down for a moment, my eyes panning up to find Grey's fixed to my face on the other side of the aisle, concern painted into his rugged features.

I look away quickly to see Carrie approach.

I only wish I was thinking about her and nothing else.

Indigo
Wednesday

My hands tremble, forcing me to put my phone into the wicker table on the balcony as I stare at the message.

I know what you're up to over there, you whore.

We'll be waiting for you when you get back, Indie.

We're gonna teach you a fucking lesson, you slut.

Slut.

Whore.

Cunt.

I glance inside the house, wondering if Rami or Fran are up and getting ready for yoga. Today's first class starts in just over an hour, I think.

I drop my head.

Let's face it—I wouldn't tell them about his messages even if they were up. They already went through enough crap during the end of the relationship, and I don't want to ruin their vacation by making them deal with him again.

The only person I can really talk to is his ex who went through the same thing when they split up, but even she's still afraid of him and I know my calls trigger her, so I've been trying not to contact her.

At the chime of another message coming through, I flinch.

I have people watching you, slut.

I know he's lying. He's always said stuff like that, even around the middle of our relationship when I hadn't fully realized what I'd gotten myself into.

I stare at the message, not responding.

I never respond, as I was told not to by my trauma therapist. Only this time, I'm not doing nothing. I'm collecting each message and beginning to put all the evidence I have from last year together. If he doesn't stop, when I get back, I'm going to file for that restraining order and ask the police if we can press charges.

I know you're fucking around, whore.

I hope you get fucked by a gang of—

I slam the phone down, my insides quivering as another shockwave of panic ravages me.

I file through any number of folders in my brain, trying to understand how he could have found where I was going on this trip which is clearly triggering the hell out of him.

I could drive myself mad wondering how he always seems two steps ahead.

My head tilts to stare at the ocean, the fizz of rough water lulling me out of my dark thoughts as the early morning waves foam into white as they hit the dark sand of the beach.

I close my eyes, inhaling the salty scent of the ocean, deciding that a swim will hopefully clean away the more vicious of his words, cleansing the crawling feeling of him on my skin.

I get up and pull my nightdress off my frame and drape it over my chair. I'm wearing a peach bralette and panties that I pulled on when I got up.

I should really go upstairs and grab my bikini, but I can't be bothered. It's before 7 a.m. and on this cloudy morning, there's not a soul in sight along this quiet residential stretch of beach.

I open the little gate, trudge down the wooden steps of the deck, and amble down to the inviting water, my feet pushing into the spongy sand as I do.

The rush of strong waves calls to me as I try to shake off the contaminating poison of his messages. Just a few words from him seem to permeate my insides, leaving me shaking and unsettled, unable to think about anything else.

The water is colder and slightly rougher than yesterday, but my whole body relaxes as I wade in, the salty liquid lapping at my ankles, then knees, then hips. I suck in a deep breath and plunge my hands into the water as it hits my waist, making me shiver and forcing me to push on through and venture further so that the cold doesn't hurt quite as much.

As the water reaches my nipples, I inhale a lungful of air to some vague noise I just about make out behind me over the tumbling whoosh of fast waves.

My momentum has me diving forwards, plunging my head beneath the surface and coming back up a few feet away, the shock of icy water cleansing my nervous system of some of the energy Micah does so love imparting on me.

I duck into the water and begin to swim, trying to focus on the wedding I'll be attending later today. I have to get myself over to Carrie's room in about an hour to do hair and make-up and get her ready, no doubt watched over by the ever-vigilant Anne who seemed to first decide she didn't like me when I

told her I wouldn't be stripping the pink out of my hair for the wedding.

As I wade further, my body pushes against the strong current and I decide to go back after just a couple more minutes once the dark knot has untied in my belly.

I dive below the surface again to avoid getting whacked in the face by errant waves, letting the ungovernable mass of water tumble me about a bit if only to discharge the anxiety seeking to seize control of my body and send me into a panic, only as I come back up to the surface, I realize I'm being pulled away from the shore and not just by my own efforts.

Fuck.

As I'm yanked further out, I become aware of just how strong this tug of war is.

That's all I need...

I've been in a rip current twice before, so I know how to handle them. I make a mental note not to panic as I did the first time, and just let it pull me, knowing the treacherous tide will dissipate about thirty feet out, at which point I can swim parallel to the beach to get out of it, as long as I don't waste my energy beforehand trying to swim against it.

As I'm pulled out, I stay calm, kicking my limbs in order to do nothing but stay afloat, but as I look out, I see a large dark-gray wave approaching.

Dread seeps into my stomach as I inhale as much air as my winded lungs can manage and watch the thundering beast approach, closing my eyes at the last minute to be hit by it hard, the momentum forcing me under the water and knocking me about, rolling me over until I'm at least fifteen feet deep.

Realizing I may be deep enough to get out of the rip tide, I try to swim to the left, but the merciless tug of the current is still in possession of my body as I kick my legs frantically to get back up to the surface.

As I reach air, I gasp loudly, aware of the increasing panic leaching strength from my limbs.

Stay calm...

As I look out at the ocean, trying to see where the current stops, another wave approaches, only this time the wind is thoroughly knocked out of me as I'm slammed under the water, hearing the high-pitched and desperate noise that is ripped from my throat as I'm thrown about as if in a tumble dryer.

Indie...

Trying once again to swim out of the current, I realize in disbelief that I can't. It's too strong and all I can do is flail my body, twisting it to get back up to the surface and take a lungful of air just in time to be hit by another roaring monster of a wave.

This time, I manage to dive beneath the water before the waves hit my head, but it doesn't stop the perilous maelstrom from dragging me under, only now my internal pleas to stay calm no longer work as the sudden hell of primal fear seizes me and I begin to kick wildly, desperate to reach the surface before another wave hits.

Except I can't.

Before I reach the top, I'm propelled lower by a wave that spins me around. My nose stings from swallowing water the wrong way, and my eyes open in panic, seeing nothing but gray and the pull of black beneath it. As I begin to pray and plead to God knows who, the sudden grip on my flesh jolts me as something seizes my arm, pulling me with a strength that doesn't seem possible.

With wilting legs, I kick in the same direction, air streaming from my nose until, after what feels like eternity, we reach the surface and I'm yanked up mercilessly.

I barely realize who it is before my arms are around his neck, holding him tightly as he treads water and I realize that he's pulled us out of the current.

“Are you okay?”

My eyes, instantly filled with tears, lock onto his—as gray as the water beneath the surface and wild with fear.

I nod, trying not to cry from relief... and from the humiliation of needing to be rescued.

“Hold onto me,” Greyson orders.

“I can swim from here,” I respond.

“You’ll hold onto me until we get close to the shore,” he growls. “Understand?”

I nod, holding my arms around his neck as he begins to swim us towards the shore. My body shifts, coming to lie on his strong back as he swims, the kinesis of him so powerful compared to my meager efforts out there.

As we finally approach the shore, I slide off him. “I can swim from here.”

But he ignores my assertion, grabbing my wrist with his hand and pulling me as he swims the rest of the way.

I thank God as my feet hit the sand and I stand, tugging at my dishevelled bralette so that it somewhat covers my boobs and pulling up my panties as high as they’ll go as he leads me out of the water, still gripping my arm.

I pull against his grasp, but he ignores me until the foaming white no longer laps at our ankles, finally releasing me before turning around.

“Thank you,” I manage breathlessly.

“Did you hear me shout back there?”

His question and the irascible way he asks it knocks the little wind I have left out of me.

“No,” I answer, crossing my arms to cover my breasts which are covered by fabric that is clinging to them in a way that I know leaves little to the imagination.

As I peer up at him under the thick clouds above, I realize that the worry carved into his face out there has morphed into anger that I don’t know if I can deal with right now.

“You realize you could have got yourself killed!” he snarls. “*Again*. Didn’t you see the rip tide before you went in?!”

“Well, obviously not!” I shoot back, my body shivering from overwhelm as I search his eyes beneath lashes from which cling salt water.

Without asking, he pulls me down the beach towards our rental house by the arm. His grasp isn't rough but firm enough to have me slip into the stream of his tall body. From just behind him, I see that he's wearing black boxers, the type you usually wear around the house and not to swim in, and as my gaze pans up, I see something beneath the rivulets of ocean water snaking down his muscular back—scars.

A web of thick, pronounced scars on his left side.

Just as my eyes focus a little, he pivots me towards the water.

“Hey!” I shout, yanking my arm away as he gestures towards the ocean.

“See that current?!” he barks, pointing to a very clear tunnel of water being pulled back towards the ocean. “The thing was practically sign-posted. How could you miss it?!”

The accusation rankles. “I was distracted,” I mutter.

“Distracted?! Well, what a perfect fucking time to get distracted—when you're about to go swimming in the ocean on a shitty day when no one's around! Was that your excuse when you decided to cycle right in front of a moving car last month?”

“Stop shouting!”

He takes a step towards me, eyes wild with desperation. “I'll stop shouting the day you finally get your head out of the fucking clouds long enough to not make decisions that will get you killed! It happens, you know, every fucking day. Women leave their homes thinking they have another forty years of life, and don't come home...”

Women...

“Yeah, well, it's not like I planned it!”

“No. You're just a one-woman fucking disaster zone!”

Before I can tell him to go fuck himself, my attention is caught by two men about a hundred feet away, slowly walking towards us. Greyson turns to look at them, taking a firm hold of my forearm once again and marching me back towards the steps of my rental house.

I yank my arm away from him as we reach the area under the deck and he pivots me, standing with his back to the ocean as if to shield me from their eyes.

“Good morning,” they say.

“Morning,” I reply as Grey’s body stiffens and from his profile, I see his incandescent glare as watches them, waiting for them to pass.

As they do, he turns to me, his eyes roaming down and then back up my wet body.

“What the fuck are you even wearing?” he asks, making me cross my arms over my chest again.

I glance down at my panties, thanking God they’re peach and not the white ones I was going to wear which would have left even less to the imagination.

Shimmers of water drip down his breathtaking but rage-filled face as he glares at me, waiting for an explanation.

“The beach was empty,” I reply, restraining myself from saying *Fuck you* as my gaze staggers against its will down the hard slabs of muscle that make up his chest and abs, spotting more scars peeking out from under his arm by his ribs.

“Well, this is not a private beach,” he responds coarsely. “You’d do well to remember that. And men on vacation don’t need much of an excuse to misbehave.”

I shake my head in wrathful incredulity, barely able to believe the words I’m hearing.

“Seeing as I enjoy re-educating macho assholes like you,” I stammer, “women don’t get harassed, or worse, for wearing the wrong clothes. Women get harassed because *men choose* to harass them.”

His demeanor softens a little, and he watches my face intently before taking a single step back.

“On that we agree,” he replies. “But men don’t need much of an excuse to become monsters, whether you like that or not. I don’t want to see you dressed like that on this fucking beach again unless you’re with your friends or me.”

My jaw unhinges at his audacity.

“Well, it’s none of your business what I do and do not wear! And why did you see me in the first place? Were you watching me like some creep?!”

“I happened to be on my deck taking a business call,” he responds grimly. “And could have done without that little adventure.”

“Well, sorry to be such an inconvenience,” I scoff, feeling my eyes well up with tears. “You know I would have been extremely grateful if you hadn’t acted like such an asshole!”

“I don’t need your gratitude. I need you to occasionally be aware of the dangers around you.”

You have no fucking idea, asshole...

“And if I see you get into that ocean again without checking for rip currents first—”

“You’ll what?!”

“Let’s put it this way... Of all the humans I’ve met in my life, you’re by far the one who needs the most disciplining... and I have various ideas on how to accomplish that.”

He says the words through gritted teeth, his eyes fierce on mine, making me swallow thickly.

Amidst the tornado of tension between us, I hear the click of the door and see feet under the wooden planks of the deck. Peering up, Rami’s head pops into view over the side of the deck. She stares down at us, stone-faced.

“Do I need to kill someone?” she asks.

“No,” replies Grey, “but your friend could have drowned today.”

“Stop!” I bark.

“I’d keep that in mind before letting her go out there on her own like that.”

“Hey, she was asleep!” I retort. “It had nothing to do with her!”

I look up to see Rami’s expression riddled with shock and concern as she meets Grey’s before he finally turns to walk back to his rental.

“You know,” I shout and upon stopping in his tracks for a few seconds, he finally deems me worthy of turning around. “I would have thanked you if you hadn’t behaved like such a prick when you came out of the water.”

His body tenses, his eyes aflame in the moody morning light.

“You’ll be thanking me some other time, Indigo,” he rasps. “*Thoroughly.*”

I conceal a gasp at his words which leave me burning in irritation... and something else.

As I trudge up the stairs, I find Rami cocking an eyebrow and planting her hand on her hip. “What was that? What the fuck happened?”

“I got caught in a rip,” I groan with a sigh. “He had to pull me out. Or he *thinks* he did. I would have gotten out just fine without him,” I add, willing myself to believe it.

In reality, by the fourth time I’d gone under, I was starting to panic, panic my nervous system really didn’t need today.

“I told you I’d seen one yesterday,” she shoots back, throwing a towel at me, which I wrap around my dripping body.

“I know,” I sputter. “I just... didn’t pay attention.”

“And the asshole just happened to be watching?” she asks, cynicism dripping from the words.

“So he says,” I shrug.

Rami's never been into the dominants of the male species. A man like Grey is practically her kryptonite. Frankly, after what I've been through this year, he should be mine too.

She eyes me in that far-too-insightful way of hers. Her training as a marine seems to make that woman go about life with extraterrestrial Spidey senses.

"What's going on with you?" she asks, sitting at the table on the deck, plunging her spoon into a bowl of cereal waiting for her before pouring in some milk from a small white jug.

I glance at my phone still languishing on the table, my heart starting to race as I wonder if more texts assaulted it while I was in the water.

"What do you mean?" I say, sitting down opposite her, letting the early morning sun peeking through the clouds heat my icy skin as I pour myself a glass of orange juice from a jug Rami must have brought out. The sweet, sour liquid erases the taste of salt still lingering on my tongue.

"With you," she says. "You've been weird since we got here."

My fingers fiddle with my phone as I keep my eyes on the wet tips of her short black hair that caress her tanned skin as she shovels in a mouthful of cereal.

I've really been trying to look as upbeat as possible, but Rami's impossible to conceal things from. She's sharp as a tack and knows me way too well. I just don't want to ruin her vacation by going on and on about him.

I would say *Nothing*, but she'll just cock an eyebrow at me and threaten to spank it out of me.

"My mom," I say after a moment. Well, it is *partly* her.

Steeling myself to look at my messages, I notice another five have come in, two from one anonymous number and three from another. Apparently, Micah has roped more than one person into his twisted little game.

I ignore them, scrolling to the messages my mother has sent me these last few days, clearly caught in the whirlwind

insanity of narcissistic rage that comes from someone, in this case me, daring to reject her.

While she isn't the primary source of my anxiety, her particular brand of venomous poison never ceases to leave me shaken, my mind consumed by her heinous words for hours some days.

I hand my phone to Rami who crunches down on some cereal, taking a sip of tea before beginning to read.

"You had everything. You have no idea how lucky are. I suppose you prefer whoring it up with your so-called friends"—she lifts her contemptuous gaze to mine for a second—*"than speaking to your own mother. What a fucking mistake you were."* Rami exhales roughly, adding her own commentary. "The bitch is on form today."

"Yep."

"You're a disgrace to this family. You could have had it all, you spoilt bitch. You leave everyone decent. Your ex was too good for you."

I read the words this morning but they still skewer me.

Rami puts the phone down. "Fuck, I can't wait for the day I beat this demonic succubus's ass."

"I don't think I'll stop you, babe," I say, drinking down some more juice. "Though she isn't worth it."

She picks up the phone. *"You deserve to suffer, you ungrateful wh..."* She slams it down, clenching her fist on the table. "Right, that's it!"

"Sorry," I say, taking the phone from her. "Not exactly pre-yoga preparation."

She stares me straight in the eye. "Fuck. That. Bitch."

The words come out with such fury that she makes me grin despite the threat of tears. I grab her hand over the table. "Don't worry. I've made peace with how evil she is."

"How did she even get your new number?"

“Aw, she dominates every single family member of mine. They just cave whenever she makes some demand. Or she throws money at them...”

“Block the bitch,” Rami snarls.

“Yeah, and have her harass you, Fran, Yoshi, my boss, my cousins, my—”

“Yeah, I can take her,” she breathes.

“Oh, I know that. I just can’t subject everyone around me to her venom. Plus I nearly got fired a few months ago because of her insane emails to my boss. It’s easier just to let her spew her poison at me.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

I nod, releasing a shuddery breath as I stare down into my half-empty glass.

“Is it just her?” Rami asks and I close my eyes without meaning to, trying to process the relentless onslaught of Micah’s texts by proxy since I got here.

I take a sip of juice, contemplating whether I can lie and get away with it, but instead, I say one word. “Micah.”

“Has he been in contact?”

I nod and she bangs her spoon down onto the table, making me instantly regret telling her. “*Fucking prick*. I knew he would. How’s he doing it?”

“I don’t know. Today there are two numbers sending the messages. They’re both private and there’s no metadata attached to either of them. They’re internet numbers, or whatever that system scammers use is.”

“What’s the prick saying?”

“He threatened to have someone turn up at the wedding.”

“He’s bluffing.”

“I know. I just keep thinking I should placate him until after it’s over. Plus, they’re being really careful not to say anything that could prove it’s him. I feel like if I engage with

them, get them to say stuff, I can collect enough evidence to file.”

“For the protective order? You’re finally gonna do it?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think so, though is it even worth it with him in jail?”

“Fuck yeah,” Rami replies. “I mean, these messages fuck you up, right?”

I nod.

“Then maybe doing something will get them to think twice before sending them.”

“I know it took me a while,” I begin to explain.

“Stop. You know what I’ve been through, Indie.”

I sigh, thinking back to the day Rami told me about her finally going to the police about a sexual assault she experienced when she was a teen at the hands of two family members, an experience she called as traumatizing as the event itself. It’s one of the reasons I never told her what happened that last day with Micah.

“I do, babe,” I say, and we watch each other for a while, unspeaking but saying a million things neither of us wanted to have to share with each other as the waves fizz against the shore a hundred feet away.

“Do you mind not telling Fran about Micah?” I ask. “I don’t want to wreck the retreat for her.”

Rami takes a sip of tea. “We can always tell when you’re off, you know? We’re like freaking drones that way.”

I can’t help but smile at her delivery. “I know, but... just till the retreat’s over.”

She nods before crunching on another mouthful of cereal. “Not a word, Tornada. You coming to yoga today?”

“Nooo... Today’s the wedding, remember? And that auction I’m being raffled off at.”

“Oh, fuck. I’d blanked that thing out.”

“It’s for charity, so I can’t even say no. I mean who has a charity auction at a wedding?”

“Rich people,” deadpans Rami, knowing full well that Carrie and Tom are worth a fortune between them. “Makes them feel better about stupidly extravagant nuptials.”

“I think you’ve got a point,” I giggle.

“I suppose you have to help bridezilla get ready?”

“Yeah. I’m heading over to the hotel room soon. Honestly, at this point, I’m just happy it’s nearly over.”

“I take it the moody prick staying next door will be there.”

I glance over at his balcony, seeing not a soul in sight. “Think he’ll expect a dance after dragging you out the water?”

For a second which stuns me, I see my hand slipping onto his palm, feel his fingers close around it.

“Well, he can always dream,” I sing.

Greyson

I smile at Tom as he fidgets nervously for the fifteenth time in the last ten minutes. We're standing just inside the partition, giving him a final pep talk before he walks down the aisle to wait for his bride-to-be.

"This is it," he breathes.

"You gonna be okay?" I ask.

"Yep," he replies, looking like he has the worst stage fright of his life. "Just if I pass out, try to catch me."

Kennedy smirks. "Just a warning, your bride-to-be might slit your throat in front of everybody if you do that."

"Oh, she will," Tom concedes.

"Go on, get up there," replies Gideon, and he curses before heading down the aisle alone to words of encouragement from the guests. He turns around briefly for moral support before saying a word to the priest who is casually dressed in long khaki pants and a loose white shirt.

The bridal party texted twenty minutes ago to say they were fifteen minutes away, and my eyes can't help but be drawn to the glass doors behind the partition through which they'll appear.

As we take up our positions behind it, I spot a puff of white draped in a veil of some sort, behind which appears a

vision in a coral dress holding the door open for her.

The creature's golden shoulders are on display and her hair tied into a neat bun at the back of her head. She lifts the bottom of Carolyn's dress, helping her through the doorway, all grinning nervously as they walk towards us.

Anne, in her black suit with her clipboard glued to her hands, leads the way, whispering some instruction at the insolent girl to whom I thoroughly intend to teach a lesson or two.

I'm still irritated by the panic I felt this morning as I watched her wade absently into dangerous water, running towards her only to watch monstrous wave after wave knock her under, swimming fast despite no longer seeing her head above the waterline.

For a moment, I felt the terror of another day as I tried to wake someone up... though with her reckless, insouciant attitude, I doubt Indigo has even grasped what kind of danger is out there.

Exhaling my frustration, I take her body in to ease my discomfort.

Her strapless dress hugs her ample breasts, and my cock pulsates at the sight of them, and at those plump lips, the muted pink the same color as the long hair she has hidden inside the neat bun that I would like to unravel with my hands.

My fingers ache to run through her hair, to wind it tightly around my fist, to drag her across the room with it, up the stairs, and to pull her head back until she can barely breathe but for a gasp that whooshes from her as I enter her.

I close my eyes for a second, shaking out the vision so that I don't have to walk down the fucking aisle with quite such an uncivilized erection.

My eyes open at the sound of high-pitched voices, only to collide with her gaze which she withdraws from me very fast, choosing instead to focus on the bride who looks like she's on the verge of panic.

“You’ll be fine,” sings Indigo, brushing a lock of Carrie’s long dark hair off her face as her uncle, who will be walking his niece down the aisle, rubs his hand up and down her arm.

“I can’t even believe this is happening.”

“Hey, you wanted it,” Nisha, another bridesmaid, laughs as two others squeeze the bride’s hand.

“If I pass out, will you catch me?” she asks her uncle. “I seriously think it’s gonna happen.”

Indigo’s eyes jump to meet mine for a moment, that sullen glare of hers unmistakable, before sliding back to the bride.

“I’ll try,” her uncle laughs. “Let’s just try and avoid that happening, shall we?”

“Are we ready, everyone?” interrupts Anne.

“God, I’m nervous myself,” mutters Sarah, one of the bridesmaids. “Is that normal?”

“I hope so,” chuckles Indigo. “Because I’m about to fucking well pass out as well.”

“I’m sure *someone* will catch you,” replies Kennedy with a smirk, and I imbibe the instant flush of red that explodes on her cheeks. She blinks at him flatly before her eyes wander to my chest and then look away.

“Couples,” rasps Anne, “please get into position on this side of the partition. And then you’ll walk on my cue.”

She jostles us about a bit until we’re in the right order. “Bridesmaids and groomsmen, take position please.”

My body hardens as Indigo is ordered to stand next to me.

She’s tiny in comparison to the women I usually date—probably about five foot three. Her size and the thought of how easily I could carry her from one room to the next makes me very hard. Any anyway, what she lacks in height, she more than makes up for with that attitude of hers.

On breaks from the woman I’ve been earmarked to marry, a thing I refuse to do, and the main source of my father’s current wrath, I’ve typically dated models, many of them

approaching my height, and truth be told, the appeal of every single one has waned fast.

I use the word *Date* casually because, as I make sure to tell them, I don't get attached emotionally.

I know why it happened to me, why I shut down, but I can't undo it no matter how much therapy I've attempted over the years. The things other men feel for women, I'm incapable of. When I date someone, I go through the motions, giving attention, advice, support, protecting them if need be, fucking them, of course, and I've been faithful every time, but as for *love*, it's not in my DNA.

Or rather, I haven't felt it since I was a boy.

My friends tell me I just haven't met the right woman, but they're wrong. I'm broken into too many pieces, and even the largest shards can't be put back together. I know it, and I let any woman who has come near me know it as quickly as possible. I used to assume they'd run a mile once I told them, but they don't. Maybe they think they can *fix* me, or maybe they don't care as long as they have access to my wealth.

Except the one woman I've been lined up to marry since I was a teenager, Gabriella Bakhtin, doesn't need my money, and yet she seems as determined as ever to go ahead with this farce designed by parents who see children as pawns and not humans.

To the average person, it sounds impossible—some twisted version of a modern-day arranged marriage in twenty-first-century United States—but when you're dealing with power-hungry families like ours, the need to hold onto the power gained becomes a disease, and the fear of losing any, an albatross around their necks.

Our parents decided long ago that we'd be the perfect match to render both our families indestructible. Her family is political. Mine pulls strings for the rich and powerful behind the scenes, in turn becoming one of the wealthiest and most powerful in the state itself.

This union is a way to allay the fears of both of our fathers, and to assert their control over their children, a form of dehumanization that my father has revelled in since my earliest memory, and whether their children want it or not is irrelevant in their eyes.

I've told Gabriella the truth more times than I can count: I don't love her. I can't love *anyone*. Not anymore, anyway. If I get married, it will be out a sense of duty to my family. I've informed her that she deserves better and six months ago, let her know I had no interest in marrying her, but she's still determined to go through with this fraud.

At times, I have wondered if it isn't the best thing for me—marrying someone who knows full well I won't love her, and who accepts my limitations, as well as my needs and proclivities, which are rather... *singular*.

For one, I require unequivocal submission. I allow safe words of course, but expect the women I date to submit to me and I don't apologize for it. So far, none have offered resistance, which is just how I like it... though I suspect the spitfire to my right would not go down without a fight...

As for Gabriella, I imagine that compared to some of the abusive assholes she's encountered in our circles, I'm a somewhat safe bet, other than the fact that I feel nothing for her. But then, I feel nothing for any woman.

It's not a choice. It's this thing I've been afflicted with since that day. And I've come to accept that no amount of therapy can undo it.

Which is why the fact that I see only one fucking thing in a room of two hundred people, with flowers and crystals glistening at every turn and my friend about to be married, not only unsettles me, it fucks with everything I know about myself.

I don't care for Indigo. Not really. I *can't*. I know that.

And yet, when I dove into the water today, I was propelled by some force I didn't recognize, and when I saw the fool she was dumping standing behind her, I fought the urge to break

his face, and when I saw her skin fall pale as she received a message on her phone, I wanted to know everything about every part of her life... something I've had to restrain myself from finding out against her will.

I don't know exactly what has happened to me since I met her, but I intend to solve this fucking problem as soon as I can. I can't keep allowing myself to be tormented like this.

Later tonight, I'm going to explain to her in detail exactly what I want to do to that indecent little body of hers... and what I can give her after I've made her come over and over again—precisely, nothing.

Once I've fucked her mercilessly with her hands bound behind her back, and made her scream my name in a type of pleasure I know she's never felt, I should finally be able to get this insubordinate little brat out of my fucking system.

I just need to make sure she understands the rules of a game she may not have played before, but that I know from the way her body reacts when I come near here that she'll want to.

Carolyn's fidgeting has me removing my gaze from Indigo's beautiful profile as Anne sends the first couple down the aisle.

"You'll be fine," says Nisha as Indie squeezes the bride's arm.

"Just think of all the booze you can glug down once it's over," adds Indigo, making Carrie burst into a nervous chuckle as she clutches her chest.

"Right, next two," announces Anne, urging Kennedy and Nisha down the aisle to the gentle lullaby of Canon in D.

"Indigo," Anne spits out in exasperation after they disappear to the other side of the partition. "Put your hand under Greyson's arm and hold on." She grabs Indie's hand, seeming to spot something around her wrist.

My head pivots down and I see a frail strand of blue cotton wrapped around her wrist as her hand clutches a small bouquet of white roses tied in a burgundy ribbon.

“Didn’t I say no jewelry?” snaps Anne as Carolyn turns to talk to her uncle.

“Oh, our yoga master gave it to us. It’s for protection and centering this week.”

Anne cocks an eyebrow. “We’re not at some hippy retreat here, Indie. Can you take it off, please?”

Anne goes as if to untie the knot, but Indie pulls her hand away. “I’m already going through enough wearing this dress. You can barely see the string. It’s staying on.”

Anne takes a step backwards and peeks down the aisle before tapping Gideon on the shoulder, setting him and his partner Sarah off.

“And what exactly is wrong with the dress?”

Indie glances down at her chest sheathed by the strapless coral dress, rimmed with pale lace, before scanning the room to check that Carrie and her uncle aren’t listening.

“I don’t have the same body shape as the waifs around here,” whispers Indie. “They look like goddesses in these dresses while I look like a freaking... high-class hooker.

I bow my head, stifling a smile. It is true that her frame is slim, and with the elegant neck of hers curving to her neat bun, she’s a vision of grace, but it doesn’t hide the fact that the dress clinging to her only accentuates her pert, ample breasts and tiny waist leading to the impeccable curve of her hips.

“I thought bridesmaids were supposed to blend into the background?” Indie whispers in irritation. “One false jiggle and these things will bounce right out of—”

She stops talking as Anne’s face registers contempt before she gesture to Indie’s hand.

“Hand firmly on your partner’s arm,” she seethes through gritted teeth before turning her attention to Carolyn.

Indigo’s fingers coil around my bicep, our skin separated by the cotton of my white shirt as she readies herself for our walk down the aisle.

Her fingertips press into the muscle tentatively as if exploring something, and my cock, which I've deprived for weeks in preparation for seeing her here, hardens at the touch, forcing me to take a moment to think of my late grandfather's ass in an attempt to cool myself down.

In truth, I've been hot for this girl since the second I saw her get off that bike and give me the kind of attitude most women would never dare to.

I angle my head downwards. "I'm not sure you're the *blending into the background* type, Indigo."

Her storm-filled eyes shoot up to meet mine in a moment that sends a silent thunderbolt into me, but she exhales as if to compose herself, her gaze flicking away to Anne standing a few feet away talking to the jittery bride.

"Do you think sour britches removes the stick from up her ass once the wedding's done," she whispers, "or does it stay there till the next one?"

Amusement makes my lips curve. "I'd have thought she'd lay off you today since you made it on time. *For once*. Or are you the reason the bride was late? Did they have to rescue you from another catastrophe you'd got yourself into?"

"You're a dick," she spits back, throwing me quite the moody look as her fingers dig into me unconsciously.

I smile. "Indeed."

"You two. Go!" orders Anne a heartbeat later.

Indigo turns to Carrie, giving her a thumbs up. "You've got this, babe!"

"Thanks," Carrie replies, still visibly shuddering.

As we make it past the partition and down the first part of the aisle, Indie's fingers wind around my arm more tightly as guests turn to look at us as we amble, our steps very slow as instructed.

"You look breathtaking."

As soon as the words emerge from my mouth, I regret it. I'm not one for cheap compliments, but I've been thrown off by her beauty today.

I see the contraction of her throat as she swallows before tipping her head up, her obstinate gaze locked onto mine for a brief second before she turns to glare in the direction of the altar.

"I appreciate the compliment," she whispers, "but if you're going to give me whiplash by preceding it with a veiled insult about punctuality, you can kindly shove it where the sun doesn't shine."

Fair enough, little spitfire.

"What a pleasant sentiment for a wedding, Indie," I reply.

"It's still Indigo to you," she shoots back in hushed tones. "And I have more from where they came from."

"Good," I reply as we reach the front. "I look forward to hearing them."

As the priest smiles at us and Tom throws me a nervous glance, her fingers slip away from my arm and she heads to the left as I take a few steps up to the right, coming to stand at the front of the line of groomsmen waiting a few feet behind Tom.

"You okay?" I whisper.

"It's normal to want to throw up, right?" he responds.

"So I've heard." I smile. "Just a word of advice. Try not to aim for the bride if you do."

I manage to make him snigger under his breath as he turns to look back, waiting for his bride-to-be.

Only I don't follow suit... even when the bride appears. Even when she walks down the aisle in her ornate dress on her uncle's arm. Even when she joins her future husband in front of the altar.

For it's all I can do to unlock my gaze from the impertinent little bridesmaid who doesn't seem able to stop herself from

glancing in my direction.

I haven't had to teach a woman a lesson in manners in a very, very long time.

I'm looking forward to this one.

Indigo

Nisha and I lean into each other as we sit, chairs facing the dancefloor, readying ourselves for the auction.

The ceremony was beautiful with Carrie most possibly the most stunning bride I've ever seen. Despite her nerves, the whole thing went off perfectly, and the kiss and dance she shared with Tom on the dancefloor once it was done almost made me cry.

Nisha and I would have danced ourselves, but Ms. Stick-up-her-ass Wedding Planner has given us instructions to remain sober and useful for the next hour until the charity auction which the happy couple decided to put on instead of asking for gifts.

About fifty people have donated stuff—bottles of whiskey, a luxury boat trip, a massage at the local spa, a photoshoot, just to name a few. Seeing as none of her bridesmaids are rolling in dough, during a champagne-fueled dress fitting, we decided to donate three slow dances instead of anything material.

What seemed like a stupidly fun idea at the time, now feels like sheer torture, especially as my body is still a spinning livewire of nervous energy.

Frankly, at this point, I'm half-tempted to back out, and I would if I didn't think Anne would stalk me with her clipboard

and batter me around the face with it if I “let the team down”, an expression she’s bandied around since we first met her six long months ago.

As the MC they hired for the event calls out the next item to be auctioned, a painting in oil of the coast off Calvert Cliffs State Park, about an hour’s drive south of DC, my traitorous eyes can’t help but float from the painting being held up by Anne to the hot mood standing on the other side of the dancefloor who hasn’t stopped staring at me all night.

I honestly don’t know who he thinks he is. He only gets away with his overbearing manners because he was basically put on this earth to incinerate panties. I bet he’s so used to women just dropping to their knees for him that he thinks the usual social decorum doesn’t apply to him... not that I’m much better.

As if on cue, I spot a sequin-swathed guest looking slightly worse for wear wobbling her way through the guests sitting and standing over on that side of the floor, as they bid on stuff they’d never buy themselves in a million years. She manages to take up position in the tiny gap between him and an elderly couple a few feet to his right.

“Oh God, who’s the whore?” I mutter as Nisha, aware of my annoying crush, snorts loudly.

I’ve been watching her hover around him for the last half hour, and after the morning I’ve had, I’m running on empty emotionally and certainly not feeling magnanimous enough to describe her with more grace.

“Maybe it’s Kennedy she’s into,” Nisha suggests, about his friend standing next to him. “Or Gideon.”

“Yeah, right,” I groan. I glance at her to find her lips curving naughtily. “What?” I ask with an internal groan.

“You know what,” she replies.

“I don’t like him,” I snap and she snorts again, even louder than before, causing me to scan the people sat all around us watching the auction. “I don’t. He just gets under my skin.

And of course, because he's a certified asshole, women are flocking to him like idiots."

"If it helps, he seems unable to take his eyes off a certain somebody."

I shoot my gaze over the empty dancefloor, only to find him glaring in my direction despite Miss Slutty Sequins seeming to attempt conversation.

The way he's looking is wholly and utterly uncivilized, and certainly not fit conduct for a wedding like this one.

"I can't believe he thinks it's socially acceptable to stare like that," I mutter.

"Come on, girl," Nisha scoffs. "Let's not pretend you're not ovulating at the very sight of him. Do you know how many women would dance butt ass naked on that dance floor just to get him to look at them."

"Pitiful," I retort in jealous outrage.

"One thousand four hundred!" shouts the MC about the painting whose auction it's getting increasingly difficult to focus on seeing as Mr. Everitt's ungodly regard is doing things to my body that are definitely diverting blood away from my brain. "Can I get fifteen hundred?!"

Nisha seems similarly distracted. "Fuck, I've never been more turned on by a man looking at another woman."

"He's only doing it because I don't bend over like everyone else. It's just a game. Those types like a challenge and then discard them like yesterday's pizza once they've got what they wanted. I know the type."

Or do I? I've known for a while that my radar is off. I thought my ex was kind and gentle and didn't read the signs that he was dangerously possessive until things had already gone too far. I don't know if I'm in much of a position to brag about my ability to understand men at this point.

My heart lifts as he shakes his head at Sequins only for her to scuttle off like the crustacean she is, only I swear to God,

not one fucking minute later, some other woman wrangles her way into position next to him.

“God, why do women keep thrusting themselves at him like that?” I seethe, my skin crawling at the sight. “He’s not the only hot dick they can hop on around here.”

“Girl, do you understand who that is?” replies Nisha in hushed tones. “That’s Greyson fucking Everitt. He’s worth an absolute fortune, like hundreds of millions or something. He inherited a fortune, and his family own this big successful PR firm for rich fuckers, and tons of property all over Washington.”

“Oh, woop-dee-do,” I mutter, already aware that that’s part of the reason he’s so insufferably arrogant. “How did they make that much money in PR anyway? Something nefarious, no doubt.”

“I’m not sure, but their clients are like next level. I mean fucking presidents and senators and billionaires and shit.”

“They just make money helping pigs not get caught rolling around in mud.”

“Pretty much.”

I feel myself simmering at the dark-skinned goddess attempting small talk with Grey and his friends as the MC announces the winner of the oil painting auction—a portly gentleman now walking across the dancefloor to collect his prize.

“God, it’s so humiliating the way they just throw themselves at him like that,” I snap in irritation. “I mean, don’t they have any standards?”

“Standards? Girl, I’d sell my left pussy lip for a night in the sack with that man. You’re too picky, Indie.”

“Yeah, maybe because in my last relationship, I wasn’t picky enough.”

“God, screw that loser.”

Easier said than done.

It doesn't help that Anne's assistant took our phones so that we could walk down the aisle unencumbered, and I can't help but constantly wonder if he's texted again or whether he's decided to leave me alone as I asked him to. I shouldn't care, but at this point, I've reached that insidious stage of high anxiety where not knowing feels worse than facing things.

"Don't even think of him," she adds.

I nod, my thoughts caught in some maelstrom where I'm worrying about my ex while simultaneously unable to control my jealousy over women still swarming around Grey like wasps around bowls of fruit salad. I mean, no wonder he's so damn conceited if women keep launching themselves at him like homing missiles.

"Women are such morons sometimes," I groan.

"Girl, I wouldn't worry," Nisha replies, taking a naughty sip of champagne that she nabbed from a tray floating by. "Frankly there was more heat between you two as you were walking down the aisle than there was between the bride and groom."

"Heat? The only heat I felt was the burn of irritation. The guy is such an unfiltered asshole."

"A very *hot* unfiltered asshole."

"Yeah, well, I've had enough of those in the last year to last a lifetime. At least he can go amuse himself with the gaggle of braindead bimbos launching themselves at him."

"Hey, don't judge, miss. They'll be enjoying themselves tonight, unlike you with that baton lodged up your ass. What happened to Little Miss *seize the day*? Did she not make it onto the island or something?"

"It's not *them* I'm judging," I sigh, not remembering having been this much of a killjoy in quite some time.

I don't feel like myself right now. I feel knocked off balance and prickly, my emotions heightened, my body oversensitive to stimuli. I really just need to find a hole to crawl into for a month in the hopes that when I come out,

Micah will have forgotten my existence. “He just bugs me,” I add.

“Well, I’d say the feeling is mutual.” She tips her head towards him and I pivot a little, inhaling sharply as I meet the burning ice of his eyes across the dancefloor. “That glare is freaking uncivilized,” she whispers.

It is... and yet all I want him to do is to keep glaring, to keep reminding me that my body can want a man again.

“God, I think we’re up next,” says Nisha, making my stomach churn. “Anne just waved at me.”

“Oh shit,” I reply. “I was hoping we could donate the money instead.”

“What the hell has gotten into you?” she sniggers. “I’ve never seen you this grouchy.”

“Shit,” I sigh. “I’m sorry.” I grab her champagne from her, downing the rest. “I’m just feeling a bit off.”

“Yep, weddings are weird.”

“It’s not that,” I reply. “I mean, yeah, they are, but it’s not my first. I’m just... ready to go back to my yoga retreat and try and switch my brain off for a few more days.”

“How much longer are you staying?”

“Till Sunday.”

Nisha cocks an eyebrow. “Really? Cause I think I overhead Grey saying he’s staying till Sunday too. What are the chances?”

Indigo

“We’ll get more than that,” I decide as a lady saunters up to the stage to collect her two season tickets to the Washington National Opera.

“Well, you will, Miss Hot Stuff,” replies Nisha. “Hachiko’s boyfriend is a cheap bastard. And I bet no one pays more than a hundred bucks for me.”

I spin to face her. “What do you mean?” I ask, my voice shaky. “Aren’t they bidding on us as a package?”

“No. Anne thought we’d make more if they did individual bidding.”

“What the fuck?” I whisper, glancing around to make sure no one can hear me. “What the actual fuck? That’s ridiculous. What if we don’t get the same amounts? How are the others gonna feel?”

“How are *we* gonna feel, you mean?” corrects Sarah sitting on the other side of Nisha.

“And now...” Anne’s booming voice—one which sounds like a foghorn stuck on full blast—ricochets through my ear canals. “We have four lovely ladies who are offering three slow dances.”

“Oh God, welcome to the first level of hell,” I moan to Nisha’s chuckle.

With butterflies throwing a rave in my belly, I glance behind me, my eyes landing on a rather full tumbler of whiskey sitting inside a kinda hot forty-something man's grasp.

Fuck it.

I lean over. "Um, excuse me, sir?"

His beguiled eyes shift to me.

"Can I drink that?"

"Indie!" chastises Nisha as Anne's voice blares out.

The man's look of confusion morphs into an amused smirk as I silently plead with him. "Sure, doll."

"Thank you."

I take the tumbler from his hand and lift it to my lips. The second the pungent amber liquid hits my tongue, I close my eyes, tipping the glass back until ice cubes plonk themselves against my lips with a clunk and I down the whole thing, the whiskey burning my throat like low-grade acid as the rich smell of oak floods my nostrils.

"Thank you," I reply, handing him back his empty glass. "You're a lifesaver."

"You're one of the bridesmaids offering a dance, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Well, I may have to bid now."

I grin, turning back around.

"Ladies," snarls Anne from the side of the stage nearest us, gesturing wildly for us to strut our behinds over there like heifers at a cattle market just ready to be appraised.

"God, put a sock in it, Anne," I gripe, realizing that the insufferable tight ass's bark sounds like the mating roar of a sexually frustrated T-Rex I'm fairly sure I once heard simulated on the Discovery Channel.

Nisha grips my hand as we put on our best pageant smiles and waddle ourselves up there, with me being grateful for the whiskey buzz taking the edge off current proceedings.

The guests whoop and cheer as we all stand in a line, grinning inanely and pretending we don't want to be struck by lightning so that we can escape the cattle sale.

I glance down at my frock, checking that it's not translucent in the lights beaming onto the stage. That's all I need. I contemplated pulling my hairband out to kind of cover my breasts more but decide to spare Anne from the mini-stroke she'll have when she spies the pink ends.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, our first dance is being offered—"

The MC sounds like he's just about to get a lap dance as he verbally salivates over our first auction sacrifice, Hachiko, though her boyfriend has been given strict instructions to win, so at least she won't have to slow dance with some creep who thinks he's paid for more than a dance.

"Remember, all money donated is tax deductible," croaks Anne whose on-stage personality seems to have morphed from Trunchbull to Tinkerbell within the last half hour.

Hachiko smiles bravely as the bids go all the way to...

"Four hundred dollars!" The crowd erupts as her boyfriend wins the bid for the slow dance. "Sold to... James!"

He crosses the dancefloor as she takes a few steps down off the stage, planting a giddy kiss on him.

"God, I'm not cut out for sex auctions."

"It's not a sex auction," Nisha sputters. "Try to take the stick out of your ass as you walk down there so that you actually enjoy it."

"Did you see how fast the men were bidding? What do they think they're getting with this dance?"

"A tax receipt?" quips Nisha making me smile for real for the first time since I got up there.

“And now, our beautiful Nisha!”

She grips my hands as bidding starts...

Ten minutes later, I find myself thoroughly alone, trying to resist the urge to fling myself off stage as the MC sounds like his erection is now doing the talking.

Only for you, Carrie... Only for you.

It's not Carrie's fault. I'm not normally this miserable or jaded. I love a good belly flop into the ridiculous as much as the next girl, but right now, all I want to do is disappear to some place where there are no men around, and certainly don't fancy dancing with one who thinks I owe him something.

“Our last dance is with this delicious young creature...”

I slow-blink at the MC and his chubby sweat-beaded face the color of blanched red peppers.

He did not just phrase it like that.

The crowd erupts as if someone just spiked their drinks with Viagra and they think I'm about to fling my clothes off and pole-dance for them.

As they settle down, I hear Anne bellowing something in my direction. Loud.

“Indigo. Can you turn around for us?”

My lips part against my will and for a second I wonder if I'm being punked.

The foghorn can not be serious...

I stand still as a statue in a moment of stage fright from hell until, upon the whoops of a bunch of drunken well-dressed strangers, I turn around slowly, incredulity pumping through my veins.

“Mmm... De-li-cious,” fawns our lecherous MC. “Who's gonna start me at one hundred dollars for three slow dances with our scrumptious young Indigo?”

Gross.

“A hundred!”

“One fifty!”

“Two hundred!”

Oh God... Please wake me up.

“Do I see thr—”

“Three!”

“Three fifty!”

At this point, the only saving grace is that I don't hear Greyson's voice, thanking the heavens he's not participating in my public purchase.

“Anyone else?”

A voice calls out from the back of the room. “Four hundred!”

“Four fifty.”

Oh God...

“Five hundred!”

“Five fifty.”

“Ten thousand dollars.”

My breath leaves me in a sharp blast though no one would ever hear over the collective gasp of the room.

My vision blurs, landing somewhere over the dancefloor around which stand three couples, winners and prize-givers of the auction.

I don't look over to him. I knew from the second I heard that deep, rich, and exacerbating self-confident voice of his who it was.

Cheers and claps reverberate around the room as the MC has his verbal orgasm.

“Ten thousand dolllllaarrs, and our biggest bid of the night, from Mr. Greyson Everitt! How about a round of applause?!”

Around the blur of the dancefloor, I see guests getting to their feet as if they're about to witness the monthly lion-gladiator tête-à-tête at the Roman coliseum.

Somewhere to my right from the side of the stage, I hear Anne spit a word at me like a libidinous snapping turtle without a mate, and without even registering what the utterance is, I begin to walk, taking in the wooden floorboards beneath my feet so that my floppy legs don't give way, until I get to the short set of stairs that lead me down to the dancefloor.

"I think that deserves a fourth dance, don't you?" shouts the MC who sounds like he's shuddering through orgasm no. 2.

I'm highly aware of my feet as I somehow manage to make it across the herringbone parquet. The crowd cheer as I walk myself forwards, my unsteady gaze following the floor until they meet a set of shiny black shoes in the center of the dancefloor, before roaming up the ebony fabric of the pants encasing long legs and over his crotch. A white shirt is tucked into the pants around a lean waist and I follow it up to a muscular chest and thick, broad shoulders which I'll soon... touch.

What hits me even before seeing his face is how his body language can be so poised standing there in front of a room full of people, as if he owns the goddamn room and everyone in it.

As my gaze rises to his face, I see that he's tracking me as a lion would the gazelle whose throat he's about to rip out, and so I do my best to keep my expression stone-faced.

My breathing shortens as he raises his hand, waiting for the touch of mine. As I make it to within a foot of him, my hand lifts almost against my will, and as my fingertips collide with his palm to the sound of cheers which ricochet through my head, a surge of electricity rages through my body that dissolves into nothing as my palm hits his.

My eyes lock onto his as I block out all sound, all feeling other than that of his fingers wrapping around the edge of my

hand as his other one slides onto the side of my waist, and I lift mine to his shoulder, trying to ignore how thick and strong the muscle is.

As the first bars of Sleepwalk by Deftones play out and the crowd cheers, I realize we're dancing this first dance alone.

It takes me a good twenty seconds to relocate my voice, which I do in no small part to avoid people watching at us just stare at each other.

"I'm not good at slow dancing," I mutter.

"I'll lead," he responds, the deep timber of his decadent voice now rumbling through his body into mine.

"What a surprise," I mutter as he leads us gently into a dance. "You know, some people think it's rude to upstage the bride and groom on their wedding day."

"I cleared it with the bride and groom," he responds as I try for a second to find Carrie in the crowd to shoot her a look of most earnest reproach.

As my gaze wanders over his arm, I spot a guest filming us and another taking a picture and a hit of anxiety seizes my body at the thought that an image of us could end up on social media for my stalking ex to see.

I am single and by rights, I have the right to dance with anyone I want to, but when someone refuses to let go, that kind of logic goes out of the window, which is entirely the point: they want to know that they pollute every experience you have. That they still own you even when you've gotten away.

I glance at Greyson's chest. "I see you finally got those beet stains out," I say mock-innocently, smushing down a smile which makes his eyes warm.

"Not the same shirt, Indigo," he replies wryly.

"Oh, really?"

God, I can be such a brat with this man...

The easy grace with which he moves me about makes me feel like being caught in some warm current. The strong hand around my waist pulls me closer but not so close that I touch his torso. I don't think he'd do something that indecent...

"I suppose you enjoyed bidding on me," I say, finally meeting his laser beam of a gaze again.

"I did."

"It's a ridiculous amount of money, you know?"

"It's for a good cause."

"Well, you know you're only getting a dance for the money..."

Heat spreads throughout my body as his fingers squeeze my hand more tightly.

His next words leave me unable to comprehend how I'm still upright.

"It's worth it already."

I shake my head in an attempt to conceal my whimper as I try to ignore the pleasure spilling into the parts of my flesh he's touching, to ignore the fact that the dense armor of his insanely honed body is inches away from mine.

"Enjoying the wedding?" he asks.

"Apart from the bridesmaid auction..." His sinful smile makes me bite my lip. "It's beautiful..."

"Is this how you imagine getting married? At a place like this?"

"I'm never getting married," I respond and his movement stops for a moment. He takes a second to watch me before easing us back into the dance.

"Why not?" he asks.

Oh, let me tell you a tale of family trauma, Greyson...

But of course, I don't.

"I'm just..." I shrug. "Not marriage material."

“What does that mean?”

“Too incorrigible,” I suggest.

“I can believe that somehow.”

“If I do ever get married, it’ll be in a barn surrounded by rescue animals with people drinking beer and eating sticky food on paper plates...”

He arches a brow. “It just so happens I have a barn...”

As my step falters thanks to wobbly whiskey-addled feet and the shock of his words, his hand moves up my back, the other gripping mine more tightly.

“No, you don’t,” I spit out.

“I may have to prove it to you when we get back, Indigo...”

Breathe, woman, breathe...

“Save the lines for women who want to hear them, Grey.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a proposal, Indigo. For one, I wouldn’t propose to a woman unless she’d proven that she has what it takes to meet my needs.”

Holy shit...

“And two, I highly doubt I’m the marrying kind either.”

“Well, if you are, I’m sure there are no shortage of drunken bimbos around here who’d sign up for that.”

He scrutinizes my lips as I try to regain my composure and pretend I didn’t just give him signs that I was seething with jealousy watching him be approached like that.

At least he has the grace to change the subject...

“How’s the retreat?”

“Amazing. We’re worshipping our inner goddesses this week.”

“That sounds like something I could help you with.”

I clear my throat at the insinuation spoken with such poise.

“No, thank you. We’re worshipping the divine feminine, and other very yin things men are usually too stunted to comprehend.”

His eyes glimmer with mirth rather than the annoyance I’d expected.

“You’re just gonna have to go amuse yourself with one of guests who were throwing themselves at you back there.”

Oh God, I’m at it again...

He pulls me in a little closer, and I can’t help but feel like some fairy held inside this giant man’s frame.

He dips into me a little, his lips a freaking work of art emitting hushed words. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were jealous, Indigo.”

I’m suddenly hyper-conscious of the way my palm is slipping against his as he loosens then tightens his grip on my hand. “I’m not jealous,” I retort through gritted teeth. “Just disappointed at how easily women lay themselves out on a platter for men like you.”

“Men like me?”

“Yes,” I reply defiantly. “I mean, I’m sure it’ll make your stay here memorable.”

He shakes his head slowly.

“As for me,” I continue, deciding my mouth hasn’t run away with me enough, “I’ll be on a dick detox till the end of the week and not one minute before.”

He takes a minute to watch me, unspeaking, seeming to study the annoying red heat I feel spreading across my cheeks.

“That’s okay, Indigo,” he finally says. “I’ll suffer through your attempts at chastity with you.”

I shake my head. “Why?”

He drops his head to mine, his lips hovering an inch from my cheek. “Because I know when something’s worth waiting for.” His hand squeezes mine so tightly. “I’m not used to

waiting, Indigo, or to chasing, but with you, it's half the pleasure."

The way he utters the last word makes me mess up my footing again, dropping my gaze to figure out what my feet are doing, and whether they've decided to tell on me for my whiskey-downing ways.

When I look back up, his countenance is rougher, with hints of disapproval laced into his impossibly beautiful face.

"I saw you take that man's drink," he says, his jaw tightening.

"Oh, you did?" I respond, faux-innocently. "It was sweet of him, wasn't it?"

"It was *dangerous*," he responds after a moment, eyes darkening. "That's not how you should ever procure a drink, Indigo."

"What, you think he'd lace his own drink in the hopes some socially unconventional woman just happens to ask to down it to cope with her anxiety?"

"*I think* that you've shown me no signs that you're cognizant of any dangers around you."

I peer behind him as one tune morphs into another—*Only you know* by Dion, I think—and the other bridesmaids and auction winners take to the dancefloor along with the bride and groom, hopefully cranking down the heat of watchful eyes a notch.

"Well, sorry, but I don't have to show you anything."

"That's where you're wrong," he replies, the final words encased in a growl. "You don't take drinks from other men anymore. In fact, I don't want to see you talking to other men for the rest of the wedding."

"Are you out of your mind?" I stammer. "Did some poor unfortunate give you the memo that you buying these dances meant you could boss me around for the rest of the day?"

He pulls me into him. "You'll be doing what I tell you to until I see signs that you're able to muster up the most basic

survival skills for more than five minutes.”

“Sorry, but you’re not my boss anymore, and I don’t have to do anything you say.”

“I don’t recall you obeying my orders even when I was your boss,” he responds.

“Exactly,” I sing, deliberately provoking him with a smile. “And if you think I’m capitulating to your asinine commands outside the workplace, you can think again.”

Quiet mirth reflects in his silver-flecked eyes. “Well, at least I now know what you think of my instructions.”

“Yes, you do... if you didn’t already,” I mutter.

“I don’t want to see you ever taking drinks from men again.”

I shake my head. “I should have known...”

“What?”

“Well, not only do we women get auctioned off like cattle, but of course, the men who buy us suddenly think they have some kind of ownership over us... though I highly doubt you’d understand. You don’t strike me as the feminist type.”

His poised gaze ambles to the people around us before returning to my face, dropping to my lips which he regards most indecently, even by his standards.

“I’m currently unable to think of anything but how much pleasure I want to give you. That’s my version of feminism, Indigo.”

It’s very, very difficult to chew someone out for their outrageous behavior when that same conduct is currently setting off fireworks in your panties. My clit tingles and my pussy begins to pulsate as I try to remember where I am and not jump up, straddle his waist and beg him to bounce me up and down his cock.

He takes in my nervous swallow and what I know to be the increasing reddening of my face.

“Did you think of me after you left?” he asks.

I throw a glance around. “Do you think we can just stick to awkward small talk?”

“No,” he replies. “We can not. *Did you think of me?*”

Every day...

Every minute sometimes... which was most fucking annoying.

I’m fairly sure I need an exorcism at this point...

I don’t answer, aware of one song drifting into another, seeing couples floating in my peripheral vision, but unable to pull my gaze away from the indecent man leading us so skillfully to the graceful melody.

“Good,” he replies, apparently gleaning the answer from my silence.

His next question doesn’t steal my voice. Instead, it makes me whimper, fidgeting as he holds me tight around my hand and back.

“Do you touch yourself while thinking of me?”

I peer up, unable to understand how he can ask such a question without exhibiting the vaguest hint of embarrassment

It takes me an entire chorus to speak. “You first,” I reply.

“I haven’t touched a woman since you left, so, yes... frequently.”

I swallow down his words. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t lie,” he replies, making my heart rate faster. “Now you. I want to hear it. Do you touch yourself when you think of me?”

The question is so outrageous, so indecent... and yet, I hunger to answer it.

I hunger to say yes, to tell him that thoughts of him make me wet, allow me to touch myself, to make myself come in what has felt like forever.

But instead, I remain silent, realizing I might be giving him my answer.

We don't speak for the rest of the dance. It's tense and I've never been more aware of the painfully heated proximity of another human's body, but there's something comfortable about it as well.

I barely feel like I have to move—Grey takes care of that part with such strength and refinement that I can't help but be caught in his current.

I know we're fully clothed and in a room full of people, but between his eyes studying my lips and mine doing the same, this may be the most stimulating foreplay I've ever experienced.

As the final song comes to an end and the guests break into applause, I move to release myself from his grasp only to have him tug me into him more firmly, his grasp possessive, his gaze an entire tempestuous mood.

I shoot my best glower at him. "Is this all a game to you?" I whisper as he narrows his eyes at me.

"I'd only play with you if I knew you'd enjoy it, Indigo."

Indigo

“Can I get my phone?” I ask Anne’s assistant, a short, tight-lipped woman whose expression can best be described by the words “brow-beaten”. In fact, at one point when Anne was hush-barking some insufferable command at her, I’m fairly sure I saw her soul depart from her body and enter the stratosphere.

Her anxiety-riddled gaze darts around the room. “Um, I think Anne said the bridesmaids are on duty until three. Maybe I should check with her?”

“What?!” I chuckle incredulously. “You can’t keep my phone from me, Stacey. That’s freaking ridiculous.”

“Okay... Just tell her it was an emergency,” she replies, digging my phone out of her turquoise purse.

It’s been an hour since my dance with Grey, who I haven’t seen in a while, spending most of it being ordered around by Anne whilst chatting to Carrie’s friends and trying to get in morsels of food to mitigate the effect of the whiskey and champagne.

“I can’t believe she thinks she can confiscate our phones all day. Seriously, what planet did that woman spawn from?”

Stacey breaks into a sheepish grin but my amusement dissipates into the ether as I swipe my thumb across my phone

to unlock it, all levity erased as weight begins to press on my chest.

Five missed calls, but only one I really see:

D.C. Central Detention Facility

Not to mention eighteen text messages between those same two numbers.

As Stacey's voice blurs into some muffled sound that mixes with the muted guffaws and light wedding music, I press on the first number, only to be plunged into ice at the sight of a photograph.

The shore of Cumberland Island.

And the message beneath it.

You don't pick up and that wedding will be ruined.

"Thanks," I mutter to Stacey, walking slowly to the door, trapped in some masochistic cage where I'm unable to stop myself from scrolling through the messages, realizing the styles from the two numbers are completely different...

He just wants to talk.

Why are you being so fucking cruel?

Answer his calls.

The next number's messages are in the first person and show no signs of the same desperation, but rather, rage.

I know what you're doing over there, you slut.

We'll cut your face up so no one wants you.

You better pray no one's waiting for you when you get back.

You had it all, bitch.

You're gonna pay.

Whore.

As I glimpse through the glass doors leading to the lobby of the hotel, I stop at the sight of two mutual friends of ours, really not wanting to talk to them right now. Peering around, I see the staging room at the back that I've been in and out of in the last couple of days upon Anne's instruction as we got the wedding favors together. Last I checked, it was full of boxes of champagne, a change of clothes for the bride and groom for later this evening, gifts, and other props that didn't make it to the main reception area.

I head over there and tentatively open it, peering all around to check if anyone's there before entering and closing the door behind me.

I move some items off an armchair next to a table and sit down, staring at the phone for what feels like forever until I jump in my seat at the sight of a name flashing on the screen.

D.C. Central Detention Facility

Oh my God...

My friends would tell me not to pick up, but the lawyer I talked to a few months ago told me that the calls are recorded and if he incriminates himself, that will only help my case.

And anyway, my anxiety is so high right now that nothing could be worse than this.

In the hopes that talking to him will placate him, giving me some respite from the onslaught of messages, I move my finger to the green button, my breathing ragged as I press it.

“A prisoner from D.C. Central Detention Facility is trying to reach you. Press one if you accept the call.”

My finger moves almost against my will and I begin to shudder at the sound of noises on the line... and then a voice.

“*So you finally pick up.*”

The rasp of his tone, the scrape of gravel through an otherwise elegant voice, rakes through me.

I inhale as deeply as possible, keeping him on speakerphone so that I don't have to hold his haunting voice up to my ear.

“If your cousin or whoever keeps texting me, I'm gonna go to the police.”

“No you won't.”

“I will. I swear to God. This is unhinged.”

“Unhinged? No, what's unhinged, Indie, is me being in here while you're out there... whoring yourself about.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yeah, I do. I know what men will want from women like you at weddings.”

“I'm on a fucking yoga retreat. We're here for healing.”

“Don't give me that shit.”

“And I don't have to explain myself to you... ever again.”

“You do while I'm rotting in here.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with that!”

“But I bet you're just so happy I'm in here. Aren't you?”

“I want you to leave me alone.”

“I can't, Indie. You owe me.”

“Owe you? How on Earth do you figure that?”

“I don't see you visiting me... or working to get me released from this shithole.”

“Why would I do that when we both know what you did to me?”

“I did *nothing*.”

“Yes, you did. You hurt me.”

“I loved you. I still love you.”

“You stopped me having any life apart from you. You tried to cut me off from everyone. You smashed my apartment up more times than I can count. You cut up my clothes. You stalked me. You threatened me and my family. And we both know what happened that last day...”

“As if you didn’t want it, Indie...”

A single tear falls without warning onto the phone in my trembling hand.

“Leave me alone. Please.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll go to the police.”

“And I’ll get someone to visit that red-headed bitch you think is your friend in the night.”

Frannie’s face blazes before me.

I know he’d never do it. Idle threats are his default mode of communication. But the rancor in his tone and the fear that maybe this time, he’s telling the truth, always stops me from doing what I should... just as it stops the other women he’s hurt.

Hoping I can make it sound like he’s won some victory over me, I utter, “Look you’ve already ruined my time here. Just please tell the assholes you have texting me to leave me alone.”

“Just the one, wildflower,” he replies. “Or is one not enough for you?”

Something twists in my stomach.

He’s lying...

There are two separate private numbers...

“This call will end in sixty seconds.”

The dull announcement from the prison system’s phone service has me waiting for whatever version of goodbye he’ll

give me this time.

At the sound of voices outside the door, I take him off speakerphone, bringing the phone to my ear and speaking in more muted tones.

“Leave me alone. That’s all I want. I had nothing to do with you being in that place.”

“I can’t, Indie... I still want you. I still want you to feel me inside you.”

“Stop...”

“Touch a man over there and I’ll have someone visiting you within twenty-four hours.”

“Leave me alone. Please.”

“I like it when you beg, Indie. I remember the last time you did. Remember? Mmm, that was good. Beg me to stop, Indie. Beg me.”

As the call clicks off and the dial tone replaces the ragged edges of his harsh voice, my head drops and what feels like a never-ending waterfall of tears plummets silently onto the screen of the phone that I hold on my lap.

From behind the door, I hear raucous laughter and the clinks of drinks, all plunged into shadow by the incessant black backdrop of fear—fear that he’s watching, fear that someone he had follow me is, fear that one day he’ll want to take everyone down with him.

Stupid, Indie...

So fucking stupid...

I shouldn’t have picked up.

I just couldn’t take the fear anymore...

I’ve probably just given him a high, recharged his batteries for the fun he intends to have.

I bet you I’m not the only one of his exes he’s called today. From what I gather, he enjoys tormenting the last three of us, although apparently his calls to them have waned over the last

year even before he was in jail, another reason why they don't want to go to the authorities.

It's also what makes me so afraid; that he'll never let go; that five years from now, whether he's in prison or not, he'll be making the same calls, tainting the taste of everything with his special brand of poison, and I'll still be unable to tell anyone for fear that I ruin their day too.

Sometimes it doesn't feel like this is my life. How did I go from this free-spirited creature who used to howl at the moon and whip the air into a storm to someone holding back, afraid, unable to fully be at peace? Even during my yoga class, my mind drifts to what he may be plotting to the point that yoga and meditation are starting to become triggering...

I grab a tissue from a box on the table and wipe the tears from my eyes, deciding to wait a few minutes before leaving the room to find a washroom in some hidden part of the hotel. If I bump into anyone, I'll tell them the wedding made me emotional.

As I slowly lift my head, wondering if there's a mirror here that I can check my reflection in, I jump back in my chair, my palm nailing my chest at the sight of a man standing not twenty feet away, filling the doorway of an adjacent room in which we put the cases of champagne yesterday after they'd all been labeled.

God...

A droplet of saltwater trickles into the gap between my lips and I wipe my face quickly as he takes a step towards me.

"I'm sorry." The solemn note to his face is not one I've seen before. "By the time you started talking, I didn't know if I should interrupt."

Of all fucking people in this place, it just had to be him, didn't it?

I don't speak, my indignation and humiliation at his eavesdropping keeping me mute. I would be more annoyed, but he doesn't have his usual penetrating stare or that godforsaken poise of his. In fact, he looks positively ashen.

Without waiting for my permission, he walks slowly towards me, carrying two bottles of champagne in the fingers of one hand. He places them onto the small round table beside us before taking a seat in the armchair opposite me.

If I had a voice, I'd be tempted to give him some sanctimonious speech about not making his presence known, but there's a solemnity in his eyes that stops me.

He stares down at the floor between us, his chest rising and falling so heavily that it's as if his whole body is moved by some internal ocean wave.

As his gaze finally makes its way back up to my face, his lips part as if to speak, but he says nothing, searching my eyes.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, Indie. I really didn't."

I want to muster up something biting to scoff at him, but I don't.

"Your ex," he says. "That guy who was at Carrie's that last day?"

I shake my head. "No. That was Kohl. This is... someone else." I can't say his name to him. I don't want him to hear it.

I contemplate whether to engage in this conversation, but I'm so exhausted at feeling alone and helpless, and Grey's expression is so stern, as if desperate to know, that I can't help the words which pour out.

"I dated him a year ago. It lasted just under six months and it... wasn't healthy. I ended it and he didn't take that well."

"He's in prison," he says, and I realize he must have heard that part of the conversation. It's also one of the most embarrassing parts of the story. Telling people you're being stalked by an unhinged ex who is now incarcerated makes you look like a woman who can't read the signs, who likes dangerous men. In reality, as I've found out, something like this can happen to anyone.

"In jail," I clarify. "Awaiting trial... or a plea bargain."

"For what he did to you?"

“No,” I reply. “For beating up a guy in a bar. Really, really badly.”

“And to you...? Did he... He hurt you?”

I stare down at my hands, only just now realizing that tears are still dripping down my face. I swipe them away before nodding, not meeting his eyes.

I vaguely see his head dropping, his palm wiping backwards over his forehead to the sound of audible breaths.

He doesn't lift his head. “Did you ever file a complaint?”

I bristle at the question, not least because I ask myself how someone smart and feisty who fights for women's rights can be so afraid that she'd rather try to make this all just go away than have to face the consequences of having him arrested.

“No,” I reply firmly, finding his eyes. “Most women don't. And if you've never been in this situation, you can't understand. I've seen with my friends how the system is stacked against women who accuse men of abuse, especially powerful ones. I know what will happen. It'll be my word against his. I didn't go to the police straight away. We didn't collect the evidence we needed. If I do accuse him, the chances of charges being filed are slim and there'd be absolutely no protection for me.”

I hear the desperation in my own voice, the desperation to have someone understand.

“There's a huge backlog of cases so it could take a year or two or three, during which time, my life would be on hold and I'd have to live with the fear of my family or friends being targeted by him. I've seen someone close to me go through this, so please don't judge me. You can't unders—”

“I do understand,” he growls. “I do. I... I've seen it myself.”

I frown, wrapping my arms around myself as his body tightens. “What do you mean? *You?*”

“No. Not me. But someone... close... to me.” Am I imagining it or are his eyes misting over? “I know how this

works, Indie. I understand.”

I can't explain why and I hate that I'm doing it, but something about his words makes me drop my head, causing silent tears to fall onto my dress, the droplets disappearing from focus as his hand appears, wrapping around my wrist, squeezing it tightly.

“It's going to be okay.” His words make me close my eyes, feeling tears leak out from under my lids. “I promise you.”

“He wasn't that type when I met him,” I begin to explain.

“You don't have to explain that. You think I'd judge you for him being in jail?”

I lift my chin. “Wouldn't you?”

“No. I don't assign blame to innocent people for the action of others.”

I inhale, trying to hide my relief as his fingers unwind from my arm, his eyes not leaving my face, softening, as does his tone. “He hurt you,” he says.

I shrug my shoulders. “Not really physically. I mean, not that bad.” Though as I say it, I don't understand the lie. I just know I'm so used to saying it, to myself and to those around me. “He'd smash up my stuff. Stop me from leaving my place sometimes. Push me... He got really possessive. Like, more than the usual guy stuff.”

Pushing me into walls, grabbing me and throwing me onto the bed, punching the wall beside my head, running knives through my clothes.

Does that even count?

And then, that last day...

I wonder for a moment why of all people it's him I'm talking to, telling things I even hide from my closest friends at times...

I don't know what it is. There's something about his strength, his composure, that makes me want to give in, to hope that someone else can listen for once.

“And when we split up, he started to... stalk me, basically. Follow me. Threaten me. Text me a hundred times a day. Well, now he gets some sick friends of his to do it for him.”

His smoke-hued eyes lock onto my face as I speak.

“He’s from a good family. I mean, outwardly. They’re wealthy and—”

He shakes his head slowly. “You still think I’d judge you, don’t you? For picking a *bad* man?”

I lower my eyes, hating that I feel the need to justify myself.

“Wealthy families can be *bad*,” he says. “I have extensive experience in the matter.”

The thought of Greyson’s imposing father still chills me today.

“I know. I just hate people thinking that... I’m into dangerous men. In the beginning, he never even raised his voice. If he had done one-tenth of the stuff he was doing at the end, I’d never have agreed to go out with him.”

“Stop. You don’t have to explain yourself like this.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like we live in a society that doesn’t blame women for the behavior of their male partners.”

He exhales slowly. “Stop, Indie. I told you... You don’t have to explain yourself to me. It’s not your fault.”

I taste the salty tears that I’m swallowing as I peer down, watched by him.

“What’s his name?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t want you getting involved.”

“That’s too late,” he replies. “I’m going to have some security guys down here within a couple of hours.”

“No...”

“Then I’ll speak to the Assistant DA. I know him well. He’s a good friend of mine. He’ll deal with this when you get

back to DC. We're going to fix this fucking problem. And I'll make sure you're protected while we do."

"Grey, I..."

"I need a name. I can find it out myself, but I want you to trust me."

"Look, just wait a minute..."

"This isn't going to go away, Indigo. I know why you don't want the police involved, but you have to believe me... This won't stop."

"I don't want security," I say. "I'm on vacation. I just want to feel free for the *first* time in a year. Plus, I don't need it. That call will have placated him a bit. He won't do anything while I'm here. He's full of shit."

He studies me as if unsure what to do for a moment.

"I can hold them off until you get back to DC."

"Look, I don't want you getting involved in this mess."

"I'm sorry, Indie. It's too late for that now. I am involved. There's no going back from that now. I'll need your number. To arrange things..."

I swallow before speaking the number, watching as he calls it and his flashes up on my screen. I click on it once it stops ringing and plug it into my phone. My fingers want to name him Moody Prick, but I don't, instead typing Greyson.

As I look at his name, it strikes me how beautiful it is.

Grey.

When I first met him, I thought the color suited him.

Despite the fact that he's hotter than a freshly deep-fried churro, he seemed dour and uptight and extremely condescending. A moody cloud...

Now, I'm not so sure...

He's certainly not the jovial type, but his eye contact is the most vibrant I've ever seen, and his presence bold, arresting, electrifying. He's not overly talkative, but there's no one

whose words I hang onto quite like this, whose every utterance seems to set off secret fireworks hidden out of view inside me.

“I should get back,” I say and he nods.

As we make it to the door, I feel a hand wind gently around my upper arm. I glance down at it and he slides it away quickly, as if thinking I’m suddenly too fragile and messed up to be touched, as if the bold way he was holding me when we danced won’t happen again.

Damaged goods, and all.

I hate that feeling. The pity in his eyes. The concern.

I don’t want *any* of it. I never have. *Not one bit.*

In fact, I’m quite sure I preferred it when he was an unapologetic asshole, but before I can say it, he speaks...

“Indigo... He didn’t hurt you... in *that* way... You know what I mean...”

My lips part, willing me to speak.

Only, I don’t want to be a victim. Or even a survivor. I just want to get back to the life I had before I knew he existed.

“Did he?”

I shake my head slowly as he examines my face so studiously that I can’t take it anymore.

My finger reaches for the door handle only to have his hand blanket mine as I stare at the pronounced veins on his strong, large golden hand.

“I need a name, Indie,” he breathes into the side of my face, the air from his throat fresh, comforting. “I can find it out, but I want you to trust me.”

I tremble as his fingers wrap around the tips of mine. “Indie...”

“Micah,” I say, finally raising my dewy eyes to find his so close to me that I can barely look away. “Micah Korhonen.”

It feels like forever before he releases my hand so that I can turn the handle and leave.

Greyson

“It’s about twenty minutes down the coast.”

“Sounds awesome,” replies Kennedy to Gideon as they make plans to free-dive around some cove at the weekend.

“I’ll join you,” I say, and as expected, Gideon whips his head to look at me from the passenger seat.

“I thought you weren’t sure if you’d still be here by the weekend...”

I don’t answer, glancing at him instead to find a knowing smirk on his face.

I keep my hands tight on the steering wheel as I drive us to a seafood restaurant from the state park we’ve just visited, just waiting for the questions to start.

As I steer us through a canopy of live oaks, their branches intertwining to form a tent of foliage above us, Kennedy’s hand hits the top of my chair from the back seat, his fingers skimming my shoulder.

“Um, any particular reason for the vacation extension, Grey? Enjoying the dune bugs? The sand gnats?”

“Or the live oaks, maybe?” suggests Gideon wryly.

I don’t bother giving some facile explanation when these two assholes know full well what has consumed me of late... although since the events of yesterday, working this girl out of my system may not be as simple as I’d hoped.

“Just realized I really need a vacation, boys,” I reply, not expecting either of them to buy it.

In truth, my need to stay is constant, plaguing me, making the thought of leaving her intolerable, a fact which irritates the living hell out of me. While my team can cover for me and I can work just as well from here as from back in DC, I’m still disquieted by the depth of the concern I feel for a woman I barely know. I’ve dated women for over a year and not felt anywhere near as protective of them as this. Something about her taps into a part of me I believed I’d hammered over with steel plates a long time ago... and I don’t know if it’s something I can face again. Or if I want to...

My conversation with the district attorney didn’t help this morning. Apparently, this Micah Korhonen has a history with women—stalking and harassment, in particular. Several complaints have been made by different women, but after some time, each one has refused to press charges. His family is fairly wealthy and I know a little of the legal firm they use, none of it good. When she said his name, I flinched. I had my assistant check to see if his family was on the client list of our family but there’s no sign of them... but then, there are those clients, the ones my father and his little team of sociopaths, whose secrets are so heinous that their names never appear in any file...

In any case, I know this is not a man who should be on the street, and I intend to do whatever it takes to make sure he stays behind bars for as long as humanly possible.

When I called Indigo to talk about her situation, she didn’t answer, instead texting me to say that she was sorry she’d involved me and that she just wanted to move on. From what I heard of that phone call with him, she’s clearly in denial about the likelihood of his fixation on her ending.

She’s different from the women I normally deal with. She’s impulsive and illogical and stubborn as all hell. My urge to get her into line fights with this sudden and most unwanted need to protect her, a need which makes me feel weak, exposed, which throws me off balance.

“Since when does Greyson Everitt take vacations?” jests Kennedy from behind, his playful tone so irritating that it’s bordering on amusing.

I pull out of the thicket onto a main road parallel to the coast.

“And all it took is one strategically placed hippy for him to take some time off,” adds Gideon as my hands tense on the wheel.

I throw him a *Watch yourself, asshole* look, my body instantly rigid in irritation. He pats me on the arm, eliciting a half-playful “Go fuck yourself” in response which makes him guffaw in laughter.

“Seriously, what’s the plan with her?” he asks.

“The plan...”

I repeat his tedious words, realizing that any vague semblance of plan has now gone out the window, including the plan to make her beg and plead for me, on her knees, mouth open, hands bound firmly. I’ve wanted to teach the insolent little brat a lesson in manners since the first minute I set eyes on her last year.

That will now have to wait until I figure out how to deal with the dead man walking harassing her, and ensure that the highly deviant things I would like to do to her don’t leave her damaged.

Why do you even care?

Those words hit me for the fifth time today, wondering if I should go back to thoroughly enjoying my empty life as an emotionless prick.

I’ll just make a few calls, I decide bitterly. See if I can’t get the DA to press harder for a plea deal that will keep him off the streets for a few years. He told me that if several of his exes decide to press charges, they can do something about him, but until then, nothing. I may just have to speak to one or two of them...

As I contemplate giving Gideon some trite answer just to shut him up, I see the rental car that has been parked outside their house pull out of a small lane that leads to a yoga studio, and turn onto our road about fifty feet ahead of us, going in the opposite direction back in the direction of the rental house.

“Indigo,” I whisper without meaning to, spying the ridiculously small and unsafe car in my rearview mirror. I’m guessing they couldn’t afford a larger and safer one.

As I glare at the car that Indigo is driving as it gets further and further away, I realize that it looks like she’s driving about ten miles per hour, too slow for the traffic. This girl seems to do every fucking thing in a way that makes me want to correct it. And her.

As I start to contemplate the chances of Indigo driving even moderately better than she cycles, and whether she’s already seen my text message requesting to meet her tonight, I see a car come careening down the road in their direction. It’s driving way too fucking fast and as my eyes widen, I see it drift over the dividing line between two lines.

My heart beats fast as I slow down a little, watching the cars get further away before glancing at the lanes behind me and pulling over to the side before cranking the steering wheel to the left and pulling a highly illegal U-turn.

“Um, where are we going?” Kennedy asks. “Did we miss it?”

“Sorry, gentlemen. Detour.”

“Is that her car?” Gideon questions, followed by a few choice words when I don’t respond. “You’re losing it, you know?” he snorts. “What the fuck has gotten into you?”

Do you really think I wanna have this fucking problem?

“Didn’t she chew you up for following her?”

“I’m not—”

I stop myself, preparing myself mentally to get off at the next exit so as not to turn into the kind of stalking cretin she’s currently dealing with.

I don't mean to stalk her. It's certainly not to intimidate her. In fact, I'd rather she had no idea I was behind her, and with how little I imagine she's bothering to use her rearview mirror, that is a distinct possibility.

I just want to make sure she gets home okay.

Okay, maybe I am losing it...

I've never really felt protective over anyone before. Not since I was a kid anyway.

It's a feeling I loathe, certainly when it puts me at the mercy of an obstinate, capricious and unpredictable woman who thinks I'm the world's biggest asshole, depending on the day.

Hell, maybe she's right.

As I accelerate, trying to catch up to the man I now see weaving in and out of lanes, panic surges through my limbs as the memory of a day long ago ricochets through me...

No...

"Gabriella's gonna love this when she finds out," snorts Kennedy.

"Love what?" I snap, going past the speed limit to try to catch up.

"Well, she prunes herself from head to foot every day to be the perfect submissive Mrs. Greyson Everitt while you lose your nut over some hippy who won't give you the time of day," he guffaws.

My fingers curl tightly around the steering wheel as my prick friends' words slice through my gut. I haven't *lost my nut*.

I'm just protective, perhaps because Indigo seems to be a one-woman disaster zone incapable of not getting herself into a mess for more than twenty-four hours.

Once I've pulled some strings and got her fucker ex's plea deal fast-tracked so that he's out of her hair and got someone to either threaten or pay whoever it is doing his work to leave

her alone, I intend to do to her what I've dreamed of since that first day I saw her and she dared me with those insolent green eyes of hers.

Hopefully, by the end of it, she'll be out of my system for good and I won't be following cars around like a goddamn lunatic.

"I don't give a fuck what Gabriella thinks. We're not together, as she well knows," I retort, but before I can tear my friend a new one, my eyes zoom in on the car in front—some beaten-up pickup with a small orange flag flapping around, its stick protruding from the rooftop, the one weaving across lines, approaching the small red car in front.

As I contemplate if I should beep the horn, I see the fucking thing veer to the right, to the lane she's in.

"Fuck!" I snarl as I begin to beep my horn to warn her and her friends, my eyes wide as it drifts to the right, brushing against the side of their car.

"Fuck!"

As I beep my horn again, she swerves right, hitting the brakes so hard that I have to follow suit, yanking the steering wheel so that I'm on the shoulder. I can't stop the collision as the bumper of her car taps the front of mine as she tries to avoid him. Gideon's hand braces against the dashboard before we both come to a stop, her rolling their car forwards until she's twenty feet away.

"Jesus fucking Christ," exclaims a breathless Kennedy.

It takes me a moment to breathe through an image from long ago which blasted through my mind the second her bumper touched mine.

"You okay?" I finally ask, swallowing down the memory as I turn to look at my friends before spying the pick-up in the distance as it zooms away. I check that the dashcam camera was recording, which it was and still is and I turn back to look at Kennedy.

He shakes his head roughly. "Well, that's one fucking way to get her attention."

“Can one of you call the police?” I ask as I undo my seatbelt and open the door.

“On it,” replies Gideon, reaching for the phone in his pocket.

As I get out and close the door behind me, followed by my friends, the driver’s side door of the small red car in front opens and this shaken bird-like creature gets out.

She’s wearing some midriff revealing tie-dyed scrap of cloth which barely covers her breasts as a top and a pair of cut-offs that show all the way off to her upper thighs, but I’m quickly distracted from the sight by the tears rolling down her face and the phone gripped tightly in her hand as she walks back towards me as her friends get out of the car.

“I’m sorry,” she mutters, her shoulders packed tightly against her frame as tears drip down her golden freckle-spattered skin and over the curve of her upper lip. “Did you see that guy—”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I declare firmly, not wanting her to be in any doubt about that.

She peers over at the front bumper of my car which has the faintest of scratches, having barely touched hers.

“I’m so sorry.” My arms stiffen at the sight of her tears as I realize I’m fighting the need to hold her. “I didn’t check the rearview mirror before I braked. I thought he was going to drive into us.”

“You were right to brake. He was heading that way... I have it all on camera.”

Her teary eyes widen. “You do?” she sniffles, the muted pink ends of her dark blond hair caressing her bare arms, which I notice are spotted with goosebumps despite the Georgia heat.

“Yes. The police are on their way.”

She glances over at Gideon who I hear making the call as a thought begins to creep inside me insidiously. I’ve never been

one to hold back what I'm feeling about a situation, and despite her tears, I intend to make sure I'm wrong...

"Indie... Could it have been..."

She frowns, clutching her phone to her cleavage and she begins to shake almost imperceptibly, searching my face as if to anchor herself to it.

She shakes her head, glancing behind her as if to check that her friends are out of earshot. "No. It... It couldn't have been him... I..." She peers down at the gravel beneath our feet, as if dark thoughts are consuming her. "His family are cowards. He only does that stuff by text. He's gutless when you have him face-to-face. He'd never do it."

"The police can check the plate number when they get here. Just to be sure."

Her arms wind around her waist as if to protect herself and for a moment, I wonder whether I should have asked the question as Fran and Rami approach, both visibly shaken. I don't mean to scare her. I just know too well how these things can play out.

I wipe the image of what happened all those years ago from my mind as quickly as it came as she surveys the side of her and then the front of mine.

"We got fully comprehensive insurance," she says as Fran walks up to us, and rubs her hands up and down Indie's slim arm, the movement making me wish I had the right to do the same, or at least hold her until she stops shaking and the tears stop flowing. The sight of her tears is almost unbearable, a fact which twists in my gut. "I'll make sure we pay for the damage to your car. Do I call the rental company?" she asks, "and tell them?"

I glance over at Kennedy and Gideon as they walk up to us. "You know a mechanic, right?" I ask Gideon who has been coming to the island with his family since he was a boy.

"I do. He's very good."

"I'll sort out the cars," I say. "No need to inform insurance."

“What?!” she exclaims. “No! I have insurance for a reason.”

“Indie, your deductible will be at least five hundred dollars. The man who veered into you is responsible, not you. I don’t want the rest of your vacation ruined by this. I’ll sort it out. I can get you another car in the meantime.”

“Look—”

“I insist.”

The frail way she watches me, her hands curled around her sides, her fear and vulnerability so palpable, sets off a trail of crackling heat along my skin.

My eyes tear from hers only at the sound of a police siren approaching and I ease her to the side of the shoulder as a police car pulls up behind us and a large middle-aged cop with a copper mustache gets out.

Sometime later, he’s staring at the screen of the dashcam.

“Yeah, that’s Hank. The town drunk and a constant pain in my ass.”

“You’re sure?” Indie asks, her body tensing as if in search of relief.

“Yep. That’s the one.”

“Can you arrest him?” I ask.

“We’ll do our best. He’ll be hiding at one of his family member’s places in the hopes of sobering up.”

“He was drunk?” Indie asks.

“Yeah. Not the first time.”

“How isn’t his license suspended?” she presses, exasperation hollowing out her voice. “Are they waiting till he kills somebody?!”

“I don’t know,” the cop sighs. “If it were up to me, he’d be spending ten years behind bars by now. That man’s a danger to the public, and I’ll say it till I’m blue in the face.”

Fifteen or so minutes later after we've given our statements and the officer has left with instructions to send him a copy of the video, Indie's dewy eyes, bright mossy green in the waning sun, lift to mine for a moment. "What do I do with the car, then?"

"The mechanic I know said we can bring them both round now," replies Gideon. "His shop isn't far from your house. We can all walk back. He needs to take a look, but from what I described, he thinks he'll have the car sorted out within seventy-two hours. You're staying till the end of the week, right?"

"Another four days," replies Fran.

"He says he'll call us if he can get them repaired faster."

"I want to pay for the damage," Indie says resolutely.

"I'll drive you there," I reply.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I've already explained that you won't be paying for an accident that wasn't your fault," I reply, my body beginning to bristle again at the constant way she defies me. In public, no less.

Not something I'm used to.

"Well, why should *you* pay?"

I gesture towards her car. "Get in. I'll drive you back."

"We don't need you to drive us," snaps Rami.

"I know you don't. But you're shaken up and I'll feel more comfortable if I drive you."

"Well, tough shit," she replies. "You're gonna have to go live out your hero fantasy on one of the airheads around here. We ain't no fucking damsels in distress."

"Can you drive mine to the garage?" I ask Gideon, ignoring the comment.

"Sure."

I walk over to their car and get into the driver's seat. I am aware that what I'm doing is obnoxious, overbearing and demeaning, but I don't care right now. All I give a shit about right now is getting her and her friends home in one piece.

"I'm glad I don't speak good Spanish, Rami," I say as I pull up at the mechanic's place ten minutes later, with the soundtrack of muttered words hissed by Rami in my direction still resounding in my ears.

"I wouldn't care if you did," she sneers from the back passenger seat, and I can't help but smile at how committed she is to thinking I'm a prick. "And it's *Ramirez* to you."

"Don't you have a first name?"

"Not one you'll ever be hearing."

I smile as I make out a few more muffled words from Rami, none of which sound cordial, glancing in the rearview mirror to meet Indigo's eyes.

Her usual glare has dissipated somewhere and, in its place, there's a look of concern that I despise as much as it makes my cells flare in anticipation.

I breathe deeply, trying to expel the arousal surging through my body as I watch her.

Greyson

“Do you fancy getting something to eat?” asks Kennedy, plastering on his most jovial of expressions as we pass a restaurant on the oceanfront on the way from the mechanic’s to our houses.

It’s an indoor-outdoor one, with the outdoor portion overlooking a narrow swimming pool that lies parallel to the ocean on the other side of the beach below the rocks beneath its deck. “I’m starving.” He throws me a sneaky grin, as if I didn’t know what he was up to...

“Yeah, you can miss me with that one,” bites Rami, making Indie smile for the first time since I’ve seen her today. In fact, it’s the first real smile I’ve seen of hers since being on the island. The thing is warm and beautiful and feels like the rays of the sun on your skin.

“I honestly need a drink,” moans Fran, who if I’m not mistaken has been eyeing up Gideon for the last hour, a fact that I know my ever-perceptive friend has not failed to notice.

“Yeah, I second that,” adds Indie with purpose, her eyes floating to mine for a brief second which she curtails as soon as they collide with mine.

“We’re joining you,” I add, aware that I can be quite the overbearing prick, but enjoying the various ways she glowers at me in response.

“Fine.” Indie lifts her chin. “But we’re paying for our own drinks and food and that’s final.”

“We are?” replies Rami, still clearly thoroughly unimpressed by our presence. “If we have to suffer through this, they could at least pay for our food.”

Indie chuckles, pulling on Rami’s arm as we walk towards the bar-restaurant which, from the sound of it, is busy tonight.

Rami tilts her head towards me. “And by the way, I wouldn’t accept a meal off you if I hadn’t eaten for a month and was contemplating amputating a toe to chomp on.”

“Good to know.” I smile as Indie chastises her with a shake of the head. Gideon and I pass in front of them as we approach the oak gables of the large restaurant.

As we walk past a small group of men sitting on a wall leading to the restaurant and enter it, we’re greeted by a slim woman in her mid-twenties who flashes us the kind of wide, toothy smile I’ve yet to witness from Indigo... other than the day she sprayed me with beetroot juice, that is.

“Fuck.”

At the scrape of gravel, I turn to see Indigo’s flip-flop snag, the central slip of rubber pulled out of the sole. She stops, dropping her bag into the ground and bending over to push the toe separator back into the hole from which it came loose.

“Table for six,” says Gideon as Indigo picks up her tatty rainbow-colored bag upon repairing her shoe.

“Right this way,” sings the waitress as Indie hops a few steps to catch up. As she approaches, my eyes slide to the men who I spotted watching her as she was bent over.

And right on cue, one of them does it—the tall one in the middle wearing the sleeveless T-shirt and the trucker cap. Some words I can’t make out over the music and chatter inside slip from his lips as the men on either side of him snigger like pigs.

And in that second, an explosion detonates inside me, held back just about by the shell of my body as I see Indigo stop dead in her tracks, pivoting her slim, barely concealed body to face them, and most probably giving them the view they were after.

Her whole tiny frame undulates as if containing a tidal wave of outrage. “What did you just say to me?!”

“Ooh, we’ve got a live one for once, fellas.”

“How dare you?!”

“Indie!” I bark as I make my way up there fast, only for the prick in the middle to get to his feet. He must be six foot four—slightly taller than me, and he’s stocky with it, but older; late thirties to my twenty-nine.

“What the hell gives you the right to say something so disgusting to me?!” she shouts as I suddenly want to carry her inside the restaurant myself and teach her a very explicit lesson about dangerous men that she won’t forget.

“Just a joke, sweetheart. Lighten up.” Dead man number one turns to his friend and smirks. “Or if it’s stress relief you’re after, you only have to ask nicely.”

“Yeah, we’ll take care of you,” smirks his balding fuck of a friend.

As I make it up to her, I pull her backwards, only for her to yank her arm away.

“I don’t need you fighting my battles!”

“God dammit,” I snarl. “You get into that fucking restaurant right now or I’ll drag you in there.”

“Get in line,” snickers one of the men as I pull her backwards and stand in front of her as the main prick takes a step towards me, eyeing me slowly up and down with the kind of enraged neanderthal stare that tells me he’s been begging for a fight all day. I catch a whiff of beer on his breath and realize it would be too fucking easy.

I’d happily take out the lot of them.

“Let me guess,” he snarls. “Our white knight.”

But before I can speak, I feel the touch of a hand on my arm. More than a touch. Indie grips it tightly with both hands, pulling me back.

“They’re not worth it,” she breathes as prick number one’s lips curve into some twisted smile.

I feel my hand tense into a fist, picturing me pushing her back so that I can cock my fist and break his fucking jaw into two. The other two are more wary; I can feel it. I’d still very much enjoy feeling their blood on my teeth.

Only I don’t want her to watch the warm blood spray from this guy’s neck, nor mine if I fuck up the timing, and something about the combination of the wife-beater shirt, the stench of beer and the way he’s eye-balling me makes me think he may have a switch-knife hidden in a pocket somewhere.

But fuck, every riotous cell in my body wants me to feast on this piece of shit’s flesh.

As she yanks on my arm harder, I think of her watching some vicious fight.

I don’t want that.

“You got lucky,” I snarl as she pulls me back.

“Oh yeah?” His lips contort into a heinous grin as he bares his teeth at me.

You haven’t seen anything...

“Stop!” Indie shouts.

I take a step back, eyeballing him as we retreat. This time it’s me who takes her by the arm, pulling her into the restaurant as I spot Gideon on the far left sitting on the roof-covered terrace overlooking the pool straight ahead.

My body stiffens in rage as I think of her vulnerability in the face of those men. “You really need to start becoming more aware of the dangers around you,” I snap in frustration.

She stops dead in her tracks in the dimly-lit, empty part of the restaurant near the kitchen. “What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

I turn to find her grave eyes searching mine, watching her slim arms tense as if to conceal her outrage.

“I mean that as a woman, it’s important to be aware of your *fucking* surroundings.”

I know I’m being an asshole but between her reckless dive into the rip tide, her habit of cycling in front of cars, and the psycho ex now on her tail, I have a feeling this girl isn’t aware of how fucking dangerous life can be for someone as small and vulnerable as her.

“Are you blaming me for those braindead troglodytes?!”

“I’m not blaming you, but maybe scan your fucking surroundings before bending down in front of a group of drunken men dressed like...*that*.”

My eyes roam down her barely concealed body.

“Are you saying it’s *my* fault that the local scumbags decide to harass innocent women minding their own fucking business on the street?! Do you even hear yourself?!”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault,” I bite back. “I’m just saying that from what I’ve observed of you, you seem to have little awareness of any kind of danger around you.”

She dumps her bag on the ground, eliciting a glance from a passing waitress. Splotches of red flush upon her chest as she places one indignant hand on the curve of her hip, one I’ve wanted to carefully explore since the first minute I met her. “Is that so? Well, how about you?”

“What about me?”

“Your involvement didn’t exactly calm things down, did it?”

“I was trying to get you out of a mess that you created,” I bark.

“Oh really? By rushing up to them like some caveman with a club?!”

I balk at the accusation, although deep down, I realize that from the second I saw the way they were looking at her, I felt out of control. Jealous. Enraged.

Murderous.

It's new.

Only in the last year of our attempt at a relationship did Gabriella learn to tolerate the absence of jealousy I felt when she talked to other men. Hell, I felt close to nothing when she fucked other men when we were on one of our numerous breaks when I couldn't keep up the pretense anymore. In fact, I encouraged her to, a fact that used to drive her nuts, but which she now understands is part of the limitations of what I can feel for others.

So having this woman, a woman I barely know, make me want to rip a man's limbs from his torso in five seconds flat is the first and last time I ever want to experience this fucking feeling of being out of control... especially when I'm at the mercy of a girl who conducts herself with about as much forethought as a tornado ripping through a town.

“What did you think you were trying to achieve?!”

“Protecting you,” I growl, narrowing my eyes at the insubordinate woman who has no idea how harsh and thorough a lesson I want to teach her. “From yourself.”

She shakes her head at my deliberate provocation. “You're blaming me again, aren't you? What is it with men taking no responsibility for their bullshit and blaming women for all the crazy shit they do?!”

“I'm not blaming you, but look how you're dressed.”

“What of it?! I just got out of a fucking yoga class! I was driving straight back home. I didn't know some drunkard was gonna come careening into me at fifty miles per hour and that I'd have to walk home, did I?”

“You should keep a shirt or something in your bag for situations like these.”

I don't really mean it. In fact, I don't mean it at all. She should be able to wear whatever the fuck she wants without being bothered. I've just learned too harsh a lesson about the dangers women face at the hands of men. It's a point of weakness for me, of fracture, which is why the women I usually frequent are poised and in control of themselves and not some untamable storm of chaos like this one.

“Do you hear yourself?!” she yells, her voice only just about drowned out by the music as another waitress gives me a smile as she walks past. “You're saying I need to walk around covered from head to toe otherwise I deserve to be sexually harassed in the most graphic way.”

“No. I'm saying that men are *pigs*, at best and *dangerous monsters* at worst, and you need to start waking up to that fact. I would have thought *you* of all people would have understood it.”

Her face falls pallid, as I realize I said something I had no right to.

“What... What is that supposed to mean?”

She shakes her head slowly as I remain quiet, my face softening as I observe the glistening jade flecks in hers, realizing I went too far.

“I didn't tell you about my ex so you could use it against me and throw it in my face every time I do something you disapprove of.” She picks up her bag from the wooden floor of the restaurant. “I'm never entrusting you with anything about my private life. *Ever*. Again.”

Before I can speak, she pivots on her heels and heads down the steps of the restaurant in the direction of the pool where I watch her dump her bag onto a sun lounge and drag out a towel which she drapes across it. As she pulls what just about passes as a T-shirt off her torso and throws it onto the lounge, I walk towards her and down the steps to the pool just in time to see a group of four men on the far-right side.

One of them taps another on the arm and they ogle her as if she's some piece of cattle at a market. One licks his lips as he runs his greedy piglike gaze up and down her body as she unbuttons her shorts and tugs them down her legs, leaving her wearing only what look like black cotton panties and a matching bralette. Neither of them are see-through, but they'd better not be when she gets out of the fucking water.

The touch of a hand has me looking into Gideon's keen brown eyes. "You okay?"

I turn to watch Indigo walk towards the open shower halfway down the pool as the men make the kind of lewd noises that make me want to rip their lungs out through their throats.

I shake my head, my shoulders stiffening. "I'm gonna end up in prison with this girl. I can feel it."

"You joining us?"

"Not yet," I reply, pulling my phone and wallet out of my back pocket and handing them to him. "Can you look after those?" I begin to unbutton the buckle of the belt I'd very much like to employ on her pert little ass until it was bright red and very, very sore and she was beginning to see the error of her ways...

"Sure. But don't take too long. Ramirez looks like she wants to strangle Kennedy with her belt."

I pull my T-shirt up and over my head, dumping it and the belt onto the lounge next to Indie's as she rinses her tight little frame off, the water forming glistening rivulets which trickle down the golden curves of a body she's clearly looked after carefully, and one small enough for me to pick up and carry about at my leisure. The image takes me back to this morning when I made myself come in the shower, working my shaft to the thought of that naked body of hers next to me, climbing onto my dick, riding me as I held her, the water making our bodies a slippery mess.

As the water dampens her long hair, turning the muted ends a vivid pink, I pull off my shorts. "He'll survive," I

respond, aware that Kennedy's boisterous personality is something of an acquired taste, and apparently one that Indie's friend cares for about as little as she does me.

As Indigo walks over to the far side of the pool, my eyes pan over to the inebriated fuck in the too-tight speedos wolf-whistling at the sight, and for a second I do actually envisage myself spending some time in prison in the near future... once I've half-drowned him, of course.

She locks eyes with me for a moment as she approaches the edge, glaring wildly, making it quite clear what she thinks of me, as if I didn't know it already, before diving into the pool, mostly empty due to the setting sun and the cooler early-evening air.

"Do you want us to order food for you two?" Gideon asks as she swims hard and fast, her crawl better than I'd expect for someone so messy. "They have really good chickpea fries here."

"No. Better not."

At the ding of my phone, I take it back from him to switch it off so that it doesn't bug them while they eat, only to see my father's name on the screen and the unpalatable beginning of a message.

I click to open it, my body bracing itself as it so often does whenever I get messages from *either* of my parents, frankly.

I heard about that little stunt at the auction.

My eyes narrow as I read his words and I wonder who told him, where he saw it... and if there's someone around me I can't trust...

Gideon and Kennedy, I trust with my life.

But Tom, my father's well-paid employee? I don't know. Maybe... It could have been any number of the people who work with us and who attended.

Ten thousand dollars for a classless whore. I hope she worked it off.

The words he uses to describe her, to describe almost every woman, make my stomach churn.

What does a whore give you for ten thousand dollars?

Well, you're the expert in that, I mutter internally.

I hear from your assistant that you'll be gone all week and not back today. I would have appreciated if you informed me yourself so that I can arrange to pick up your slack. If I didn't know better, I'd say my own son didn't give a fuck about his family's business. That's good to know.

Just as I contemplate whether to answer, another comes in.

Enjoy your whore. Get her out of your system. Oh and whatever you do, don't spare a thought for your long-suffering fiancée, Greyson.

She's not my fucking fiancée, Father dear.

She's a woman I feel nothing for whom you've pressured me to marry since before I even knew what my dick was for.

I contemplate not responding, but when I don't, I can't get his words out of my head. When I respond, I have to deal with the anxiety of waiting for an answer from the emotionally abusive prick, but at least it makes me feel like I'm not just bending over and taking it like I used to, afraid of speaking up

for myself for fear of the retribution and rage that aroused in him.

As a rule, I'm not afraid of others, nor of confronting the people I need to, but with this man, a man who has withdrawn affection from me my entire life, handing it back in breadcrumbs to sustain me, I struggle to assert myself. I've always hoped that one day, he'll become the father I've needed, but with every day that passes, that hope wanes more and more and I find myself just wishing that every interaction with him didn't turn my world to black.

At this point, I don't know why I don't walk away for good, like the numerous therapists I've had over the years have told me to, despite vocal protests from every woman I've ever dated.

Maybe one day, I'll have the strength to...

My eyes track the girl as she swims back towards the far wall of the pool as if being chased by a shark. Her energy pierces my armor until my hand almost tremors as I type back.

I informed Jerrod I'd be working from here. I don't need you to pick up any slack. Enjoy the rest of your week, Father.

I suck in a breath as I press Send, watched over by Gideon who is aware of the never-ending tension festering between my father and me.

As Indigo flips upside down, her feet hitting the wall and propelling her towards me, I think of that naughty little smile of hers and decide to add something for good measure, mainly just to piss him off.

As for my "fiancée", I have absolutely no idea who the fuck you're talking about.

As I press Send on that one, I look up to find Gideon, no fan of my father, grinning, his keen brown eyes sparkling.

“He won’t like that one,” Gideon smirks.

“Good.” I put my phone on mute and give it back to him, taking my wallet back for a minute and pulling out a fifty-dollar bill from it before handing it back to my friend. “You enjoy the company.”

Gideon smiles as I reference the burgeoning heat between him and Fran before heading back to join the group as I remove my loose navy pants, happy I wore briefs underneath them today, and approach a waiter hovering around this quieter outer part of the restaurant.

I gesture towards her bag lying on the lounge, holding out the bill for him which he takes. “Could you keep an eye on that bag for ten minutes?”

“Uh, sure. No problem.”

“We need two towels as well please.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.”

I head over to the edge of the pool and wait for Indie to reach this end which she does, turning swiftly under the water, her feet nailing the tiled side of the pool as she kicks off in the other direction. When she’s halfway down the pool, I dive in, swimming fast, aware of this nauseating need to catch up to her, to talk to her. To look at her.

Frustration makes me swim harder and just as I’m a few feet away, she flips once more, her feet slamming the wall of the pool, only this time, she pushes herself way down, swimming a few feet below the surface until she’s made it past me, before coming up for air.

I know she knows I’m in here.

I’m ready for the chase, Indie.

I’m not used to hunting. Women come to me stupidly easily, not that I’d ever say that aloud.

With this one, I'm beginning to revel in the hunt almost as much as I hope to revel in the victory of her submission.

I flip myself swimming fast, the kinesis bestial, catching up to her before she reaches the other end. As she flips, I do the same to her right, slowing down, the splashing of the water as frenetic as the beat of my heart, as the desperation concealed in the measured movements of my limbs.

I need to exorcise whatever the hell has hold of me and fast.

It must be another ten lengths before she finally stops. Having overtaken her twice, I now find myself behind her. I slow the cadence of my strokes, the water stilling as my feet find the bottom and I begin to walk in her direction.

Her shoulders are hunched as she stares at the tiles above the pool, her body heaving as she tries to catch her breath. I walk slowly, fighting the urge to wrap my frame around hers from behind, to hold her. To touch her. To whisper words into her ear which will calm her down.

But I don't yet have that right.

Especially given how much of a prick I just was.

Nor do I understand why the fuck I am drawn to this highly disordered creature. It's as if there is something in her blood arousing me, calling to me.

And I ache to taste it.

Instead, I move to the left, coming to stand next to her, watching water drip down her closed eyelids and linger on the tips of her dark-blond lashes. I trace the droplets that scurry down to the tip of her nose, which taunt me as they wait on the perfect curves of her plump lips.

As my arm accidentally brushes hers, her eyes open and she stares straight ahead, her respiration still labored.

"I'm sorry," I say softly, and this time, I mean it. "It wasn't your fault. *None* of it. And you should be able to dress how you want. I just... don't handle men like that talking to you like that. It turns me into an asshole."

“*Turns you into?*” she scoffs, still staring straight ahead, her voice small.

“Alright. *More* of an asshole.”

“It’s not women’s fault that men harass them,” she utters, her slight frame shivering slightly. “It’s the fault of *men* and men only, and we need to start putting the onus back on that and not blaming us for everything you do to women.”

“I don’t do that kind of thing. Ever.”

Her head snaps to look at me and I realize her eyes look misted, and not just from the water we’re swimming in. “I didn’t mean *you*. I meant... men. Not all men. Just enough to make our lives miserable.”

“It was their fault, not yours. I know that. I shouldn’t have brought up your clothes. I just get... protective around you. Stupid.”

She peers up at me, her large green eyes always searching. “Why do you even care?”

I study her face, how earnest her expression is, how vulnerable despite anger clearly brimming beneath the surface of her vain attempt at composure. There’s something about this annoying creature that’s so unfamiliar to me. She’s wild. Untamed. She’s so different to the women I know—composed, sophisticated, elegant.

Predictable and willingly domesticated.

I think of Gabriella for a moment and despite our numerous arguments, I don’t think there’s one time she’s dared looked at me so boldly as this little one. Not just boldly; Indigo glares at me as if demanding answers.

It would be amusing if it weren’t so vexatious, if it didn’t tear at the fabric of my need for control.

As it is, taming her to my satisfaction is still very much on the menu. In fact, by the impertinent way she glowers at me, I would almost guess that’s exactly what she’s looking for.

“I don’t know, Indigo,” I reply truthfully to her question, locked into her eyes for what feels like an hour.

She turns back to look at the side of the pool as I study her beautiful profile. She looks like some pixie, her features dainty but for blaring eyes that could see right into you. Three silver hoops are looped into her creamy earlobes and behind her ear lies some tattooed symbol in white ink. I can't make it out but it's all I can do to stop myself running my tongue along it.

She closes her eyes for a moment as her fingertips curl around her slim, wet arm. Her nails are painted white and chipped in several places, which, of course they would be. She's a walking tornado. I'm used to women who are manicured and pruned to within an inch of their lives. But despite the chaos, I like being around this one. It feels like being able to breathe. I study her fingers, wishing I could draw them into my mouth and suck on them as she watches me... and then make her do the same.

"What is it?" I ask as she quivers, holding herself tightly.

As her eyes open, a trickle of water makes an exquisite path down the side of her neck, her skin calling to me, my teeth itching to bite.

"Just thinking about those pigs outside. And then... that car."

Her words jolt me, a tidal wave carrying me back to a day long ago. A day I carry with me in silence, trying to forget, never knowing when the memory of it will leave me paralyzed for a few hours or days or weeks, until I work it out of my system and carry on, as if that day never happened, just as I've always been told to.

"It'll take a few days to get over the shock," I say.

She turns to look at me, eyes too solemn for a girl such as this. "I hope they arrest the driver."

"I'll make sure of it," I reply.

She evaluates me for a while until a rogue blast of cooler ocean air hits us, making her turn and head towards the steps that lead out of the pool. I join her, making sure to walk on the side of her that the pigs were lurking on earlier, to shield her from their lascivious glares. I turn to look at them as she

reaches the lounge and grabs a towel that the waiter must have left for us, wrapping around her body.

Once she's covered, I grab my own, wiping the water off my body as she sits down, holding the towel around herself. As my eyes wander to her face, I see her looking at my back—no doubt noticing the large scars snaked across it and the bumps from the skin graft I had over twenty years ago.

A heartbeat later, her eyes lift to meet my face as I take a seat next to her. She reaches into her bag, pulling out a slim watch which she clicks easily into place around her wrist, her thumb sliding over the oval face of it as if it soothes her.

“Ready to eat?” I ask.

She peers over at the group speaking animatedly on the far side of the open restaurant, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m not really in the mood after all,” she says, swallowing hard.

“Why not?”

She blinks at me slowly. “Because I’m a woman and changing our minds every five minutes is one of the few privileges of that.”

“Maybe there are privileges of it that you aren’t aware of yet, Indie.”

She cocks an eyebrow, scrutinizing the daring smile I feel playing on my lips at the innuendo.

She shudders out a breath, rising to her feet to drag her shorts up her still-wet legs. “I need to go home,” she announces as I stand up to put on my clothes.

“You must be hungry.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll eat at home.”

“I’ll walk you there.”

“No, you will not!” she snaps as I button up my pants and pull my belt into the latches. “I’m not going straight there anyway. And before your stalking ass asks, I’m going to get a massage at that place near our—”

“I know the one.”

“She said I could drop in tonight.”

“Fine. I’ll walk you there.”

“You’re impossible,” she chides as I pull on my T-shirt as she does hers.

I gesture over to the waiter. “Two portions of chickpea fries. To go.”

“Coming right up.”

Indigo

“I’m just not in the mood,” I explain to Fran and Rami for the fifth time. “My whole body feels like it’s been pummeled. My neck feels like it’s gone ten rounds with the chiropractor. I’m just... tense.” I refrain from adding “Thanks to you” to Grey who’s sliding his phone back into his pocket, his movements stupidly elegant. The man always looks as in control as I do out of it. “I need a massage.”

“I’ll give you one,” exclaims the wide-eyed Fran.

“Thanks, babe,” I smile. “But I need one that makes me forget my existence for an hour or so.”

“Are you sure she’s open?” asks Rami about the woman who popped out when we saw the *Massages available* notice at her front gate yesterday.

“I don’t know, but I saw her this morning. She said I could drop by and see. If she’s open, she’ll take me. Are you guys gonna be okay to get home?” I ask, not unaware of the building tension between the grinning Fran and the handsome Gideon, a man smoking hot but without the bottomless brooding energy that clings to Grey everywhere he goes.

“We’ll walk them back,” replies Gideon.

“Or get a cab,” clarifies Rami. “We’ll be fine as long as Kennedy doesn’t mind me beating him up if he keeps getting

on my fucking nerves,” she groans to his good-natured guffaw of amusement.

I feel myself smile for once, asking Fran if I can take a sip of her beer just to wash the taste of chlorine out of my mouth. She obliges and I drink down a few gulps, partly to remove the taste, and partly because of the wave of anxiety that just surged through my belly as I allowed my thoughts to drift to my stupid ex again.

I need that massage and pronto.

To wash away thoughts of my ex, but mainly because Greyson is basically a walking erection in very good clothes. Every irritating second spent in his company makes me wish I'd brought my silent mini vibrator with me so I could rush off to the washroom and relieve myself.

And that's not something I've ever experienced with any man.

I restrain myself from eyeballing the sky as I contemplate asking God why the only man who's ever set my groin alight so strongly that it could probably power the national grid in an emergency just had to be such an arrogant and overbearing prick...

Not to mention a protective one.

That's the part that's gonna get you, Indie, I warn myself, pretending to ignore the fact that his ravenous eyes are searing into my profile.

“How are you gonna get there?” asks Rami.

“I'll walk her there,” replies Grey, his tone utterly resolute.

“I don't know if that reassures me much,” retorts an eye-rolling Rami flatly, making me break into a grin.

I turn up to look at Grey whose eyes drop to my smiling lips.

“Ready?” he asks in a tone that makes me feel like he's my boss. He's gonna have to cut that out, for starters, I decide as I nod before following him back through the restaurant, aware of the water from this thick ridiculously healthy-looking hair

seeping in splotches through that pastel-blue T-shirt of his that caresses thick, lean muscles...

Indie...

I'm starting to wonder whether it's a massage I need or an ice-cold shower.

As we get near the kitchen, a waiter hands him two small brown bags with the fries in them and in exchange, Greyson hands him a bill I don't see the color of. "Keep the change."

"Aw, thanks. You sure?"

Grey smiles at him as we walk out and I brace myself for seeing the ungodly assholes from before—the ones that informed me I had one hole for each of their dicks.

I didn't tell Grey that part.

Just another day of holding in the demeaning crap men feel they have the right to say to me whenever I'm not swathed head to foot in clothing that resembles an extra-large potato sack.

I'm kinda short and slim but with curves that make men see me as some object. Or at least, certain types of men.

Grey's keen eyes scan the parking lot as if on the lookout for them until we make it onto the sandy little path parallel to the ocean that leads us back towards our rental houses, and more importantly, back towards the home of what I hope will be the savior of my sanity tonight: the jolly masseuse, Gwyn.

Tall reeds brush against my hand and leg as I walk along the sandy path, desperate to take my flip-flops off so that my feet are grounded into the Earth, but not wanting to traipse sand throughout Gwyn's lovely beachfront home.

The garlicky scent of fries wafts through the air as Grey holds out a small brown bag as we walk.

"I told you I wasn't hungry," I say, not wanting to fill my stomach up before lying down on it for an hour. I restrain myself from adding, *I'm amazed you eat peasant food*, seeing as he doesn't actually seem quite as stuck up as I'd expect for someone of his wealth and position in society.

“Just one,” he says, holding it out, and I take one from his competent fingers, crunching down on whatever a “chickpea fry” is before discovering that it may be one of the most delicious things I’ve ever put into my mouth. The crunchy, spicy outer coating gives way to a heavily seasoned fluffy chickpea center which is pure deliciousness.

“Oh my God!” I exclaim, reaching for another. “They’re amazing!”

Only as my fingers make it within inches of the bag, he holds it back. “I thought you didn’t want one, Indie.”

“It’s still *Indigo* to you.”

“Do you like them... *Indigo*?”

The way he draws my name out makes me want to dunk the packet on his head, though I’d probably need a footstool to reach up there which may dampen the illusion somewhat.

“What, are you gonna make me beg?” I scoff.

He squares his body at me, taking a small step forwards and forcing me to crank my head back to look up at him. The fact that he’s such a giant compared to me annoys me as much as it turns me on, for his presence is so bold, so arresting, so palpable, that it’s as if he comes with his own one-man weather system.

“The begging will come later,” he replies, his tone utterly flat but his eyes blazing as I swallow down my outrage at his assertive and borderline indecent insinuation.

His eyes form tight slits as he studies my reaction which I would best describe as *dumbstruck*. I seem to be caught between wanting to give him the tongue-lashing from hell for his blatant lasciviousness and asking him to tell me more about this begging business.

Because frankly, and in another insult to my female ego, I’m starting to think I’m all for it...

The smile lifting his thick pink lips makes me relocate my inner sass. “I’m all for men begging,” I retort, just to annoy him. “The more the better.”

His smile widens until I see the tips of his large, pointed canines, and my God, if the thing doesn't feel like the first rays of sunshine after a week of rain. "Tell me how much you like them, Indigo."

"What?" I think the word came out of my mouth. I can't quite tell.

"Don't make me repeat myself." He crunches the bag in his hand. "Tell me how much you like them."

"And why exactly?" I ask, glancing down at my chest to see that the flush of heat I can feel there is not unfortunately invisible to the naked eye.

"Because I like hearing it."

I frown at the utterly unabashed way that he says it and at the complete lack of self-consciousness in his face while mine feels like it's just been microwaved on full power until it's its own source of thermonuclear radiation.

I raise a brow, suddenly aware of the proximity of his body on this quiet path stuck between a half-empty beach and a forest-lined road behind the reeds on the other side. "You... like hearing me say I like fries?"

"I like hearing you have pleasure," he corrects, and there we have it... Once again, here I am waiting for the giant sinkhole to swallow me up and save me from the sheer embarrassment of conversing with a man in such a sexual manner.

Or is it sexual? Am I making all this up in my head? He's not lewd or creepy and doesn't put his hands on me unnecessarily like some of the blue-balled sleazebags I've experienced in my life. He doesn't send me lascivious texts that make me wish I could fly off to a female-only island or constantly suggest I go back to his place for "coffee".

And I don't feel afraid like I often do when men are too brazen.

Plus, he still stares at me in this ultra-moody way as if everything I do irritates him and he's five seconds away from exsanguinating me.

Mind you, I happily return the favor, glaring so hard it's a miracle I haven't opened up some third-eye portal to a new dimension. As I think it, I realize that I'd never dare glare at Micah like that, even when he was in the love-bombing boy-scout phase of his narc seduction.

I wouldn't even have given Kohl this much attitude, him, the "nice guy" who never laid a hand on me in anger.

Glaring at a man isn't something I've ever really done, and I'd never even realized that until now when it suddenly hits me how audacious my eye contact is with Grey, and how many layers of sassypants I feel able to put on in his presence.

I almost feel fearless around him, a man so tall and strong and athletic-looking, compared to them.

I remain fixed to the spot, mute, which isn't like me.

The words he speaks next are basically an industrial-strength vacuum cleaner which steal every little bit of air from my lungs and I find myself inhaling a mouthful as if my life depended on it. "Open your mouth."

My lips part to take in air. "What?"

Fuck, my voice suddenly sounds like it belongs to a baby hamster who's just sucked on a helium teat.

"Open your mouth, Indigo."

I would roll my eyes at the alpha-Dom instruction, but I'm too busy wondering whether it's possible to have an orgasm without physical contact.

"Why?"

Genius, Indie. Your questions are poetry for idiots.

"Because I said so," he replies, as smoothly and confidently as if he were presiding over a business meeting attended only by the local sycophant community. "Don't make me repeat myself. Open your mouth for me."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

Now that, I'm sure I said aloud...

He narrows his eyes at me, as for a moment, an ocean wave to his left seems to beckon me towards it, offering me some last-ditch escape route from the embarrassment I feel at his order... and from my own libido, firing so rapidly that you could plug an electrical device into it and get a charge.

“I’ll say it one more time.” His low voice is the ultimate temperamental grumble through my flesh. “Open your mouth for me like a good girl.”

Like a good girl...

I think I can die now.

Yep, I’m good. Bye world...

His eyes wander slowly to my lips, parted as wide as a guppy fish that needs feeding, and I can’t help but wonder if he can see my tongue lurking inside like a conger eel in its little hole being urged to come out.

I mean, he stopped short of saying, “Get on your knees,” but after “Open your mouth for me like a good girl”, there are not many places the mind can go. It’s basically a one-way ticket to fellatio-ville. And despite how outraged I am at his sexual undertone—who I am kidding?—*overtone*, getting on my knees and taking very, very slow and reverential licks up and down his hard cock is frankly all I can picture doing right now.

If it weren’t for the threat of being arrested for public indecency and ending up on TikTok crawling out of the reeds next to Grey’s naked ass cheeks, I may well do it.

I mean, I’m kind of joking, but the thing is... I want to submit.

I’m so turned on, and so much blood has left my brain to congregate around my pulsating sex that it’s a miracle I have enough life force left to remain standing, especially as the last two minutes have basically involved me attempting not to dissolve into a dripping puddle on the sand.

I used to like to submit with the boyfriend I had before Kohl. Kohl kind of treated sex like some mechanical act he

was rehearsing for to prepare for his eventual reincarnation as an android.

He barely kissed me, or at least not with his tongue, and I don't really think my pleasure was much of a priority for him. I stopped being really turned on by him within a few weeks of our on-off relationship. He was sweet and attentive most of the time, and I could make myself come without his involvement anyway, so I just kind of made the best of it in the hopes it would get the feel of Micah off my skin.

With him, well, let's just say there's no pleasure to be had in submission when it's not earned nor given willingly. Sex Micah-style is no longer about dominance and submission for mutual pleasure, but about control. Force. Power.

And I never want to experience anything like that again.

But dammit, I do yearn to experience submission once again—with someone safe. Surely that can't be a dominant socially invasive man like Grey... can it?

I mean, I would say no, but I'm so turned on by him that I really think I'm gonna need to invest in a wet floor sign to carry around with me for the duration of my vacation.

Hell, as I glance around at the tall reeds, I'm half tempted to pull down my shorts and beg him to fuck me right here.

To fuck the feeling of Micah right out of my body. Hopefully for good.

This isn't really like me. My therapist told me I'm a demi-sexual, unable to feel pleasure during sex unless I feel something really strongly for someone.

And I certainly don't feel that with Grey... do I? How could I? I hardly know the man. Plus, we can barely be in each other's company for more than five minutes without wanting to drain each other of blood.

And yet, my *neglected-to-the-point-of-dormant* pussy is practically having its own hot-tub party down there with the pulse setting on extra high.

Grey doesn't move, doesn't flinch, doesn't fidget the way I can't help but do as he watches me, waiting to see what I'll do, whether I'll obey his command and open my mouth *like a good girl*.

I have no idea myself. I'm torn between two opposing reactions: chewing him out for speaking to me in such a lewd manner, and... ripping my own clothes off and jumping on top of him, begging him to ride me in front of the handful of people slowly ambling down the beach in the peachy glow of the setting sun.

Perhaps something reasonable between the two poles, Indie, I advise myself before taking a breath and slowly opening my mouth for him if for no other reason than my frozen statue routine has to come to an end at some point.

And because I want to see what he does when I obey his command. I want to track the angular lines of his stunning face for twitches he can't control. I want to see if his eyes widen, if his neck flushes, if his lips curve, if he groans...

I want to hold my gaze as his meets it.

I want to undo the last year of my life.

I wasn't expecting to hear a sound, but if I'm not mistaken, the frail ghost of a raspy moan escapes his throat as he watches my concession—a gesture of submission I'd have thought about as likely as me climbing naked up the Washington Monument.

Even this second as my lips are parting wide beneath the fervid gaze tracking them, I hate that I'm doing it...

And I like it...

No. I love it.

I feel turned on, really turned on, in the presence of a man for the first time in what must be over a year. I mean, tingles, rainbows and angel song galore.

I thought that side of me was permanently dormant, yet standing on a quiet path just above a beach in the waning sun in front of Washington's most coveted men, I suddenly

remember the pleasure of submission I felt with my first boyfriend.

And I don't want the feeling to stop.

“Wider,” he orders and dear God, if the percussion section of a symphony orchestra didn't just throw away their instruments and use my clit instead.

I stare at him moodily just out of respect for my own self-worth as a woman, wondering if he wants to humiliate me, or whether, as his face would indicate, he's motivated by the same mixture of curiosity and arousal as I am.

As I give in to the latter, my lips part further as Grey inspects the hole, his chest rising and falling a little faster than before.

His lustful eyes lift from my parted lips as he reaches into one of the bags and pulls out a chickpea fry—one thing I'll always be grateful to him for introducing me to, if nothing else.

He slowly brings it to my lips, watching my eyes as he inserts it into my mouth—just the tip of it at first, then more, and more until it hits my tongue and I bite down. As I swallow it, he inserts the rest and I chomp down on it as he watches me eat, unable to take his gaze off my face.

The entire exercise would feel utterly ridiculous if it weren't for the serious undercurrent of growly, borderline menacing energy he's exhibiting and how serious his expression is, as if he's doing research for some top-secret governmental project that will decide whether humankind survives till the end of the year.

As I swallow once again, his eyes fall fast to my throat which he contemplates for a moment before reaching for another fry to feed me. This time I thank the heavens that my brain has made a reappearance as I wonder if I want to indulge him again. Handing over unearned submission like this is hardly something I want to do with someone I don't even like that much, hot tamale or not.

“Is this another weird kink of yours?” I ask as he lifts it to my mouth.

“I’m not sure,” he replies, his expression earnest. He regards me most sternly, as if a teacher telling off a disobedient student. “If it is, as I told you, it will be one of many,” he adds, and I know he must have heard that sharp inhale of air I couldn’t help but take at his words.

There’s not a bit of me surprised that he’s a kinky bastard. I mean, let’s face it, he’s a dominant, uptight alphahole with no boundaries and a stick lodged so high up his clenched ass that it’s probably massaging his diaphragm.

I already know based on his objectionable and emotionally stunted personality that he’s gonna be a walking sex shop of weird kinks, but to have him insinuate it out loud with an unashamed hiss falling from his stupidly enticing lips is another matter... not least because I suddenly wish I knew what every single one of these kinks were.

God, Indie, hold it together, for Pete’s sake...

I stare at him boldly as I eat the fry in some vague attempt to pretend I haven’t lost power in this exchange, while trying to ignore the body-consuming buzz that radiates through me the moment that I swallow, a movement of the throat supervised by his keen eyes.

Only this time, as I finish, his thumb dares to wander to my lips which he studies most intently, as it grazes from side to side, wiping the salt from them.

I feel my nipples harden into swollen bee stings under my flimsy top as his thumb catches a slip of saliva inside my mouth and strains against my lip, as if wanting to push inside.

The sudden vision of all the wooden and stone statues of female deities our yoga teacher had dotted around the Shala this week while talking about the sacred feminine make me want to hang my head in shame because I’ve never felt such a desperate need to suck before. I keep expecting the thumb to push inside and imagining my lips curving around it and my tongue running up and down as I begin to suck. I mean I

suspect I'd suck as strongly as if I'd been unceremoniously kicked out of a spaceship onto the moon and his thumb is the only oxygen delivery device on the big old rock.

His thumb... or another body part, of course.

God, *don't even think about that*, I warn myself, wondering how hard it is, how big, whether it's cut, whether it's as deviant in its tastes as that stare of his is.

But at the sight of his bicep tensing, a sudden intrusive wave of rational thought whacks me square in the face and wakes me up, as if God has decided to spare what's left of my inner goddess's self-respect and allowed a split-second hit of blood to rush back up to my brain.

And I recall the excitement I felt this time last week as Fran, Rami and I prepared to set off for the divine female-worshipping retreat, and the vow of chastity which a few days ago I uttered with utmost conviction, declaring my body a no-dick zone until the very last Savasana of the retreat... and if I'm not mistaken, with three classes a day, I have three more of those to go.

But, who's counting?

The vow isn't the only problem. Unless God decides to beat him about the face with the enlightenment stick in the next week, I'm still dealing with an ex for whom my pain is oxygen. Still dealing with text messages from hidden numbers with no metadata attached. Silent voicemails. Heinous words uttered which crawl under my skin and fester there, leaving me plagued with anxiety attacks that I have to hide from everyone in order not to spare them more shit.

Plus, Grey and I aren't friends. We're not lovers. We're not boyfriend and girlfriend. We're not *anything*. I don't even know if we like each other. For all I know, this sense of safety I have around him is nothing more than an illusion and I'm some deer skipping along in the woods, not realizing she's being stalked from the shadows.

In a moment of clarity which cranks down the heat on my loins that this man seems to ignite, I clamp my lips shut,

stopping his thumb from entering my mouth as I return the same unflinching eye contact that he's shooting at me like a flaming arrow.

He withdraws his thumb quickly, leaving a tingling spark of electricity and a hit of longing in its wake, and watches me, his expression frankly unreadable amidst the blazing kinetic heat pulsing between us. I swear to God, this may be the most indecipherable man I've ever encountered.

He finally drops his eyes and turns, handing me my own paper bag as we walk down the path. Only I don't eat anymore, and neither does he. My appetite has been curtailed by what just happened, and how quickly I felt willing to obey his rather ungentlemanly orders.

A full-body cringe seizes my little self as I stumble along the path, my flip-flops catching a rock and almost leaving me face-planting into the dirt just to add insult to injury.

Only he catches me, his grip firm, his strength unmistakable as he pivots back to standing.

I lift my chin, groaning at myself internally.

God, he probably thinks I'm some loose-limbed flake with no self-control. Another primitive weakling whose clothes magically fall off whenever he looks at her like every other woman.

I don't want him thinking that...

I'm not like that.

Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I'm... starting to blame him at this point.

And God.

And the universe in general.

And hormones obviously.

Greyson "the libido whisperer" Everitt is a test of will that no heterosexual woman should be subjected to without at least a year of training beforehand. The man just does something to my pleasure centers which should not be legal. In fact, after

my massage, I may look online to see if there's a hotline to report such a walking threat to female bodily sanity. From what I can tell, he's a one-man sanity-hazard.

I shake out the ridiculous thought once more as we walk in silence towards Gwyn's house, the sun, awash in magenta hues, now sliding low in the darkening sky as the leafy tips of branches of short trees skim our arms until we make it to the slim thicket of trees that envelop the houses in this complex.

The silence is simultaneously extremely tense and ridiculously comfortable if that's possible, with Grey's hands in his pockets and his eyes watching the path as if deep in thought. In fact, he always looks like that, as if he's contemplating the darkest secrets of the universe while I'm mainly focusing on not making an ass of myself or losing my tentative hold on to my sang froid, as I've been known to do around presumptuous assholes who think they're superior to me because of their body parts.

Or at least, I used to. In the last couple of months of our relationship, the fear consuming me when I was with Micah transformed me into someone neither I nor my friends recognized—someone walking on eggshells, constantly careful about what she did and didn't say, wondering if I should speak up about something or not.

I became someone so different to everything I was before knowing him.

I can't wait until he finally leaves me alone so that I can get back to being fearless like I once felt. To feeling free. To feeling as if I could fly instead of wanting to crawl into some hole in the earth and hide until the monster stops trying to find me.

Grey leads us down the path deftly, tilting his head in my direction from time to time when I lag behind him for a few seconds, waiting until I catch up. Our arms skim each other's at moments, which of course just has to feel like a billion volts of lightning singeing my body, and which seems to make his step falter momentarily—or maybe just mine. I can't tell, for

my extrasensory awareness of this man seems to be blighting my senses.

As we walk up the paved pathway towards Gwyn's back gate, I stare at a white sign she's stuck over the post, hoping it doesn't say what I think it says.

"Fuck," I mutter as I read the first line.

**Closed for today. Text me to make an appointment.
Namaste. Gwyn.**

"Dammit."

I turn quickly so that she doesn't feel bothered by people lurking at her gate.

"I can find you a massage therapist," Greyson says as we walk back down the path and head towards our adjacent houses.

"No, thank you. Forget it," I sigh, deciding to take a warm bath instead to soothe the tension coiling itself so considerately around my body.

Indigo

“Thanks for walking me back,” I say, hiding my irritation at the fact that he walked me all the way back to the door when I told him he could let me go at the end of the driveway.

I mean, it’s very sweet of him, but I’m realizing that I don’t like the sudden bodyguard aspect to the way he deals with me. I don’t know him well enough to allow him to be protective over me, plus I hate feeling like I’m some fragile thing that needs to be watched over. I’m not weak or in need of being rescued. In fact, I’ve never had that kind of dynamic with a man before, and I don’t like how vulnerable it makes me feel, as if he doesn’t trust in my own strength.

As if danger is lurking around every corner and he can see it but I can’t.

I slot my key into the door before turning to look up at him. “Thank you.”

“I want to massage your body.”

My lips, now taking on a life of their own because of this mysterious Greyson magic I’ve been exposed to, separate against their will as a whisper tumbles out from between them. “What?”

“I want to massage you, Indigo.”

“Is that some euphemism?” I scoff.

“No,” he replies sternly. “It’s not. I want to get the tension out of your body. In fact, I need to. Seeing as you’re on a retreat to celebrate your womanhood, I think it’s fitting to have a man serve you. It’s not a role I usually take on with women, but I would like to make a concession... just this once.”

Swallowing hard, I contemplate pinching myself to see if I’m actually in a deep sleep. I mean, who talks like that?

Plus, we haven’t even kissed yet, for fuck’s sake. Why would I let him slide his large, strong, incredibly sexy hands, snaked with veins along my stupidly quivering flesh...

“Well, sorry,” I stammer, “but I’m not in the habit of letting random men rub their hands up and down my body.”

Though as I say it, I feel quite sure that every hungry cell in my rigid body is cursing me to the high heavens for being such a pleasure-depriving fuckwad towards it, and while I wait for him to respond, all I can think about is the firm stroke of his hands up and down my back and how desperately I want him to work the painful knots out of my tightly wound body.

But I can’t...

I don’t know him that well.

I’d be alone in there.

Vulnerable.

It’s too reckless.

Dangerous, maybe?

The second I said “*random men*”, his face hardened into granite, as if the words were an insult.

I guess they were a bit below the belt. I do kind of know him, after all, but I have to stand my ground no matter how much the part of my inner goddess that never got on board with the whole chastity vow in the first place, is verbally flogging me for not allowing a man such as this to give me some urgently needed bodily therapy.

“Look, sorry. I appreciate the offer but I’m gonna have to say no.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Or at least, you would if you were a woman.”

“You feel unsafe around me?”

I shake my head, realizing that in reality, I don’t. “No. It’s not that. It’s just... it’s for the best.”

“Your body looks tense, Indie. You shouldn’t have to inhabit a body in which you feel uncomfortable.”

“I am tense! You make me tense!”

“Fine. If it’s my fault, I should remedy that.”

“Look, I already told you I’m on this divine feminine retreat thing. I’ve taken a vow of chastity, if you can wrap your emotionally stunted male brain around that concept.”

His tall frame stiffens as he leans into me, eyes severe but bearing a shimmering glint in the moonlight.

“I’m not offering to have sex with you, Indigo. Apart from the fact that I don’t believe that you’ve earned that right yet, and when it does happen”—he narrows his moody eyes at me most unapologetically—“it will be because you have *begged* for me, and for no other reason”—my mouth pops open as I try to control my breathing—“I respect the vow you made, and your boundaries. I want to give your body pleasure. That’s all.”

Still struck dumb by the “you’re going to beg me” remark that’s rattling around my increasingly primitive brain, I take a ridiculously long moment to speak while acutely aware that there is no way in hell he can’t see the flush of pink spreading across my cheeks. Hell, you can probably spot it from space at this point. A sort of bright red libido signpost that his intelligent eyes are wandering over.

I clear my throat, making his lips curve up just a little at the corners. “Um... Thanks for that PSA, but I...”

God Indie, I'll slap you if you say no, I hear from my aching innards.

“You’ve had a rough time of it. You’re clearly stressed. I want to do something about it.”

His words are like the snap of an elastic band on my skin. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like... some problem case. Some thing that needs repairing. We all go through shit in life. I’m not some fragile little doll. I don’t want to be treated like some trauma victim just because you overheard that conversation. You don’t have to tiptoe around me, or offer to fix me. I honestly preferred it when you were an asshole.”

“He hasn’t retired,” he deadpans, and I can’t stop myself from cracking into a grin.

“You know what I mean,” I finally say, collecting myself.

“Open the door, Indie. Let me in.”

“Did you hear—?”

His hypnotizing glare stops my sentence short, as I try to stay angry and not give in to the desperation I feel to know what it’s like to be massaged by Greyson fucking Everitt.

My body hums in anticipation of his touch, almost humming loud enough to drown out my ego which wants me to send him away.

Barely realizing I’m doing it, I push the door open... a little... and then wider.

But before I let him in, I decide to get something straight again. “I don’t like charity, so don’t speak to me as if I’m some problem case. I don’t like it. Just speak to me as you would have done normally.”

“You’re repeating yourself, Indie.”

“Well, I just like to hammer things home ad nauseum until people are ready to throw me into the sea.”

As I say the word, I recall the pull of his hands as he rescued me from those cold tumbling waves the other day, and my little speech suddenly seems ridiculous.

Despite the vague note of amusement playing on his lips, he bows his head and I find myself opening the door wide and stepping inside, holding it open for him, then closing and locking it behind him.

After Micah, letting Kohl into my place and locking the door behind me felt like caging myself in with a wild animal, no matter how civilized and gentle he was. I glance up at Grey quickly, wondering what animal I'm encaged with before placing my key on the countertop of the open-plan kitchen near the door we came through.

Fran and Rami have at least one key between them so they can get in. I contemplate texting them to warn them Grey is in the house, but knowing Rami she'll hot-foot it in here to chaperone or something. I love how protective she is of her friends, not in small part because her experiences in a highly patriarchal family were less than pleasant from what she told me, leading to her distrust of dominant men, but I'll spare him that particular sideshow for now.

I turn on a light, lowering the dimmer so that it's not too bright and head to the sink and pull two glasses from the rack before filling them with the filtered water from the faucet. I hand him one and watch him over the rim of mine as we both drink until the short glass is empty.

"More?" I ask as he places his glass down onto the obsidian soapstone countertop threaded with streaks of white.

He shakes his head slowly, his eyes fixed to me as if I'm the only thing in this house, as if an animal unable to take its eyes off its prey, as if he barely cares what the rest of the place even looks like... unless, he had a hand in arranging this place, something I've forgotten to ask him and am not sure I want to know the answer to.

"I'll need some oil," he says. "To massage you properly."

Holy crap, the way he says it... So clinical. So... demanding. I keep waiting for fear to kick in like it usually does when I'm alone around men, but instead, all I feel is the good type of jittery at the thought of him touching me. Inviting strange men into my house is really not my style. Frannie is a lot more free-spirited in that department. Even before the trauma with Micah, I couldn't sleep with men I didn't know well. I saw about three different therapists to try to solve the problem before giving up.

I wonder for a second if I brought massage oil with me to the island, but I don't think I did, so I reach into a frosted-glass cupboard for a white bowl and pull it out. I grab some olive oil, pouring two inches into the bowl before taking my purse from the countertop and reaching inside for a bottle of lemongrass essential oil that I brought with me to repel the numerous mosquitos and other bugs that are in heaven on this marshy island. I drop five droplets in and swirl it around with my finger, inhaling the lemony scent laced with hints of warm ginger.

I spot Grey watching my hands before he takes the bowl from me and it suddenly hits me that I have no idea where he's going to massage me. No way in hell am I inviting him up to my bedroom. I'm not *that* trusting.

Instead, I grab a large clean towel from the washing machine in the kitchen and lead him to the living room where I consider lying down on the rug.

As I turn to him, I find him looking through the glass doors onto the balcony. He unlocks and slides open the door without asking, placing the bowl onto the small wicker table before reaching up for the tie keeping the thin red drapes that surround the balcony rolled up. As I step out, the warm July air stroking my skin, he unties each one deftly.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he makes it to the final one on the far right, lowering it so that it forms a veil around the balustrade so that no one can see us.

"We'll do it out here," he replies, throwing the navy cushions on the double-wide lounging chair onto the wooden

deck of the balcony before pulling the chair away from the wall and folding down the top half so that it basically forms a mattress of sorts.

He stands up to face me, now bathed in dim burgundy light from the moon streaming through the translucent red curtains around us. “Tie your hair up.”

His harsh tone makes me balk, stealing my breath as I struggle momentarily to feel as if I’m in control, wondering whether using your genitals to make decisions rather than your brain is really that good an idea. “Do you mind not barking orders at me?” I retort with a smile. “I’m not one of your mindless—”

I restrain myself from saying the words “subs” like I want to. It’s not like we need any more sexually charged vocabulary uttering tonight.

Though being some kind of superhuman, I know he knows what I was thinking...

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Indigo. Tie up your hair. Now.”

His harsh tone sends a wave of heat through my body which competes with my indignation at being ordered about, but I pull a hairband off my wrist and wrestle with my still-damp hair anyway. I’m suddenly aware of my breasts jiggling beneath my skimpy top as I draw my hair up from behind and tie it in a high ponytail which leaves the warm rose gold ends of my long wavy hair tickling the bare skin between my shoulder blades.

“Take off your clothes,” he instructs and my heart goes from a tense jog to a full-blown sprint for its life.

“What?”

“Your outer clothes,” he clarifies, his tone so measured that you’d think he were giving his accountant instructions on how best to screw over the government during tax season.

“Well... turn around, then,” I say to the glistening of his eyes.

Dammit, this man has the most piercingly intelligent eyes I've ever seen. If you told me he had x-ray vision and could see into your soul, I might just believe you.

"I've already seen your body at the pool. And I'm about to see it again. Up close."

"I don't care," I snap, channeling my ungrateful little brat in the hopes of not melting into a puddle of raspberry jam before him. "I'm not performing some sordid striptease for you. Now turn around. *Please.*"

Amusement floats around his pale eyes for a moment until he turns around, allowing me to slide my shorts down my legs, followed by my strappy tie-dyed T-shirt, both of which I attempt to fold before giving up due to sudden untamable hand tremors and just general clumsiness, and place on the wicker table.

I take a cheeky moment to scan his frame from behind—muscular and long, and his back—broad, like an upside-down triangle. I saw his ludicrously dense body when he climbed out of the pool, the armor of him slick with water dripping down hard muscle which has clearly spent way too much time at the gym.

Now wearing nothing but my still-slightly damp black bralette and panties, I wrap the towel around me and climb onto the makeshift massage bed on which I watched the canopy of glistening and occasionally shooting stars last night with Fran and Rami, unaware that within twenty-four hours, one of Washington's prominent bachelors would suggest being my own personal massage slave on it.

I get on all fours before lowering myself down onto my stomach, loosening the towel from around my front and making sure it covers my back and all the way down to the knees.

"Okay," I say upon a deep breath in, my heart beginning to hammer in my chest and defeat the whole relaxation point of this. By the scrape of the bowl of oil along the wicker tabletop and the shift in weight on the thick cushion beneath me, I know that he's sitting down next to me in the darkness, the

only light being the faint tinge of moonlight, dyed red due to the drapes.

Without warning, his fingers reach for the bottom of the towel and slide it up to the top of my thighs. I feel relieved that he doesn't expose my ass, but am suddenly hyperaware of my body and its imperfections, wondering whether hair has started to grow in from when I waxed my legs last week, or whether I have any bruises from falling over while attempting crow's pose for the tenth time this week.

I mean, I shouldn't care. All bodies are beautiful. That's what I've always said... but being touched by something you usually see walking out of the sea in a cologne commercial will apparently make you self-conscious in a way you're not used to.

I tilt my head, placing my clammy cheek on the top of my hand, as I suck in a sharp breath at the first unfamiliar touch of his palm on my leg.

His hand is so large that it envelops the entire back of my thigh, his fingers curving around the inside of my leg as he slides oil up and down so firmly that I swear I can feel this touch recalibrate every cell in my body.

As his warm hand makes it past the inner crook of my knee and down my calf, I close my eyes as knots begin to dissolve as if by the alchemy of his touch. He sweeps his hand back up, stopping at the top of my leg and gliding back down again, making my body undulate at the unfamiliar feeling of a man taking his time just to ease tension from my body.

His firm touch makes it to my ankle, but this time, he doesn't go back up, instead bending my knee and taking my foot in his hand.

I flinch to move it, but he holds it firmly in place as I pray it's still clean from the pool and the sole doesn't look discolored from my flip-flops. I mean it shouldn't; they're clean... but I've never cared this damn much about how I look to a man.

I try to ignore how unimpressed I am with the kind of thought patterns I regularly gripe about society inflicting upon women as Grey runs both thumbs up and down the sides and the top of my feet very gently, tilting them from side to side as if to inspect them.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he tilts my foot in his hands.

“You have beautiful feet, Indigo,” he responds, gently running his fingertips along the sensitive sole of them.

And if a choir of angels hadn’t just gone falsetto in unison in my chest, I’d have enough voice to tell Mr. Everitt to cut it out. But that’ll have to wait, for the compliment makes me feel like I’ve just drunk a flute of the world’s best champagne, and the kneading of his fingers on my tired yoga-worn feet unravels the aching binds therein after hours of Sun Salutation poses I’ve pretzeled my way through this week.

“My nail polish is chipped,” I say, as if to excuse myself.

“It suits you,” he replies, running his thumbs up and down the tops of my toes. “And the next time you apologize for something about your perfect little body,” he growls, “I’ll pause the massage to give you a small taste of the discipline I have planned for you.”

My eyes open wide as he works my foot, and I wonder what “discipline” means to a man bearing that lethal combination of being highly emotionally unavailable while simultaneously one of the hottest pieces of ass to ever grace the East Coast... and why, after everything I went through with my ex, I’m even curious to know.

He places my foot down and shifts his weight to between my feet at the end of the bed, taking hold of my other foot and beginning to tend to it. It feels tiny as he holds it in his giant hands, gently caressing it at first before working it with his thumbs more persistently, the sole, the ball, the front pad, even my toes, as if kneading away the tension I’ve stored there since running away that first time my ex’s degenerate cousin approached me in a car after I left him those months back. I

feel like I've been running ever since, even in the weeks he went silent and I'd hoped it was over.

I relish the sensation until Grey shifts again, kneeling between my lower legs and grabbing both ankles from the top.

I whimper without meaning to as he slowly parts my thighs, gliding his warm palms up my leg, an inch per second, the flesh melting beneath his touch like butter under a warm knife. His hands move up the inner seam of both thighs at the same time, and I swear to God, despite him stopping inches from the gusset of my panties, now thoroughly drenched not only from the swimming pool but from the arousal he's inflicting upon me, the anticipation of his fingertips suddenly makes me want to beg...

His fingertips skim the flesh below my ass cheeks and he pauses there, a low sound rasping in his throat, before he finally lifts his weight, straddling one of my legs and then the other, pushing mine together and sitting his weight down onto the back of my thighs. He pulls the towel off me swiftly and throws it onto a chair nearby as my body seizes again and I pivot my neck to look up at him.

Before I can find his eyes, he grabs my ponytail, pulling my hair back and leaning forwards.

I can't help but whimper as his lips meet my ear.

"What are you doing?" I murmur, aware of the hard weight of his erection lying on top of my ass cheeks. I guess that's one way to answer my question about whether he's as aroused as I am...

The brush of his lips against the shell of my ear coupled with his warm breath makes my body dissolve into what suddenly feels like a squishy blob with the bones taken out. "I'm massaging you, Indigo."

"I know, but..." I stop speaking as one of his hands keeps a firm grip on my ponytail, forcing my neck to crank backwards as his other sweeps up the flesh of my lower back.

"But, what?"

"You heard what I said," I reply. "About the vow."

“I did.” His hand ventures further. “And I believe I made it clear to you that you haven’t yet done enough to earn my cock.” I suppress a gasp at the deviant words, hoping that when he leans back he won’t see the gloss pooling in the gusset of my panties in the dim light. My clit hasn’t throbbed this much in God knows how long, and it’s all I can do to stop myself from pressing my fingers to it to relieve the torture he’s subjecting me to. “I’ll need to observe how willing you are to submit to me before you’ll get access to it.”

I close my eyes to hide the embarrassment I feel at his words, so sinful and yet spoken in such deep, comforting, cavernous tones.

His fingers edge to the clasp of my bra and as he flicks at it, it loosens, the sides falling around my ribs.

“Now,” he whispers in a hushed rasp. “Will you let me do my job or do I stop?”

I have to pinch myself for a minute. How in all holy heaven did I end up with a huge slab of hard muscle on top of me, pinning me to the cushion below? And why do I feel more thrilled than afraid, especially in light of recent events?

As his hot palm rests upon the center of my back and his fingers spread wide, covering most of its breadth, I know full well I don’t want him to stop kneading the tough, sinewy binds out of my rigid body.

I don’t want to lose the touch of his strong hands. I want to trust that I can be with a man like this and feel safe.

“Well?” he asks.

“Don’t stop.”

“Good girl,” he whispers and I’m fairly sure my pussy’s vibrate setting just cranked up to hyperspeed in response. “Take it off.”

“What?”

He slides the strap of my bra off one shoulder. “Take it off, Indigo. Let me do this properly.”

I hesitate for a moment before sliding my hands underneath my chest and reaching for the straps which I pull up my arms. He lifts his weight a little, and I ease my hands through the loops, aware of my breasts falling out as I drop my bra onto the chair nearby and smush myself back down onto the long cushion.

“Good girl,” he utters again, and I realize he’s gonna have to stop saying that pronto before I have to say *au revoir* to every ounce of my flagging self-control.

He lets go of my ponytail and sits back down onto the back of my legs, his erection still hard as stone and if I’m not mistaken... big. Heavy.

I know what it is. God has sent it to test me. I mean, the *one freaking time* in my life I take a vow of chastity just has to be the one time I get delivered a throbbing hard dick attached to one of the hottest, moodiest and glariest assholes I’ve ever encountered.

Hairs crest on my skin as his fingers reach for the strap of my watch, unbuckling it deftly and placing it onto the side table.

It’s not sexual, it’s definitely not sexual, I repeat to myself in a moment of self-aware self-delusion as he dips his fingers into the bowl of citronella-laced oil once more, dripping some onto my back before running his palms upwards towards my neck, the cool fragrant oil leaving tingling tracks behind which are warmed by the heat of his hands.

His fingers spread out to my shoulders which he kneads over and over as if to unstiffen them. I’ve always held tension there, always been told I hunch them too much, and as he works them, I try consciously to relax, to block out today, to block out thoughts of Micah who would probably murder me if he saw me as much as look at another man, let alone be touched by one.

Screw him.

He’s taken enough from me.

Not to mention that after we split up, he was immediately back to working his way through half of the wealthy suburb of Washington where he lives. Good for him, but he won't keep me in a cage forever.

I keep my eyes tightly closed, enjoying Grey's delicious weight on the back of my legs, enjoying the squeeze of my muscles, tiny compared to the moving sculpture of his. As his fingers wind around the front of my throat, he squeezes a little, making a high-pitched noise escape from it before I can stop it.

He leans over me, tilting my head to the side so that his mouth hovers over my ear. "Do you like that?" I don't answer, only for him to squeeze a little tighter, my body now burning from the inside out. "Do you?"

"Yes."

"Louder."

"Yes."

"Good."

He removes his fingers from my neck, watching the side of my face as he sweeps his hands down the back of my arms, past my elbows, his fingers sinking into my palms lying face-up which he rubs firmly backwards and forwards over and over before intertwining his fingers with mine. He rubs the sides of them, blanketing my entire hand with his as his fingers bend into the crooks of mine and he holds my hands tightly, pressing his fingers into the top of my hand.

There's something so intimate about holding someone's hands, the fingers interlaced. Kohl basically held my hand as if he were my cousin or something, and with Micah, he'd make me flinch when he grabbed it. There was nothing pleasurable about it by the end.

But the way Greyson's hands dominate mine, holding them down, enveloping them most assertively makes my whole body unwind. As electricity zig-zags up my skin, he unfurls his grip and I get ready for the massage to be over.

But instead, he trails his right hand around the side of my waist and underneath my torso, his fingers exploring the skin of my belly, drifting close to the top of my panties.

As they skim the top of the black elastic, I wriggle a little, finding the top of his wrist with my hand which I pry under me.

“Grey...”

The yearning in his deep, low voice makes my heart stop for a second. “I want to make you come, Indigo.”

“You can’t,” I utter breathlessly as my body gets ready to pelt tomatoes at me for my pleasure-blocking ways. “My vow.”

“Your vow is about worshipping the *divine feminine*, is it not? That’s what I would like to do.” A whimper evades me as his fingers slip under the band of my panties, the strength needed to stop him absent from my fingers. “It’s not often that I’m willing to become a slave for a woman’s pleasure, Indigo. In fact, it is the first time. Would you rather me leave your *inner goddess* unsatisfied?” I know the words *inner goddess* are as amusing to him now as when I first said them at the dance at Carrie’s wedding, and yet the dangerous bite to his voice is so serious, so arousing.

His fingers slip a little lower. “Would you?”

“Grey,” I whisper as they delve over the bare skin of my pubis, slipping left to right over the hairless mound.

“It’s *Greyson* to you for the rest of the night,” he whispers as my hand coils tightly around his wrist, afraid of his fingers sinking into the glossy pool of juice enveloping the wet folds of my sex. I don’t remember being aroused like this for so long. It’s as if the floodgates to pleasure town have been pried open, some dam breached.

He’s going to know.

He’s going to know what he does to me.

“Is that understood?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Say it. Say my name.”

“Greyson.”

He groans his satisfaction at hearing me say it. “Again.”

“Greyson.”

“I like the way you say it in that little voice of yours.” As his lips caress my cheek, I let out a slight moan, shuttering it the second I hear voices—some couple walking along the beach below. “Someone could hear us.”

“Good. Let them hear. Now, am I stopping or are you going to allow me to give you the pleasure I want to? To make you *come*.”

The sound of that tiny word suddenly tastes like hot fudge sauce being poured over ice cream. I think for a minute, wondering how the hell I got here, wondering if I should tell him the truth or whether I should fake it like I usually do.

“I... I can't come like that,” I confess.

He stops all movement. “What do you mean?” he asks roughly.

“I can't orgasm with men. I... I can only do it myself. Make... myself... come.”

I wilt in embarrassment as I say the words.

I mean, I *can* orgasm. Give me the Clit-Stim 3000 that Fran got me and these days, I'll float off into outer space within three minutes flat. And then again five minutes later. Showerheads will do it. That new sucky rose thing that Fran told me to get can give me an orgasm so strong that I'm fantasizing about marrying it for days afterwards.

I just can't come with men. I've never been able to, even when they would go down on me.

I don't know if it's because I tense up or, if as Rami says, the men I've been with should be imprisoned for sexual incompetence, but whatever the reason, I'm just... deficient in that department.

It doesn't mean I don't enjoy sex. I do. Or at least, I did once. I just don't come during it—that part I take care of when I'm alone.

“You can come on your own?” he asks, and I wonder why that sinkhole I keep fantasizing about is never around when you need it.

“Yes.”

“Then the problem isn't that you *can't*. It's that the men you've been with are incompetent fools. *I'm* not,” he spits out, and frankly, I feel like I could orgasm just at the vibration of his deviant words through my neck. “Now... do I stop or not?”

“You won't do anyth—”

“Let me make it very clear to you one final time. I may, if you've been a good little girl, give you access to my cock the day you drop to your knees in front of me with your mouth open... and beg for it. Not *one* day sooner.”

My eyes close tightly as I inhale a sharp breath.

“You're not just going to submit to me, Indigo. You're going to *beg* for me.”

Oh my God...

“You're going to show me which little hole of yours you want me to fuck first, and then plead with me to put you out of your misery.”

“Grey,” I whimper, my sex clenching.

“Now... do I stop?”

“No,” I reply, my clit pulsating in warm waves which spread throughout my torso. “Don't stop.”

“Say *please*, Indigo.”

“Please don't stop.”

“Good girl.” I keep my eyes tightly closed as his fingers delve all the way over my pubis and sink into a pool of juice hiding from him inside my panties.

He releases a rough groan at the slip of it against his fingertips and begins to slide his middle finger up and down the velvety folds of my pussy.

“You’re as wet as I am hard,” he whispers into my ear as I take in the sensation of the rock-hard cock, still resting on the curve of my ass. “I think that despite the attitude you give me, you have a greedy little pussy, Indigo. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whimper, barely able to even believe the conversation I’m currently having.

“Why are you so wet? Who does this to you?”

“You do,” I whisper after a moment, stopping myself from adding a perfunctory *asshole* in response to his self-evident questions.

“Good.” He trails his finger upwards towards my clit which he presses into, gliding the pad back and forth and around in circles as I pant my arousal. “I want to hear your pleasure, Indigo. Don’t hold back.”

“What if someone hears?”

“Then they hear. I’m here to protect you.”

I eject a breathy moan as his fingers delve lower, finding the entrance to my pussy which he stimulates by making circles around the opening before pushing inside, just a tiny bit.

I contemplate asking him to stop, but apart from the fact that I’m so turned on, my entire will to live has relocated south to my pussy, I wonder if I’ll ever again find myself on an enclosed balcony with a man like Greyson Everitt seemingly determined to make me climax, and, without knowing it, to take away the heinous crawling contamination of someone else that I still feel inside me.

He curves his finger underneath me and pushes in a little deeper and suddenly a second finger edges into the swollen wet entrance to me, easing its way in.

“Grey.”

“It’s Greyson to you, Indigo,” he whispers into my ear. He curves both his fingers a little, stimulating the first inch of my insides. “You’ll come harder if you allow yourself to be opened up a little. To not feel ashamed of what you’re designed for—to be penetrated. To not feel fear while something is inside you.”

I don’t know if this is breaking the chastity vow but considering that everything he’s done so far is for my pleasure, I’m going to pretend it isn’t and hope I can look my yoga master in the eyes when I walk sheepishly into the shala tomorrow.

“Deeper,” I whisper, and he stops.

“Say that again. Louder.”

“Deeper,” I repeat.

“Say *please*.”

“Please.”

He exhales a raspy breath, delving deeper inside me, stretching me out with both fingers which glide as he pushes the tight walls apart.

“You’re tensing up.”

I know.

“I want you to relax. You can’t come properly when you’re this tense. You need to open yourself up. To feel safe.”

Easier said than done...

“Relax that tight little body for me.”

What are you, a sex therapist? I restrain myself from asking as I become aware of how tightly contracted the muscles around my core are.

“That’s an order.”

I can’t help but whimper as I close my eyes and make a concerted effort to relax my muscles, picturing my pussy opening up instead of tensing the way it is now. I imagine the

waves of a gentle ocean washing over me, lapping at my skin in rhythm with Grey's warm breath on my cheek.

"More," he whispers and I analyze my body, trying to feel where I'm clenching, where I'm afraid and slowly allowing those areas to unfurl. I realize that the sensation is new to me, that I'm not used to not tensing up when touched... and despite his fingers pushing into the opening of me, I find myself slowly able to relax my body a little.

"Good girl," he whispers as if he can feel my pussy untensing around his fingers as I'm able to loosen up enough for him to curve his wrist and slowly push all the way in, further, and further, and further, until his fingertips hit my cervix. Relief floods me for the feel of him inside me instantly seems to cleanse me of the sensation of my ex, one I'm so afraid I'll feel forever.

He pulls out of me gently and begins to tend to my clit, using my own wetness to skim back and forth before grabbing my hand and pulling it down until my fingers reach the outer folds.

"Touch yourself, Indie."

"Why?"

He slides his fingers on top of mine. "Because I want to feel how you do it."

"This feels like sex therapy."

"Which you desperately need, apparently..."

I close my eyes and begin to pulse at my clit with my fingertips, blanketed as they are by his.

"Let me hear your pleasure."

I stop moving. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Without a word, he draws his hand out of my panties and turns me over, forcing me to cover my breasts with my hands. He reaches for the waistband of my panties and I stop him.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you. I intend to make you come. In fact, I intend to make you come so hard that you feel my tongue on you for the next week.” He pulls them down a little as I prop myself up onto my elbows, watching the uncovering of my body. “You can tell me to stop at any time and I’ll stop.”

Our eyes bore into each other’s as he slides my panties down my thighs, watching my face as they make it past my knees, down over my ankles, and are finally thrown onto the chair nearby.

“Take your hands away. Show me your tits,” he orders firmly and I glance down as I remove the hands covering my breasts, letting them spill out as his eyes roam over them for a suspended moment and down onto my naked pussy. “Open your legs for me, Indigo.”

I glare at him for a moment, for he knows full well he’s asking things of me that I’m not used to, but I wonder if I can afford to stay stuck like I have been...

I peer down at my body, trying to ignore the mortification I feel as my knees bend and my legs part, and upon his instruction, I spread them wider and wider until my glistening slit is lying open before him.

He plants his palms on either side of my waist and dips his head down. “You’re insanely beautiful,” he says as his mouth delves lower and a moment later, his tongue is buried deep inside me as he spears it into and out of my pussy.

“Oh, my fucking God,” I utter breathlessly as he pulls it out and lifts his eyes to mine, his upper teeth biting into my pubis as he begins to lash at my clit with the firm muscle, stroking it up and down and side to side, backwards and forwards, pressing into it with the body of his tongue before flicking it with the tip.

The way his eyes bore into mine as he does it may be the most sinful thing I’ve ever experienced. Some brushes of his tongue are fast, others slow. Sometimes it slides all the way

down to the entrance of me, sometimes it circles my clit, flicking side to side, up and down.

He watches me as his tongue delves lower, pushing into my sex just a little before withdrawing as I tremble from the sensation.

“Lie down,” he instructs. “Close your eyes. Visualize my tongue sliding inside you. That’s the only thing that exists right now.”

Upon a suspended breath, his mouth dips to my pussy again as his thumb finds my clit which it presses into, making firm circles over and over again as his tongue rails inside me hard and fast as if ravenous for the taste of me. He pushes in and out, fucking me with his strong tongue over and over as I gasp at the sensation—totally new. No man has ever done it like *that* before.

I lay my weight back fully, gripping the sides of the cushion as I let out a moan of pleasure as my pussy pulsates, aching for him to put his tongue back on my clit.

As I lose myself in the abyss of unfamiliar pleasure for several minutes, unable to stop myself from exhaling tiny moans which make him groan his arousal, the click of something draws my attention and I open my eyes only to gasp audibly, slapping my arm over my bare breasts as I see Fran and Rami behind the glass of the balcony door, peering out onto the scene.

And while I’m thanking the heavens that we kept the balcony light off and the moonlight is partly blocked out by the drapes Grey lowered around us, this could still be the most mortified I’ve ever felt, despite Fran grinning at the sight, her mouth wide open as if in gleeful shock.

Dear Lord...

Rami blinks at me slowly but a smirk creeps onto her lips as Grey, notified by my gasp, pivots around to look at them for a mere moment, before turning back around, his eyes gleaming as they hit mine before he resumes his work as if utterly

unfazed by the intrusion, so focused as he is on the job at hand.

“We’ll come back in an hour!” shouts Fran and I almost giggle at her goofy grin despite my mortification, watching them walk away and hearing the front door close somewhere in the distance.

I take a moment to get a hold of myself before looking down at Grey who peers up at me, his top teeth nestled into my pubis as if to bite as his tongue gets to work on my clit, sliding in all directions, pushing into it hard and then softer.

Our eyes lock and I pant at how unabashedly he’s licking me and how sacrilegious his glare is.

“Oh my God.”

“You’re gonna come now, Indigo. You’re gonna close your eyes and think of my tongue”—he licks slowly—“fucking your beautiful little cunt. Understood?”

I nod, lying back down and closing my eyes tightly, gripping the side of my cushion, wondering if I’m able to come like this but feeling the orgasm building—those same hot waves of pleasure that I get when I use my favorite vibrator.

My fingers find the side of his tricep and I slide them down the tense muscle as I try to relax and let the pleasure mount into one sharp point.

“Keep going,” I pant.

“Let me hear you.”

“Keep going. Please.” With that, I begin to moan gently. I can’t help it. I don’t even give a fuck if anyone’s on the beach below. All I can think of is my swollen pussy, dripping and open in front of him, and the fervent way his tongue is devouring me, as if utterly famished and desperate for me.

“Fuck,” I mutter arching my back as the crest of the wave comes towards me, my sex pulsing, my whole body alight as he works his tongue up and down my clit fast and faster.

“Don’t stop... Grey...”

“Come all over me,” he orders sternly as he pushes two fingers inside my pussy and withdraws, doing it over and over as I visualize his cock there instead while he flicks my clit side-to-side with his tongue one final time, a move which sends me over the edge.

I let out high-pitched pants, grabbing his thick brown hair roughly as I pull him into me and he continues to tend to my clit with his tongue as his fingers slide into and out of me.

“Oh, fuck...”

After what feels like forever, I open my eyes, staring at the overhanging roof of the balcony, its wooden beams unable to ground me as I float off somewhere, my body filled with tingling light and electricity as it hits me that a man has made me come for the first time. I really thought that orgasm-by-man was an urban myth. And he didn't even need any battery-operated help to accomplish it.

By the time I descend vaguely down to Earth to the hot tsunami of pleasure illuminating my cells from the inside, I begin to let go of his hair, opening my eyes to see him watching my blood-engorged pussy as he cautiously draws his fingers out.

My eyes lift to his as he kneels up between my legs, bringing his fingers up to his lips, and in a moment of diabolical mortification that makes me want to find Mr. Sinkhole again, his tongue leaves his mouth and he slowly licks the juice from the two fingers that went inside me. It's the single most embarrassing and yet devilishly erotic thing I've ever experienced, especially given the brazen way he's glaring at me as he does it.

My cheeks flush hot as he finishes, lifting his weight and planting his hands on either side of me as his eyes roam up my body, over my chest and finally meet my stupidly reverential gaze.

“Did you come, Indigo?” he asks.

I know he knows the answer. He wants to hear it.

I nod and bite my lip, wondering if I can keep giving attitude to a man attached to a tongue as talented as this one.

“Say it.”

“You made me come.”

“Good.”

And then I say words which I shouldn't as this earthy god doesn't need his ego stroked more than it is every day. “You're the only man who's ever made me come.”

His throat thickens with a low growl as I say it while tipping my hips in his direction. I really didn't mean to, but having him hover over me as I lie here naked with the most piercing smoke-hued eyes tunneling into me as if trying to reach the Earth's core and that indecent muscular body of his caging me in, makes the orgasm melt away a little, replaced by the desperate need to have this moody man fuck me.

And preferably very, very, very hard.

I run my lustful gaze down his body. I saw how lean and thick his limbs were at the pool and right now, all I can wonder is what it would feel like to have them pin me down as he enters me.

I see the ridge of his erection straining beneath his thin, loose pants. I got an idea how big it was when he was massaging me, but my fingers itch in anticipation, desperate to get a better idea of its size...

Except... the vow.

I took it and I meant it. Or at least, what's left of it once I find the necessary loopholes for tonight's escapade.

But just as importantly... I want him to respect it.

I need him to. Even if I never see him again after this week, which I know I probably won't, I want to feel safe around a man again.

Really safe.

To trust their word.

It's been too long...

He studies me for suspended moments, his arms straining as he seems to be trying to read my thoughts until a moment later, he reaches for the towel he threw onto the chair and places it onto my body.

The way he inspects me makes me feel like I should be wearing safety goggles.

“I have to do some work tomorrow,” he says, “and you have your retreat, but I’m picking you up in the evening. Six thirty. You’re going to have dinner with me, and then I intend to make you come again... while respecting your vow once more... Is that understood?”

My tongue could probably flop out of my mouth at this point, but I manage by some miracle to keep it inside.

“Okay,” I reply and his eyes widen for a moment before he pushes himself back up to standing. I sit up, wrapping the towel around my body before getting to my feet and opening the balcony door for him.

At the front door, he puts his sandals back on, sliding his phone and wallet into his pocket before turning to look at me, his brow furrowing as his eyes wander studiously over my face.

“Goodnight, Indigo.”

“Goodnight, Greyson.”

As I close the door behind me, leaning my back into the wood and closing my eyes, I wonder what in all holy hell just happened... and whether I’m beginning to skate too close to the edge...

Greyson

“I want him taking that plea, Hunter. I’m calling in a favor here.”

“Hey, we’re trying,” replies the assistant district attorney, and my friend, a man I intend to bug the hell out of until that piece of shit ex of hers is doing a long stretch in prison. “He’s refusing to bite.”

“He’s harassing her from in there. Making calls. Getting some family members to text her abuse.”

He sighs out audibly. “We know how he operates, Grey. He’s doing it to several of his exes. The problem is getting them to testify. They’re all afraid of him. For good reason.”

“And if she did, would she get some kind of protection from the state?”

“No way in hell. She wouldn’t qualify. And if I know him, he’ll be pleading not guilty, dragging it out and making it as painful as he can for everyone. Maybe during the trial, we could station an officer on her, but it could take two years for that to happen. There’s no budget for protecting domestic violence accusers around the clock. You know that. He’s a vindictive bastard, and she’d be looking over her shoulder for two years.”

“But if she did make an official statement, could that be used to pressure him to take the plea in this assault case?”

“If all the exes came together, it would certainly provide extra incentive.”

“I’ve got a PI working on him, trying to find other victims.”

“Well, good luck. There could be ten of them. It’s irrelevant if they’re all too afraid.”

“What if we can link the text messages to his family? Could something be done about that?”

“She showed the police the messages when she made that one complaint. They’re encrypted, bouncing off servers all around the world. We’d need the FBI to trace them, but they’re not interested in exes threatening each other if no other crime has been committed. If we found the device, we could get a warrant but we can’t go searching phones randomly.”

He must hear my breath of irritation.

“Look. She could come to the police station, bring her phone and see if we can get anything off it.”

“I’ll talk to her about it,” I reply.

“And I’ll send someone down to see if he won’t accept this plea again.”

“He really messed that man up badly?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a life-altering injury. His family are trying to throw money at the victim to make the charges go away, but he’s standing firm. Brave man.”

I rub my forehead, staring at the table before me. “Thanks, Hunter.”

“You know this girl well?”

“I...” My eyes close.

No. I don’t... and yet somehow, I know her better than people I’ve known for years.

“Not well,” I reply.

“Alright. I have to go. It’s madness today.”

“Thanks,” I reply, picturing the mangled carcass of her ex in front of me. “I appreciate the time.”

As he hangs up, my eyes shift to Gideon walking down the stairs. “What did he say?” he asks, grabbing the jug of water from the table and pouring himself a glass.

“He’s gonna work on that plea,” I respond as he sits down.

“How’s he getting the messages to her?”

“She said she thinks it’s his cousin. It could be anyone. Apparently, he has money. Micah Korhonen. You heard of him?”

Gideon’s eyes narrow. “Um... No. I don’t think so.”

At the ping of my phone, my eyes slide to it in anticipation of seeing a message from her, only to receive another of the pleasantries my father has been bombarding me with today.

“You seeing her today?” asks Gideon.

I drop my elbow to the table, running my hand through my hair, contemplating what I told her last night—that I’d be picking her up to take her to dinner and later... dessert.

My body has been twitching since I got up this morning, my fingers yearning for the touch of her skin, my eyes searching for hers, my tongue aching for the taste of her.

I made myself come again before getting up, picturing that open wet pussy in front of me. Walking away from that took self-restraint I’m glad to have found out I had, but which left my cock throbbing as I walked home before jumping into the shower and pumping the cum out of it as I pictured that tight little pussy being filled up by me.

I’m desperate for her. I’m desperate to lie back and watch her ride me. I’d desperate to pin her hands to the floor and fuck her for so long that she wilts underneath me.

But since this morning, the realities of my life, my proclivities have caused a sense of unease to trickle into my body.

Pinning her down so that the only thing moving her body is my cock, I know she could handle. I already know from the way she responds to my instruction that she enjoys submission.

The issue is where she can handle my desire to bind and blindfold her, the whipping and paddling, my desire to bite into her, to cutting off her airway as I fuck her.

It's how I get pleasure—submission and control. The women I've been with before have lined up for it, but her, with the damage that's already been done to her, I don't know if I want to inflict my tastes upon her.

And it's not just about that. I'm a lot more messed up than she's even begun to realize. I saw the look in her eyes when I told her I wasn't relationship material. I know I'd end up hurting her. I can feel it.

As I contemplate the reality that the only thing a *man* like me could bring her is misery, my body grows cold as if plunged into a winter lake.

I glance up at Gideon whose keen brown eyes appraise me warmly.

“I don't know,” I reply. “I was supposed to, but...”

“But what?” he asks, taking another sip of water and placing it down onto a black ceramic coaster.

“We're not compatible, Gideon. You know that as well as I do.”

He shrugs. “It's a holiday romance, Grey. You don't have to be compatible. You don't have to take everything so fucking seriously.”

His words only amplify my frustration at how fucking out of control I feel, unable to comprehend why I care the way I do, why I hunger for her in a way I've never experienced before.

What the fuck is this dark magic?

“How about all four of us go out?” he says. “You, me, Fran and Indie? You take Indie back to her place. I'll bring Fran

back here, or vice versa.”

“You like her?” I ask. “Fran?”

He shrugs. “I don’t give a shit who rides my cock this week, Grey, as long as someone does. In fact, wasn’t it you who said those exact words to me six months ago when we were in Key West?” The asshole leans into me, knocking on the table. “Um, hello, has anyone seen my friend Greyson? Coz I’ve got no idea who the fuck this new guy is.”

“Join the club,” I respond grimly.

“Look, her chastity vow, or whatever that thing is, is over this afternoon at the end of their retreat, right? So just do what you came here to do—fuck the woman and get her out of your system. I mean, the heat between you two is practically its own weather system at this point. She’ll probably thank you at the end. Why are you even depriving the poor woman like this?”

“I…” My fists clench as I say the words. “I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Since when you have given a fuck about hurting someone?”

I stare at him flatly and he grins at the insult.

Even though he’s right.

I’m very blunt with the handful of women I’ve dated beyond the usual one-night stands I prefer, but once I inform them clearly about what my intentions are and what I can give them, I no longer take responsibility for their pain.

I don’t take pleasure in any pain they may feel. I just disconnect from it.

I’ve haven’t given a shit about a woman’s pain since I was a child, but with her, her tears do something I don’t want. They move me. As much as I ache to taste them, they instill in me a need to protect her, a need I don’t want to be burdened with. Not only that, but I’ve never particularly cared about a woman’s pleasure before, not like this, nor have I ever felt this desperation to see a woman unravel from ecstasy.

“Touché,” I respond.

“It can’t be all that bad, Grey,” he smirks. “I’ve seen the way your exes all line up to get fucked by you again.”

“That’s because I’m good, Gideon. Not because I care.”

“And you do this time? Look, I like Indie a lot, but I mean, how well do you even know her?”

“Enough to know that hurting her wouldn’t be acceptable to me.”

“What, is she more fragile than most or something?”

“No. She’s strong. I just... don’t like the idea of her pain.”

“Life is pain, friend. You told me that. Why do you care?”

I drop my head, exhaling slowly as I close my eyes, rubbing my fingers into my forehead as one of them presses into the scar hidden from view. “Maybe I need to take a step back. Just work on the issue with her ex and keep it professional.”

“Professional? You’re not colleagues, Grey. I’ve seen the moody way you two look at each other. There’s nothing professional about the hormones raging between the two of you. I’m still fucking amazed you made it out of that house without fucking her last night. You both deserve a medal for that one.”

“This isn’t helping,” I reply to Gideon’s grin before glancing at the time on my phone.

Six o’clock. Half an hour before I’m supposed to pick her up.

“So, are we doing the foursome?” Gideon asks.

“You take Fran out on her own,” I reply. “I’ll deal with Indigo.”

Indigo

“Are you sure it’s not too revealing?”

I twist my body, taking in my long peach summer dress in the mirror and the way it clings to my breasts. I’ve worn it dozens of times, but I’m suddenly self-conscious about how much of my breasts it shows, especially in light of yesterday’s skimpy outfit.

“Babe, I think he’s already got quite an eyeful,” sniggers Fran before I grab the pillow from my bed and throw it at her.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t worry about it being revealing,” deadpans Rami with twinkling eyes. “There’s not much more he could see of you without performing a colonoscopy.”

“Oh God,” I groan, sitting down and burying my head in my hands for a second as I recall the moment I opened my eyes to see them watching Grey as he recalibrated my existence with his tongue. I was too mortified this morning to respond to their ribbing as we set off for yoga. “I’m so sorry about that,” I say for the fifth time today.

“Don’t worry,” responds Rami as I grab my glass of rosé and take a stupidly large glug. “His head was blocking most of the view.”

“Fucking God,” I groan, taking another sip to try to forget as Fran stifles laughter. “I’m honestly mortified.”

“I still think he’s a conceited prick who needs to be knocked down a peg or ten, but I’m just glad you’ve met a man who knows what he’s doing for once in your life,” says Rami with a wink, leaning her muscular arm against the door frame of my room.

“Yeah, he barely skipped a beat when he saw us,” adds Fran. “Just got right back to it.”

“Don’t,” I plead in embarrassment as Fran breaks into a toothy grin, the setting sun turning her loose ginger hair into gorgeous amber flames.

“Girl, that was so fucking hot,” she adds.

“I swear to God,” I say, lowering the volume of my voice on the off chance it carries through the open window of my room and straight into Grey’s earhole in the house next door. “I’ve never had an orgasm like it.”

“So you said this morning,” smiles Fran.

“Twice,” adds Rami.

“I know,” I groan. “But honestly that man’s tongue... It could bring about world peace. Seriously, it deserves an award for service to womankind.”

“Or maybe it’s just *you* that brings out his generous side.”

“Yeah, right,” I shoot back, wondering how many women have enjoyed the talented Mr. Everitt’s tongue and how the hell a Grade A piece of prime meat like that can be single, if he is as he says he is.

Maybe it’s his objectionable personality, I ponder internally.

“He just knows he has them lining up,” I moan.

“Kind of like a firing squad,” smirks Rami, making Fran and I, who’ve both had a glass too much rosé, fall into fits of giggles.

“Yeah, well, it’s just a holiday fling,” I add. I’ve reminded myself of that fact about fifteen times today, even though the thought stupidly lets sorrow seep into my gut. “That’s why I decided to go for it. I know I’ll never see him again after this.”

“I’ll send you a new vibrator to help you recover from the loss,” drones Rami as I grin in response, polishing off the glass of rosé, which I’m drinking so fast partly to stay my nerves over Greyson who’s due to turn up in less than half an hour.

I’m taking you to dinner. And then, I’m going to make you come again.

His words cause a riot inside my body, almost blocking out the anxiety I feel over touching another man. Micah once told me that if I did, he’d kill me. Oh, that on top of him promising to cut my face up so no one would ever want me.

It's probably best it's just a holiday romance.

I wouldn't want to date anyone seriously until this mess with him is over and done with.

"Do you judge me?" I ask. "About the vow."

"You didn't have sex, did you?" asks Fran in her tight burgundy T-shirt and white ass-hugging shorts which show off her gorgeous lithe body.

"No."

"Then, fuck it. Make him your slave."

"Stop," I giggle.

"I don't know how you had that much self-control," adds Fran.

"God, neither do I. If it didn't make me look weak, I honestly would have paid him to fuck me by the end."

"Oh, he already knows you're weak," ribs Rami before inquiring, "So, are we sticking to Arlo's famous vow?"

Fran pivots to stare at me naughtily. "I thought it was over."

"Arlo said we should stick to it till we leave the island."

Fran and I glance at each other. "Yeah, fuck that," we respond, trying not to laugh at Rami's teasing unimpressed look at our complete collapse of our self-control.

"Look," I exclaim, slapping my thighs. "God's clearly sent us these specimens of manhood to test us."

"And you greedy whores have both failed," deadpans Rami, sending all three of us into laughter as she absorbs a pillow from both of us.

I glance at the little table on which my make-up and hair stuff is spread out, searching for the watch I couldn't find earlier. "Fuck."

"What?" asks Fran.

"My watch."

“Where did you last have it?”

“I...” I think back to Grey removing it from my wrist last night before sliding his meaty hands up my slim back. “Last night. I took it off during the massage.”

“Did you bring it back inside before going to bed?”

I think back to following him back inside and seeing him off. Later, I drank some juice before heading upstairs to wash the oil off my body and get into my long T-shirt ready for bed. Before that, I went back onto the balcony to bring my stuff inside and rearrange the chair.

I thought I saw my watch and brought it in...

Or did I?

I can't remember now.

It's Marilla's watch. My mom. Well, my surrogate mom. She didn't give birth to me and I met her when I was already about seventeen, but she's the woman who most feels like a mom to me. My biological mom is not exactly the maternal type, to put it very mildly.

Marilla and her wife, Orpha, gave it to me for my twenty-first birthday two years ago. It's this vintage watch from the twenties with a small gold oval watch face and thin black velvet straps that they had specially put on along with a butterfly clasp to make it easy to put on and take off.

It's not waterproof, not practical for yoga, and frankly, I barely use it seeing as I have my phone on me most of the time, but I wear it to feel close to them, especially when I go away.

I don't want to lose the thing.

“I'll check outside again,” I say. “Maybe it fell through the slats. It was dark outside.”

“Maybe you knocked it off the table when your brain floated off into space,” Rami gibes, and I laugh as I climb to my feet, grabbing my purse and following my friends downstairs as they prepare to go out—Fran with Gideon, and

Rami by herself to meet up with a couple of yogis from the yoga retreat.

After seeing my friends off, I head to the balcony and turn the light on as the sun is beginning to wane. My anxiety over Grey coming over hits me as I step out, lifting the cushions of the chair and moving the table to see if anything fell underneath it.

Nothing.

Glancing down through the slats at the sandy paving stones below the balcony, I open the little wooden door to the exterior staircase and head down in case the watch fell through them.

As I make it to the bottom, I look all around, sliding my feet left to right to see if it got covered by sand during the windy night.

A few minutes later, I decide it must be languishing back in the house somewhere, and I turn to walk up the stairs only to stop in my tracks at the sight of two cigarette butts lying just next to the thick wooden post holding the balcony up. I peer down at them, sure they weren't there yesterday or the day before when I climbed up these stairs from the beach.

I run my eyes up and down the wooden post, to see two grey spots charred into the wood, as if the cigarettes had been put out there.

While I know that it was probably some passerby taking a shortcut to the path on the other side of the house, the sight of it still makes moths flutter in my stomach, filling me with dread.

But then, I always seem to be paranoid these days...

Shuddering out a weighty breath, I kick some sand over the butts and head back up the stairs, closing the little door to the balcony before pulling the glass door closed and locking it, checking it twice before heading back into the kitchen at the sound of my phone beeping.

**I'm running a little late. I'll let you know when I leave.
Grey.**

Well, if you're playing hard to get, I'm not impressed, I think about typing, but instead opt for:

No worries.

And then add a smiley face before deleting it promptly.

It's not lost on me how I yielded to him last night. I mean, I do know it was all about my pleasure not his, but still, the sass I like to subject him to flew off into the sunset about the same time my panties came off, and even though he didn't fuck me, I felt the need to submit to him.

I wanted to.

I wanted to experience that kind of pleasure again. It's not every man that makes you want to submit. If they're aggressive or dishonorable or abusive or if you really feel unsafe and disconnected, no way in hell do you want that.

Or at least, I don't.

But with him, I felt turned on and safe.

And while I can handle submitting in bed, that won't be trickling into any other part of our dynamic. I'll be giving him the same attitude I did before, talented tongue or not.

I sigh out, grabbing a glass of water and drinking half of it down to sober up a bit. I'm psychoanalyzing a relationship which I know won't even exist after I leave the island.

I need to get a hold of myself and pronto, especially seeing as he's had all day to work and the fact that he's going to be late now wouldn't suggest that I'm that much of a priority for him.

Hell, for all I know, he had another woman with him today. They certainly stare enough at him around here. Frankly, I'm amazed his head even fits through doorways at this point in his life.

I go to the toilet, brush my teeth again, check my make-up and tie my hair up in a bun, glancing down at my cleavage to reassure myself it's not indecent.

Marilla would be telling me I look like a goddess about now, but the beautiful words she has spoken to me for the last seven years since we met volunteering at that dog shelter in Noma barely drown out the words my biological mother began to speak to me after I turned ten and began to develop.

Whore was a common one.

Slut, another.

I had a crush on a boy called Stuart when I was fourteen—stupid, innocent stuff involving holding hands and kissing with tongues for the first time. I made the mistake of writing *I heart Stuart* on a piece of paper that she saw which led to an hour-long tirade involving her screaming at me that I was a slut.

If only she knew what the other girls at my school were doing, saying and thinking, way earlier than me, for the most part.

Only I doubt she'd have cared. I am the source of her eternal jealousy, rage and irritation, with nothing I've ever done being acceptable to her, and even now that I've gone no contact because I couldn't take the pain anymore, I still hear her words in my head.

I know when I tell Orpha and Marilla about my balcony adventures, they'll be in fits of hysterics. So will Harry, Marilla's brother who lives with them on their little farm near Loch Fyne in Scotland where Marilla is from.

But if my biological mother ever found out about it, she'd snarl every name under the sun at me—the kind of names my ex now calls me. Sometimes I wonder if they weren't cut from the same cloth as the way they talk to me is so similar...

I just want one day to wake up and not hear the words of evil or sick people in my head.

I flutter about the apartment for a few minutes, heading to the fridge, to the mirror, fiddling nervously with my phone and then drawing the thick translucent curtains across the balcony doors just to have something to do with my anxiety-filled body.

Only this is a different type of anxiety than the one I've had of late. It's not one filled with dread and this fear of endless blackness, this fear that I'll never get completely free of him.

It's one that makes my feet lift off the ground, that makes little explosions of light set off in my body, that makes my fingers yearn to touch him and my tongue to taste his body...

The darkness only seeps in when I think of the end of our vacation and the thud back down to reality; the reality of the absence of him.

"I've heard of holiday romances addling your brain, but this is ridiculous," I mutter under my breath as the last of the sunlight dissipates bathing the room in a mix of warm shadows.

The neon light of my phone tells me it's getting close to seven o'clock, and frankly, if he hadn't given me an orgasm so mind-blowing last night that he's probably ruined every battery-operated boyfriend known to womankind for me, I'd be getting ready to chew him out and slam the door in his face for sheer rudeness.

If he even turns up, that is.

Maybe he decided last night was enough for him.

As I glance at the clock on the wall and see that he's over twenty minutes late, the ire of indignation has me grappling for my phone as I begin to type with shaky hands.

Greyson

I stand just behind the balcony door, watching the last dregs of light disappear, turning this part of the Earth dark. In a while, a half-moon will appear in the inky sky.

I know from the sunset that I'm now very late.

I'm amazed she hasn't texted me to tell me to go fuck myself at this point. She'd be well within her rights to.

I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing here. I feel like I've landed in some foreign world whose rules I no longer understand.

I guess this is some pitiful attempt on my part to do the right thing. For once.

I'm not good for her. I'm not good for anyone.

Too much trauma. Too many secrets.

I am way more fucked in the head than she could ever imagine. I know just from the little I've interacted with her that's she's much more sensitive than the women I usually spend time with.

Gabriella is worldly, calculated, shrewd, poised, experienced.

Indigo is none of those things. She's a walking mess of emotions and overreactions.

Either through my need for unequivocal submission and my taste for disciplining of the rough kind, or my tendency to shut down and retreat from the world without warning, I know as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow that I will end up hurting this girl badly. The thought of her little face as I do so has haunted my vision for the last half hour.

I know I'm probably overthinking things as Gideon said. Maybe she's just after a holiday fling herself. I just don't know if that's a good idea anymore.

I intend to help her deal with her ex.

We can be friends.

That's it.

I'm not designed for women like her. I'm designed for women who engage their brains more than their hearts. Those are the only ones I can frequent in good conscience.

At the beep of my phone, I pull it out of my back pocket, seeing her name appear in my screen.

You know, if you wanted to cancel, you should have just told me.

I'd rather take that than this.

Or maybe this is all fun and games to you?

Making me wait like some low-standards simpleton?

I never took you for a coward but whatever.

I blink slowly as another message comes in fast, picturing her fingers typing her ire out frenetically.

Thank you very much for the orgasm. It was much appreciated, but as of today, you can kindly go fuck yourself.

PS. You're the world's biggest dick.

The last one makes my lips twist into a smile despite the dread settling into my belly like a stone.

Inhaling a rough breath, I head to the door, grab my keys and lock it behind me as I make my way over to explain why I made a mistake in pursuing her, while making a mental note to try to ignore the hunger I feel pulling at my body—the need to lift her up, to carry her silently up the stairs, the need to touch her, to taste her.

To fuck the living daylights out of her.

As I trudge along the dark path, illuminated only by shards of moonlight that break through the canopies of live oaks, I vow to stay strong when I see her face.

What I don't expect, as I approach her door, is to hear the gut-wrenching scream.

Greyson

It happens before I can even process it, the energy of wrath taking hold of my body at the blur of frantic movement spilling from the side of the house as I see a man run in the direction of the woods behind us.

Without even knowing why, I take off after him, my legs propelling me faster than I've ever run as I follow him into the thicket across the lane dotted with houses enveloped by trees.

Some high-pitched groan is ripped from him as he turns briefly to see me chasing him, reaching into his pocket as I close the gap, running so hard that I barely feel the dusty earth beneath me.

As he begins to pivot as if to face me, his feet become entangled and he trips, allowing me to grab hold of his top. I see the glint of metal but don't realize I'm cut until I glance down and see the blood on my arm as I push him to the ground, straddling his body. Before I can stop myself, I do something I've never done before, nor could ever have imagined doing, but couldn't stop if ten men were dragging me from him—I headbutt him square in the nose as my left hand reaches for his right, pinning his arm to the floor.

As blood gushes from his nose, his grip on the small switch blade loosens, and I ram his hand into the ground over and over, the blade cutting the skin of mine until he finally

drops it and I'm able to bat the thing ten or so meters away with my hand.

As he struggles underneath me, I turn to see a figure approaching, relief flooding me as I realize it's her. I cock my fist, thoroughly possessed by some vicious animal I don't recognize, and aim for the nose which I already suspect is broken, delivering one punch and then another and then another, blood now smothering my fingers as I hear a voice and a few moments later, a scream from behind us.

“Grey!”

Pinning the man's neck to the floor, I turn to see Indie running up to us, holding her phone up to her ear as she shouts words, directions to someone.

Police, I assume. In her other hand, she's holding a large kitchen knife which shakes visibly as she approaches, her eyes wide.

“Grey!”

“Are you okay?!” I shout as she gets closer, but she doesn't answer, instead speaking into the phone.

“I'll stay on the line,” she says, her voice a tremor, as I turn to look at the man, not moving but for some moans and the twisting of his neck. I take my weight off him, grabbing him by the arm as I turn him over, pulling both hands high up being his back so that they'll pull out of their fucking socket if he tries to move.

I straddle the backs of his legs, holding his hands in place as I restrain myself from doing what I want to—and that is to pummel his face into the ground until there's nothing left of it but a bloody mess.

To stain the earth with his blood.

I've never felt the desire to commit murder before.

I could do it easily.

In fact, I want to.

“Are you okay?”

“Your arm!” she exclaims, dropping to the ground beside me, her hands finding the cut. It’s not deep. I knew it hadn’t gone deep when it entered. There’s some blood trickling down my arm onto my hand which is a little more cut up, but again, nothing too deep.

“Stay back,” I order, afraid he could try to get free, though the instruction is ignored.

“Oh my God, your hand.” She touches the bloody skin as I twist my neck to lock eyes with her and see the tears streaming down her ashen face.

“Do you know him?” I ask.

“No.”

The sight of the distress swathing her innocent features doesn’t help to stay my murderous thoughts which currently feel like a tidal wave I’m powerless to stop. “EMS are on the way,” she shudders, the large kitchen knife quivering in her hand.

“Put it down, Indie.”

She puts it down behind her, inspecting my wounds with her eyes and fingers before staring down at the groaning man who curses a few times, trying to get away, but way too weak to be able to undo my hold on him.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I... I went upstairs and when I came back down to get a drink, I heard a noise, and when I turned around, he was just standing on the balcony, staring at me.”

My hands quiver as I hold the man in place, wishing I could yank his arms up so hard that I break them both to compliment his nose. “Did he try to get inside?”

“I think so. His hand was on the handle, but it was locked.”

I resist the urge to slam his face into the earth.

“As soon as I screamed, he ran down the steps. I couldn’t see him on the beach, so I looked out the front door window

and saw someone running. I... thought it was you for a minute. I was too scared to open the door at first.”

“You did the right thing.”

As the blare of some siren approaches, she stands up, running down the lane as if to find the vehicle it’s coming from.

Indigo

Greyson’s hand envelopes mine tightly as we sit in the small featureless room on the mainland, ten kilometers away. As they loaded the man into one ambulance, I and the EMT’s finally managed to persuade Grey to go to the hospital, and I sat with him as they tended to his wounds. None are deep, but the sight of the cruel jagged lines incised into his flesh feels as if I’m being cut myself.

I swear to God, I always feel the ache on my skin.

I wanted to clean the wounds, but instead watched as the nurse did, blood mixing with the gauze she used to gently wipe his golden skin. Our eyes met as she performed her clinical dance of sorts and I couldn’t help but shout at myself internally for the text messages I sent him earlier in light of the way he chased after that man as if possessed by ghouls.

Only now, all thoughts of those messages are gone, as we listen to the stubby middle-aged police officer as he holds out the man’s phone, comparing the messages I got on mine, and taking this case from what I was praying was just some clumsy attempt at opportunistic burglary to something else.

“He’s the one who sent the texts from this number.”

“But not the other one?” I ask about the second number whose texts felt altogether more insidious and sophisticated than the first.

I shouldn't really have to ask. Deep down, I know it's not sent by the same person. I can feel it.

"As soon as the judge grants the search warrant which should be in a couple of hours, we'll see if he has a second phone in his room, if he doesn't grant us permission himself."

"You know where he's staying?"

"Yeah. A motel about five kilometers from you."

"God..."

I glance at Grey whose face is hardened as it has been since he first saw the text messages.

If I hadn't still been so shaken up, I'd have died of mortification at all the times he read someone calling me a whore. Slut. Waste of life.

For a second, my mother's face floats into view. She frequently and very kindly told me she shouldn't have kept me, that she should have aborted. If I didn't know better, whoever this scumbag that my ex has paid or pressured to do this is has a hotline to her inner thoughts, especially because she was so incensed at me for leaving in the first place. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that she'd side with the man abusing her daughter, but I guess I always have this fantasy that one day she'll turn into something resembling a mother. The hollow ache of knowing that will never happen eats into me some days, leaving me so cold that I barely find the strength to locate some form of inner warmth to keep myself going.

"I want him locked up," growls Grey.

"Oh, he's going straight from the hospital to jail. I'll hand-deliver him myself."

I exhale in relief, not used to police being so amiable. I mean, I guess they do have bigger and more pressing crimes to deal with in DC than at this small police station on the southern tip of coastal Georgia.

It makes me want to move away from the city forever. I should do. I don't speak to my mother who lives there

anymore. My step-father did his own special brand of damage to me, and is her chief flying monkey and one of several people she enjoys getting to harass me so that I talk to her.

I feel trauma just at seeing his name, never mind going to visit him there. My brother and I have never been that close, not since my mother made it a point to triangulate us our entire childhoods, favoring him in every single interaction we had with her as children because he happened to be born male and that woman only wanted sons. I don't really blame him for reaping the rewards of her abuse towards me. I guess he was just trying to survive.

"And I want the link to her ex established," says Grey.

"That's gonna be trickier," replies the officer.

"Why?"

"We have an officer with him. We see texts back and forth to a number but we've dealt with these types of numbers before. They're not a number you get from a phone company. They're internet numbers, linked to accounts in foreign countries. Their calls bounce off encrypted servers. And the problem is that so far, he's staying mute on who's pulling the strings."

"My ex is really wealthy," I say, causing Grey to look in my direction for a moment. "And his family is powerful."

"I want him to talk," replies Grey, his hand wrapping tightly around mine.

"Not gonna be easy," counters the officer. "We may be able to get him on an assault charge because of the knife, but he could argue self-defense in the circumstances. It'd be tricky. And he didn't actually break in the door of your house," the officer says to me, his large dark-brown eyes brimming with the kind of compassion I didn't experience when I made my complaint about the powerful Micah in DC.

"What about his messages to the other person? Did they say anything incriminating?"

The officer looks down before speaking. "We believe the goal was... to watch you. And to *scare* you."

As the officer says the word, Grey's grip on my hand tightens so strongly that it begins to hurt. I glance at his profile, stern, rageful, his eyes locked onto the policeman.

"And they won't look into the origin?"

"We'll try, but I already know we need experts on this and there's no budget for that when there's no crime. Technically staring into someone's home, even with the messages, is not enough to bring charges."

"I guess we're supposed to wait until I get killed or something?" I suggest, breathless from exasperation.

The officer nods his head. "I hear that a lot from women in your situation. If I could change the law, I would. The reality is that without a crime, most stalkers keep getting away with it."

I nod. I already know the statistics on arrest never mind conviction.

"I spoke to my ex on the phone. He's in jail. He was careful about what he said but he did threaten to ruin the wedding I'm attending here. They'd record that, wouldn't they?"

The officer nods.

"Is that enough?"

"We'd have to link them together. If this guy thinks he'd be better off not talking, such as if your ex is paying him a lot of money, then we're at a bit of a dead end. But..." He smiles, his cocoa skin plumping on his cheeks as he sits up in his chair. "The good news is, folks... He's on parole. There was meth on him. The knife. Even if he doesn't talk, he'll be in jail for a while. He's got another three years left for breaking parole. He'll either talk or he'll be out of your hair for a while."

"Thank God," I shudder.

"He'll be back in front of a judge the second he's out of hospital."

I clutch my hand to my chest, shivering from relief.

I try to smile as he shoots me a warm, “I’ll do what I can to help, Indigo,” before leaving the room.

Feeling Grey’s eyes on me, I pivot a little to see his chest rising and falling quickly.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Why didn’t you tell me about those messages? How bad they were?”

“Because... I hate people reading them, and... I don’t like making people worry for nothing.” I sigh. “Maybe I need to rethink my strategy.”

He breathes out audibly, his uninjured hand still gripping mine with a force I’m not sure he’s really aware of. “I’ll speak to the Washington DA again tomorrow.”

“Again?”

“I spoke to him this morning.”

“What... How?”

“He’s a friend of mine.”

I frown, wondering what it takes to be friends with the DA.

“You have to make a complaint, Indie,” he says resolutely.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he threatened to kill me. To hurt my friends. If something happened—”

“I’ll speak to his other exes. We need to get this thing sorted out once and for all.”

I drop my head, wondering if I have the strength to go through what could be two or three years of waiting for this thing to even go to trial.

“I just want to move on.”

“You will. I have a lot of contacts in a lot of places. I’ll make sure the pressure and evidence against him is so

overwhelming that he gets down on his knees and begs to take a plea deal.”

Greyson

Indigo keeps her head bowed as we head back towards the house upon talking to the local two-man security team I arranged to watch her house, front and back, in the taxi on the way home... despite Indigo's vocal protests.

As I walk her up the path, I'm conscious of my hand, conscious of how much it aches to touch hers, conscious of the proximity of her body, so small, so vulnerable, so shaken up.

She reminds me so much of a woman I once knew. A woman who haunts my dreams some nights, as if some ethereal thing I can't tell if I conjured up in my own mind.

Only the handful of photos that her sister gave me in secret all those years ago, and which I've keep carefully hidden since, let me know I didn't dream the whole fucking thing up.

She *was* real, even if every minute since she left has been dedicated to erasing her.

There's something about Indigo's energy that reminds me of that woman. And I know that's another reason, as if I needed one, why I can't get close like this.

This is way too fucking personal for me now.

It already felt different to what I've known before, but to have the ghost of a woman I knew so long ago hanging over us is more than I know how to handle.

I'll help her solve this problem, but that's it. I can't get involved in any other way.

"Are your friends back?" I ask as she slips the key into the door and turns the lock.

"No," she replies, glancing at her phone. "Fran's still with Gideon and Rami's at a bar causing havoc with some of our yogi friends. They'll be back in a couple of hours, I think."

"Did you tell them?"

"No. I'll tell them when they get in tonight, or tomorrow if they get in late. Though if Rami sees them lurking around, she may decide to beat them up and then wake me up in the process."

"You did warn them," I respond and she manages a half-hearted smile. "Can I... check the rooms?" I ask. "And the doors and windows?"

"They're taking him straight to jail from the hospital, right?"

"Yeah. But... what if he's not alone? There were messages from more than one number."

"God," she shudders, peering into the dark house.

I push the door open, taking care to lock it carefully from the inside as she turns on a gentle light before we slip our shoes off. I head to the balcony, making sure it's locked before checking all the windows on the lower floor and heading upstairs without asking.

"That's my room," says Indie, following me as I enter to find stacks of clothes on chairs, a string of Tibetan prayer flags above her bed. On the table lie a row of essential oils next to a small wooden statue of a Hindu goddess I can't say I know the name of.

"It's a bit of a mess," she mutters.

"I guessed it would be," I say with a smile before checking the windows and inside the closet and then the other bedrooms and the bathroom, filled with toiletries, deodorants and sunscreen.

As I declare the house safe, I head downstairs, resisting the urge to throw her onto her bed like I want to and ravaging the stress from both of our bodies over and over and over until any vestige of fear or doubt melts away beneath the slip of our skin.

But I can't...

Even if this hadn't suddenly become more complicated, I can't do it to her. She's had enough of being messed around without adding me to the mix. I'm no good for a woman like her. I know that with every fiber of my being.

I'll only end up hurting her. I think she's had enough of that already. Not to mention that she'd have to navigate my world, my family. My father. And I know exactly how miserable he'll try and make her if he knows that I feel something for her...

I just can't block out the little voice telling me I'm a coward. This girl makes me feel something for the first time in a long time. And I know that if I have to feel this, I may have to face something I've not been allowed to since I was six years old, since the day that changed who I am.

A heartbeat of panic shortens my breathing.

I need to get us both out of this mess...

But as I walk towards the balcony to look out a final time, seeing the half-moon hanging low in the sky, I turn to face her... and goddamn it, those green eyes, still swollen and glistening from the tears she shed earlier, collide with me, weakening me, making me want to lick the stains of her tears from her face, to pick her up and carry her, hold her until she feels safe.

I run my gaze down her body, sheathed in a long slip of silky peach that envelops the curves I've so wanted to explore properly. The tips of her now-loose hair tickle her nipples and make me want to rip her dress off, bend her over the coffee table and fuck her brains out.

But would that be enough for her? The women I've been with before have all wanted more...

And sooner or later, the mask of civility would fall... and she'd be exposed to what I need to feel pleasure. I would need a level of submission that I know full well she won't have experienced. Her sex life would devolve to involve merciless binds and chains that kept her legs apart for my pleasure. She'd lose her autonomy in a frenzied blur of handcuffs and other restraint devices. I ache to close off her airway as I fuck her, to bite her until I hear the ecstasy of the pain she's willing to feel for my pleasure. She'd be brutalized by paddles, flogs, whips, blindfolds, straightjackets, and all manner of fucked up things even before she was expected to hand over her little holes for me to use for my pleasure.

And while the women I usually degrade don't seem to complain about it given how fervently they insist I use them for my pleasure again, she's a different species. I don't know how I can do it to her.

"Indigo, I... I should go. I'll speak to the security guys again, make sure they know exactly what to do."

She frowns. "I could make some mint tea... if you wanted to stay."

My gaze finds the floor, ambling to her bare feet—small, as if so small that they shouldn't be able to hold her up.

"I..."

But my words are halted as she takes a step towards me, her hand finding my arm. She stands up onto the tips of her toes, her eyes not leaving me as she leans up and gently kisses me on the lips. "Can you stay with me? *Please...*"

My blackened heart almost breaks at the request, and at the earnest plea in her jade eyes as she silently implores me, but before I can speak, she stands on her tiptoes again, kissing my lips gently, her breathing heavy.

I'm not used to kissing on the mouth. It's a level of intimacy I avoid... but as she exhales softly, enveloping my lower lip in hers, my body alights with warmth, my cock hardening further.

"Indigo," I manage, pulling away to look down at her.

“What?”

“What I said to you before is still true. I’m not boyfriend material. My world is far too messed up to give you the kind of relationship you need.”

She contemplates the words for a moment. “I don’t care,” she whispers. “I’m not expecting anything of you. Nothing.”

As she leans forwards again to kiss me, I reach for her dress, raising it up before lifting her up so that her legs straddle my waist and we begin to kiss.

I’m aware of how unused I am to kissing on the mouth, but as she moans gently, I can’t help but push my tongue inside the wet warmth, dominating hers, pushing it back and side to side, letting her know that I need control.

Her hands grip my shoulders tightly as I carry her to the wall, pressing her back against it as we inhale each other’s breaths, our tongues dancing, the wetness of her saliva reminding me of how wet her pussy was yesterday, how open, how desperate I felt to feed my hard cock inside the tight little hole.

I hold her ass up as I press into her, fucking her small mouth rhythmically as I gently pulse my hard erection between her legs, restraining myself from pulling her panties to the side and entering her.

As we kiss, the flutter of a high-pitched exhalation from her throat makes my fingers twitch as I consider what I want to do to her, how I wish to find her neck with my hands, how I wish to squeeze the air from her as I fuck her, only to release my grip long enough for her to gasp before starting over again.

I picture bending her over the armchair and whipping her ass with my belt until it’s red and raw, and every thrust into her makes her yelp in the most pleasurable type of pain.

And yet, as she grips me tightly, her body still quivering almost imperceptibly from the trauma we both just experienced, I realize I can’t do it.

I pull back and her eyes open as she peers up at me, waiting for me to speak.

“I’m concerned that... I’m taking advantage of you... while you’re shaken up.”

She shakes her head. “You’re not. You’re helping me.” She tilts her hips into mine, rubbing her clit on the stiff ridge of my erection. “Please...”

“Indie...”

“*Please.*”

“I meant what I said. I can’t give you anything other than tonight.”

She swallows hard for a moment, her eyes glistening, before she finally whispers, “I know. I don’t care. Please.”

As our mouths collide again, I begin to slowly carry her across the room and up the stairs, taking care to balance my weight properly to ensure I don’t fall. We make it into her bedroom and I carry her in, her legs and arms wrapped around me, clinging to me as if I were a life raft as I close the door behind us in case her friends come back earlier than planned.

I place her feet down onto the floor next to her bed. The light is off and in the silvery glow of the moon, her large eyes glisten like pools of green water offset by the tips of pink hair that I want to wrap around my fist and pull her onto me by...

But I can’t... not while I still see sign upon quivering sign of trauma in her tiny body.

“Take off your clothes,” I say, an attempt to delay, to restrain myself from what I really wish to do to her.

She swallows before reaching for the bottom of her dress and lifting it all the way up and over her head. She reaches for the clasp of her white bra before undoing it, letting her ample breasts spill out and making my cock stand to attention beneath my cotton pants. She looks down at her half-naked body before looking back up, her cheeks blushing the most delectable shade of pink in the low light.

Her fingers quiver as she reaches for the waistband of her beige panties, tentatively sliding them down her toned legs and

off her perfect slim feet before throwing them onto a chair nearby.

The timid way she looks up at me, so devoid of the attitude she normally enjoys subjecting me to, makes me hard as steel, makes me want to discipline her, to obtain the submission that I need from her to be able to breathe.

Instead, I choose a milder option. “Turn around. Let me look at you.”

She drops her gaze, turning around slowly, showing me the perfect round ass I want to flog until raw, the curve of her hip, the lines of her slim waist, the gentle bounce of her breasts as the tips of her hair caress her erect nipples.

As she turns back to look at me, I remain unspeaking, unmoving, wondering what the hell is holding me back when she clearly wants me, when I told her I wasn't relationship material, that I can only give her one night. I'm not tricking her into anything... so what the fuck am I doing?

At this point, I'd have normally had her hands bound behind her back and her eyes blindfolded as I ordered her to her knees. I would have spent so long fucking her throat that she'd be gasping for air by the end of it, with saliva coating the front of her body from gagging on my cock.

What the fuck is happening to me?

But before I can speak, her hand reaches for my erection. I stop it quickly, winding my fingers around her wrist. I'm not used to being out of control and I certainly don't let women take it in the bedroom. I decide when they have earned the right to suck my cock, or be fucked by it... not them.

But as she shivers, her wide eyes pleading with mine, I find myself doing something so unnatural to me that I barely recognize the sensation. I release my grip from around her wrist and allow her hand to delve forwards, exhaling a low groan as her small palm collides with my hard cock.

She begins to pant as she slides her hand down to cup my ample sack. She watches me carefully as she begins to gently

squeeze, over and over, stimulating it until I'm ready to blow my load all over her dainty little face.

She reaches for the buckle of my belt, studying me tentatively as if I'm some wild animal that could pounce and sink my teeth into her neck at any time. She'd be right to think it, for all I want to do right now is to ravage her so brutally that she forgets everything that ever came before me.

The only time I allow women to remove my clothes is if I instruct them to when I'm in the mood, but I indulge her, breathing deeply through the discomfort as she pulls my belt out of its holder and drops it onto the chair, before reaching for the button of my pants.

My body goes rigid as I tolerate the unbidden intrusion, stiffening as she unbuttons my pants and pulls down the zip. I grab hold of my T-shirt and pull it off my body before allowing her to pull my pants down my legs, leaving me in just my briefs. I lift my feet and she removes them from me, placing them on a chair to the side as she stands back up.

She runs her gaze up my torso, taking in my tall, hard body, so abjectly different from her soft short one. She reaches for the bumps of my abdominals, her fingers exploring them as her eyes widen, inspecting my body as if it's some jewel whose existence she's just learned of. It's another intrusion I don't usually tolerate but I breathe through it, imagining the vicious ways I would like to discipline her for her audacity.

Her palms move tentatively up my stomach, slowing as she spots what I knew she would—the scars, over twenty years old now, snaking around the side of my ribs. The back is the main site of the injury, but there are scars on my ribs, my arms, even one hidden beneath my hair at the top of my forehead. Her fingers wander along one of them for a moment, not something I've ever allowed a woman to do before. The brush of her skin along the scars I never speak of causes my body to simmer in discomfort, but as I watch her panting face, her parted lips, her eyes as she takes in the webs of past pain I keep hidden, I find the strength to bear it.

A thudding heartbeat later, her eyes lift to mine and she swallows thickly as she watches my face, pain, fear and curiosity painted into hers.

Her hands climb upwards, her fingers sliding across my nipples, fanning out over my chest before she reaches up, trailing her warm hands along the curves of my shoulders and down my arms which she kneads gently, as if the muscle reassures her.

“How does it feel?” I ask.

“Hard,” she replies, her voice soft. “Strong.”

“You like it?”

She nods, moving her hands down until she reaches once again for my cock beneath the thin black fabric of my briefs. I wind my fingers around her wrist quickly, stopping the movement. The plea in her eyes has me moving her hand up and down the firm column as sharp inhales float from the throat I so wish to defile...

She wraps her fingers around the column, squeezing it tightly.

“How does it feel?” I ask.

“It’s... so big.”

“You want it inside you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you willing to beg?”

She pauses for a moment, defying me with a glare that dissolves under a thin veil of pain. As if needing me desperately, she slides her other hand into the waistband of my briefs and begins to pull them down, watching me as if unsure what I’ll do. As the cotton slides down my legs, I lift my feet, kicking them to the side as her eyes widen, a tiny gasp emerging from her enticing little throat as she looks at me.

For a moment she lifts her gaze to my face and begins to drop to her knees... without waiting for my fucking instruction to do so.

Before I can stop myself, my hands thread into her loose hair and I yank her towards me by it, cranking her neck back, my breathing rabid. She trembles as I hold her by the hair, dipping my lips to hers.

“I don’t let women take control, Indigo. That includes you.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t. It’s non-negotiable. Not to mention that I don’t know if you’ve earned the right to suck on my cock.”

“I want to,” she replies, longing thinning her voice.

“I don’t care,” I growl, inhaling her sweet breath as she whimpers. “You don’t take control like that. You wait for my instructions. And you obey them. *Always*. Every single fucking time.”

“Why?”

“Because I need it that way.”

Despite her shivering, she dares to coil her small hand around my hard shaft, making me lift her by the hair until she winces from the pain of the pull.

“Why do you need that?” she insists, knowing full well she’s testing me.

The question irks, pulling at the threads of my carefully curated existence.

“I need control, Indigo. You either accept that or you don’t get to get fucked by me.”

Her fingers run down to the root of my shaft, squeezing tightly, testing my patience in the process despite the pleasure surging through me at her tentative touch. “Doesn’t that get a bit boring?”

I tip her head backwards as she pants audibly, wanting to explain exactly how much control I need, but not wanting to subject her to the details after the day she’s had—after the *year* she’s apparently had, the details of which are becoming more disturbing by the day.

“I’m not a civilized man, Indigo. I only seem that way on the surface.”

“I don’t recall asking you to be civilized,” she responds making me shake my head in anger and frustration at the thought of the thorough lessons I want to teach her. “I want to suck. Please let me.”

My cock pulses hard in her slim hand and a hiss snakes from my throat as my balls contract, urging me to shoot my load deep inside her immobilized body.

“I don’t know if you have the right yet,” I breathe, realizing I’m concerned about how intimate an act she should perform on me, considering that once we get back to Washington, she may never see me again. “You’re not obedient enough for my tastes. Not even close.”

“Please. It will help me.”

I feel my brow furrowing as some somber note bubbles from her lips and a sudden flash of pain streaks across her breathtakingly ethereal face.

My jaw clenches at the thought of her pain, and at how much I’m desperate to know about the secrets she hides. I know she does because I hide my own, and I know she sees them in my eyes. It’s a look certain people understand.

“How? How will it help?”

She closes her eyes and when they open, I find them sheathed in a veil of tears which gather on the edge of her lower lid, threatening to spill onto her face.

“Please,” she repeats. “It will help me... to heal.”

The words send a knife into my gut, making me wonder how much she’s hiding from me.

“You’re testing my ability to remain civilized,” I respond, a deflection I’m conscious of as I teeter on some unfamiliar brink where my concern for her matches my arousal.

“I’m not asking you to remain civilized. In fact, *don’t*.”

My eyes narrow. “What do you want?”

“I want to suck on you.”

I contemplate the request, aware of the rituals I’ll be forgoing if I let her do it this easily, without the rigorous training in submission that she so clearly needs.

“Beg,” I instruct, firmly removing her hand from my cock.

Her jaw stiffens. “I don’t see why I should beg. I want to feel you in my throat... for *your* pleasure as much as mine.”

“You’ll beg because it’s a privilege to tend to my cock, Indigo. And because I require it of you. You don’t get to answer back.”

“Fine. Please help me.”

The words coupled with the fervent plea in her eyes take me aback utterly.

“How?” I respond.

She pauses. “By fucking my throat.”

My cock, standing to attention, throbs as I ache to subject her to the ritual I’ve had in mind for that insolent mouth of hers since the first day we met—the blindfold, whipping, handcuffs, feet tied, her body immobile, able to do nothing but breathe, whimper and take my cock deep down her throat over and over.

But the plea of hers unarms me, allowing to do what others could not.

“You may suck on the head,” I respond. “No more. Is that understood?”

She nods slowly and I release her hair.

“On your knees. Now.”

She drops down onto the plush mauve rug next to her bed, her breasts bouncing as her knees hit the ground, her chin lifting as her eyes do to meet mine.

Before I can give the order, she opens her mouth wide, offering me her glistening pink tongue.

“Close your mouth,” I order. “You don’t open until I order you to.”

She throws me quite the daring glower before obeying.

“Now put your hands behind your back and interlace your fingers. Don’t unlock them until I say you can.”

It’s a concession compared to the painful metal handcuffs I wish to put on her, but in the circumstances, I will tolerate it.

“You’re lucky I’m letting you see,” I say. “In exchange, you’ll look up at me. You’ll keep your eyes on me at all times. Understood?”

She bows her head, the first vague sign that she understands the tiniest thing about submission.

“Open that pretty little mouth for me. Show me the tongue that’s going to give me pleasure.”

She acquiesces, parting her perfect plump lips and holding out her pink tongue for me.

“Just the head, Indigo.”

She nods and I edge the tip of my cock downwards, groaning as it enters into contact with her tongue. I slide it from side to side before her lips, full and inviting, close around the head.

She edges her mouth a little further, moaning as she does before beginning to suck on the dome firmly, closing her eyes for a moment. Upon my low growl, she opens them, reaching for my gaze again.

She exhales pleasure as she pulls back and begins to use her tongue, licking the underside, the sides, the very tip, moaning as she tastes what I know is precum I feel leaking from me.

“Do you like the taste?” I ask.

She wraps her lips around the head, sucking on it, letting out long breaths of relief as if the sensation pacifies her. As her eyes close tightly, as if savoring the taste of me, my hands tense as I restrain them from punishing her for disobeying my

orders by grabbing her hair with both hands and fucking her mouth so roughly that she can feel me in her throat for a week; from blindfolding her so that every sense is consumed by the taste and feel of me in her mouth; from tying her to the bedposts and leaning her head over the side of the mattress so that I can fuck her throat at my leisure; from placing her into a harness, tipping her upside down as I turn her mouth into my own private fuck hole.

Stopping myself from doing what I want to her feels like torture and my fingers, itching to fist her hair, instead slide under the milky silk of her chin, lifting it a little so that she peers up as she most enthusiastically tends to the dome of my cock with her greedy little tongue as if famished for it, as if the fucking thing is bringing her back to life... or erasing something else.

She strokes the underside, the sides, the top, sucking on the head, moaning more loudly, and as my balls contract and I feel more precum leak out, she inhales a sharp breath, closing her eyes, stopping all movement, seeming to need the taste.

Her tongue continues its work more reverentially than I thought her capable of, licking every meager drop of precum from me in fervent strokes, her body shuddering as she withdraws her mouth and watches me as she swallows, causing the taunting image of me shooting my cum deep down her welcoming little throat to explode through my mind.

She sits back onto her heels, closing her eyes, her body quivering as if in relief, as if caught in some rippling wave rolling tension from her body. I've never seen a sight quite like it. It makes me want to know every single fucking thing she's ever seen, ever known, ever felt...

As her eyes open, she stares at me, her hands uncoupling as she turns, reaches for the bed, using the post to push herself to her feet.

“Indigo.”

She climbs onto the bed, before reaching for my neck and leaning her weight into me, jumping, knowing full well I'll

catch her as she wraps her legs around my waist and slides downwards, caught by my hands which cup her ass.

“Indigo.” The rough warning rasps through the air. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Her lips caress my neck as she breathes into it fast. “I don’t know,” she whispers. “I’ve never done this before... like this. I just... I need you. Please.”

“I’ve warned you about taking control from me.”

“Please,” she repeats. “I need you. I’m in pain.”

The desperation in her voice dampens the wrath I feel at being so out of control. I close my eyes as I inhale the scent of her hair, my cock throbbing at the thought of that open wet pussy inches from it.

“I want you to listen to me,” I whisper, aware of how many times I’ve repeated myself. “I can’t offer anything other than this night.”

“I’m not asking you to,” she responds, gripping me tightly. “Just... please... fuck me. Very, very hard. So hard that I can barely move afterwards. Or remember anything. Just use my body whichever way you want to.”

As she uses her hands and legs to jolt herself and slide down further, kept up only by the self-restraint of my hands which lift her ass cheeks, stopping my cock from impaling the tight cunt waiting for it, I grip her tightly with one hand reaching over and pulling my wallet from the back pocket of my pants lying on the chair.

I pull out a sheathe, and find its wrapper with my other hand, as she uses her strength to cling onto me. I pull the wrapper open and draw out the condom, jolting her up a little so that I can gently roll it onto my greedy dick. No sooner is it on than she pushes down with her hands against my shoulders and finds the head with the entrance to her pussy.

“Fuck,” I mutter as the dome breaches and my shaft begins to pry apart the tight glossy walls of her eager pussy, unable to resist the offering.

I release her weight a little and she slides down all the way to the root, moaning at the invasion of her tiny body.

The pant of my name makes me exhale a hoarse groan as she breathes into my neck, gripping my shoulders tightly and using the muscles in her legs to lift and lower herself onto me over and over, pulling herself down so that I strain against her cervix.

The rush of unfamiliar pleasure blazes through the discomfort at allowing her to take control. She lets out high-pitched whimpers, her lips hungrily rubbing against the skin of my neck as she assists me in fucking her thirsty little hole, the pleasure heating my torso, rising into my chest, up my neck, setting my cells aflame in pleasure that feels entirely unexplored.

As she whines my name again, I pull her hair back, forcing her gaze into mine. Her lips part as she watches me, jerking her body down so that my cock impales her in a most uncivilized manner.

She moans as she slides down on me, and as her legs lose their strength most exquisitely, she relies on the strength in my hands and arms to raise and lower her hungry body onto my cock like my own personal little ragdoll.

I ache to groan the crudest of threats, orders and promises into her ear as I squeeze the air from her lungs, preferably as she's peering up at me with those innocent little eyes of hers, her power stripped from her for as long as it takes for me to make us both come. And yet, something is stopping me.

I leave her unmoving, my rock-hard dick buried deep inside her tight little hole. "What do you want from me? Tell me clearly."

She whimpers, her cheeks nice and pink. "I want you to fuck me. Very, very hard."

I pull her into me, staring down at her doll-like face. "You have no idea what you're saying to me. You have no idea of the things I want to do to you."

Her spine straightens as she swipes her pink lips against mine as we inhale each other's breaths. "So do them," she responds.

I groan at the naïve offering of submission, the thought crossing my mind that she could perhaps learn to accommodate my needs after all.

I carry her a step towards the bed, gently setting her down onto it. She scoots back, propping her weight onto her elbows as I take up position between her feet, kneeling to look down at her.

"Open your legs for me," I instruct.

Her lips part as I say the words and slowly, she does what I require—she parts her legs wide for me, bending her knees, exposing the juicy pink entrance to her.

"Lick your fingers and touch yourself."

She does, eyes timid as she stares up at me while massaging her clit.

"Push two inside you," I order, but the second I say the words, she stops all movement, removing her hand from her sex and placing it by her side, frowning at me, her body stiff as if freezing.

And in that second, I refrain from doing what I want to. I refrain from tying her ankles to the bedposts, from covering her face until she can barely breathe, from whipping her body and instead plant a hand outside her arm and another on the other side and lower myself down onto her.

And instead of fucking her mercilessly like she deserves, I do something I don't understand, but which I can't stop myself doing. I cup the back of her head with one hand, watching her as I gently feed my cock into her pussy which clenches around me.

Quivers of breath drop from her mouth as I go all the way in, straining against her cervix before beginning to pulse slowly inside her. Her hands slide up my back until they touch the scarred, mangled skin on one side, a place I don't allow anyone to touch. But instead of withdrawing her hand from the

monster that I am, she caresses my skin, brushing her lips against mine. Her tongue leaves her mouth and she licks the length of my lower lip before beginning to suck on it as I fuck her gently.

Something about the tentative way that her mouth seeks out mine as I press my full weight on her and pulse my dick into and out of her insides, leaves me exhaling, my tongue leaving my mouth and pushing inside hers.

She capitulates instantly, allowing my tongue to dominate hers, allowing me to fuck her in both holes at the same time as pleasure begins to mount and we find ourselves sucking in each other's breaths, our mouths kissing, nipping, our hands pawing at one another's flesh, the sounds of pleasure we're both making dancing with each other.

I find my tongue grasping desperately for her neck, licking, sucking, forgoing the urge to bite until she screams. Our mouths collide and our kisses grow more fervent as I fuck her harder, pressing every ounce of my bulk onto her so that she can't breathe air, only inhale my breaths, so that she couldn't get out from under me if she wanted to, so that she feels only me on every inch of her skin.

My name drops from her lips as she moans in pleasure, her mouth falling open as I fuck it and begin to feel the orgasm building at the root of my sack.

I grab hold of her hair peering down at her, our eyes locked into each other as I slide in and out of her, holding her, our bodies a slippery mess, our breaths turning into one.

“Greyson,” she whimpers.

I close my eyes as she says my name, opening them to the desperation of her yearning. “Indigo.”

As our lips caress each other's, the pleasure of ecstasy shoots through me as she watches my face, listening to me groan, pulling me into her until I collapse, breathing in her skin.

I don't know what it is that wakes me—the light streaming through the curtains, bright enough to tell me it's past seven, or the proximity of her warm naked body against mine.

When she asked me to stay, I agreed of course, knowing full well that I wouldn't sleep because I have never allowed women to sleep in my bed—even the woman I'm relentlessly pressured to marry.

But as I think back, I don't even remember falling asleep, and I have no memory of waking up during the night. That's not usual for me. I'm awake most nights between three and four, either because of that same recurring nightmare, or because I find myself sitting up, breathing fast, my body wracked with insidious unease I can't fully explain... unless I delve back into things I no longer wish to remember.

The first thing I see as my eyes open is the slim line of her hand, resting against her bare chest. As I shift my weight a little, there's the faint tremor of a sigh from her and she swallows, goading me with the thought of her throat. My hand wraps around my hard morning wood and I stroke my cock to the sight of her face, her eyes closed, her lips open just a little below freckles dotted across her nose. Her hands are pressed together as if protecting her chest.

Her heart.

And because I'm a fucking savage who this defiant little creature arouses more than she can comprehend, I can't help but want to lift her leg and slide into her as her morning call.

But I don't.

Before falling asleep last night, after her fingertips found my arm, allowing her to finally close her eyes, I contemplated what to do.

I feel in every fiber of my being that the more time she spends with a monster like me, the more pain and misery she will experience when she learns what I am.

I can't do it to her.

She may hate me for a few days. A week.

But if I continue to give in to my endless hunger for her, I know she'll end up despising me for the rest of her life.

I'll speak to the DA's office about her ex and the man he sent the second I get home, which will be later today and tomorrow as I'd once planned. In fact, I will have all three women taken home today for their safety. I will ensure a security team is in place to protect her.

And then... I'll make sure she's free of me.

The only thing is... I don't know how I'll look her in the eyes when I do it... or if I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror after it's done.

Greyson

Saturday evening

My hands tremble as I grip the steering wheel, having just left her basement suite which she did not let me into after I explained that she's safer not seeing me ever again.

I close my eyes, recalling the hurt in her eyes, the confusion, the pain as she took in my words.

"You did the right thing," says Gideon in the passenger seat next to me. "You've spared her pain. We both know where this would have led to."

"Where?" I ask, knowing the answer but needing to hear it from someone else to stop myself from getting out of this fucking car and running back to her when every cell in my body aches to do nothing but that.

"You'd end up hurting her badly, Grey. We both know that. It's not your fault. This will hurt her a bit now, but what you're doing is right."

I nod, though all I want is to go back, to hold her, to watch her, to listen to her, to be with the woman who has imprinted herself on me.

I think of the letter I left in her hand which I wrote this morning while packing my things to leave the island.

In it, I poured out things I hide, secrets I've kept for a long time. I don't know why the fuck I did it. I don't know how I can trust someone I've known for a few weeks over those I've known for years and to whom I've never told the full truth.

I don't expect her not to hate me afterwards, but maybe at least she can understand. Maybe it can help her find some peace. Help her realize that her life will be safer when she is free of me. When she is free of the monster I hide inside me.

Indigo

I stare at the envelope crumpled in my hand, my back pressed against the inside door of my place.

I can still smell his scent on me, still feel his touch.

I know I wanted that. I know I needed him as much as I need air last night, but now, sitting here without him, I ache all over.

He did tell me he could only give me one night. My brain listened but my heart and body didn't.

And the way we made love last night... When I close my eyes, I can still feel it.

The words he said to me before leaving ricochet through my mind.

"I'm very bad for you. I'm dangerous. I'll hurt you. I'm not healed." And later, the logistics, as if I were some puzzle he still had to solve, so that he could walk away for good, case closed, file locked away. "The DA will contact you. We can communicate via text message while we sort legal things out. I'll keep security on you while we deal with it."

I bristle with anger at how much of a cop it all seemed. And how little time he spent explaining. It felt like three minutes, like he couldn't get away fast enough.

He didn't even want to try.

Nor would he listen when I told him I didn't need security. I don't want to live that way, especially when the guards are paid by him. I don't want that.

In a sudden burst of pain, longing and humiliation, I get to my feet, heading to the kitchen of my tiny basement suite as I rip his letter to shreds.

I don't want any more of that man inside me.

I don't want to hear his words in my head.

I don't want to have to heal from him again.

I just want to recover the pieces of me that are broken.

As I grab the four torn pieces of letter and envelope, I open the paper recycling bin only to stop.

Instead, in a move I hate, I take the pieces and pull away the baseboard under one of the weathered cupboards in the kitchen, a secret hiding place for my valuables. I take out the shallow box I keep there, placing the pieces at the bottom of the items already in there, closing it up and hiding it again before putting the baseboard back into place.

I go over to my bed, my clothes still on from the long drive, get in and pull the covers over me, closing my eyes to stop tears from falling from them as I say a silent prayer that forgetting him will be easier than I hope.

Indigo

One month later

“So... we've agreed to you not filing any charges against him in exchange for him taking a five-year plea deal for assault on the man, with a minimum of three years to serve.”

“Okay... And the victim agrees to that?” I ask, thinking of the poor man who ended up with a face full of glass and broken bones at the hands of the maniac I can't even believe I once dated.

“Yes. He doesn't want this to drag on for years. He wants to move on with his life.”

“God, I don't blame him. The poor thing.”

“He's doing a lot better. He's regained some sensation in his face.”

My hand meets my chest in relief. “Thank God.”

“He'll still need some surgeries on his eye though.”

“Shit.”

“Perhaps for the rest of his life.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper, unable to comprehend the trauma that poor man must have gone through.

“As far as you’re concerned, the condition for us not pressing charges for stalking or assault on you is that *all* harassment and communication by him, his family members, or anyone associated with him stops. We made it clear that if it starts up again, he’ll be facing a litany of charges that could keep him behind bars for over a decade.”

“And...”

“He agreed.”

I shudder out a ragged breath, my hand reaching for my chest again as I try to temper my respiration, grounding myself to the warm, intelligent eyes of Hunter Jackson, Washington’s hotshot thirty-something Assistant District Attorney who also happens to be one very hot man.

He reaches for my free hand and squeezes it tightly, letting go straight away as I manage to breathe through the anxiety I’ve been feeling since he called me this morning and told me to come into his office at 2 p.m. sharp so that he could grant me a fifteen-minute window in his stupid-busy schedule.

I don’t know why the Assistant DA would meet with a lowly victim like me, nor spend so much time on the phone with me in the weeks leading up to this, but I know that Grey pulled a lot of strings to make it happen. He and his family are, after all, one of the most prominent in the city, which is probably one of the reasons Grey has no interest in ever seeing me again. I mean, the wealthy, well-known Everitt sire and the hippy chick who leads yoga and chanting classes for a living and struggles to pay her rent at least six months out of the year.

Well, struggles because I refuse to allow my well-to-do parents to control one single thing about my life ever again.

“I just... I can’t believe he agreed to it,” I say, not even wanting to imagine the narcissistic injury admitting fault on any level would have done to a man like Micah Korhonen. And his family are so well known around Washington. They must be mortified, no doubt looking for some innocent person to blame for years of their sociopathic son’s shitty behavior. I’m sure I’m enemy number one in their eyes, even if I

refrained from filing charges, and still have, despite the lunatic spending months scaring me out of my mind. It's always someone else's fault with that type. Women are always somehow to blame for the misconduct of powerful men.

"He had no choice," Hunter responds as I rake my eyes over his neatly cut black hair, finding his earnest brown eyes framed by flawless olive skin. "The evidence we have of the assault is overwhelming. I just wish the guy he sent over to scare you had agreed to talk. We could have got the plea up to ten years, maybe."

I drop my gaze, suddenly seared by the memory of that blade cutting into Greyson's flesh and the blood that fell from it, smearing his skin.

The whole thing feels like a nightmare, especially seeing as I never even got to see how it was healing.

The only contribution I could make was giving him my arnica gel and my carrot seed, ylang ylang and tea tree essential oil blend that I use on wounds and scars as a parting gift that day before he handed me that letter that I still haven't read.

"You couldn't link them up?"

"No. Their encryption system was too good, and all connected to internet metadata from servers that can be closed down without a trace. We'd need an FBI-level budget and it just wasn't approved in this case."

"So, what will that guy he sent be charged with?"

"Nothing," he replies, making darkness seep into me. "There was some meth, but a small amount, not enough to press charges. Just enough to put him in violation of his parole. Switch knives aren't illegal in Georgia so there's nothing to charge him with there, except that it shores up our case for him violating his parole."

"What about him using the knife on Greyson?"

He shakes his head. "It's just too close to self-defense. We'd never get a conviction out of it."

“And him being on my balcony?”

“Not a crime, unfortunately. I mean, unless he got in...”

“Great,” I say, shuddering out what’s left of my breath as I wonder why it seems like the police only have the power to do something when women are dead.

“The good news is, he’s going back inside for the parole violation for another three years, so you’ll finally get to breathe for a while.”

I nod, my eyes roam up Hunter’s crisp white shirt, over broad shoulders to the tanned skin of his neck. “Does... Greyson know? That he’s not facing charges for the knife wounds?”

“Yes. He knows.”

“And he’s okay with it?”

“He seemed more concerned with making sure your ex was put away... and knows the consequences of continuing his harassment.”

I nod, the memory of Greyson Everitt still annoyingly present in my mind, along with the vision of his face, his body, the imprint of his touch, his taste. I just hope the memory of him will now fade away.

His concern, as well-meant as it is, irritates me, though I don’t know why. It’s not like he led me on. He told me straight that he couldn’t offer me anything. And while we’ve only communicated by text since he left and only about the case, I hate the fact that my mind wanders to him all fucking day long, like some curse I now have to carry around.

The hormonal holiday hangover from hell.

It’s so fucking stupid. I mean, I know we went through some weird shit together but it was after all a vacation hook-up. You’re not supposed to give them a second thought once you land back in the real world. I know enough about life to at least have gathered that.

But god dammit, the way he fucked me, watched me, held me... I can’t imagine ever meeting a man who can do the

things he can... and who makes me feel quite so alive. So much *myself*.

It sounds so simple, but when you lose yourself, when you find yourself untethered, disconnected from your own freaking soul, all you can think about is how to get the pieces back together, and for a few fleeting hours this summer, I felt it. Something about the way he would look at me, hold space for me, it made me feel like I could be... *me* again.

I rub my hand with the fingers of another, realizing I should just be grateful that things may finally be over with my ex and I can walk down the street in safety again. I won't have to keep telling the security guards who Grey paid to lurk outside my place to please go away, an order which they refuse to obey.

Hopefully now they'll go away because I'll finally be safe for the first time in a very long time.

"Have you seen him?" Hunter asks, searching my eyes most intently, and I can't help but wonder what Grey said to him for him to ask such a strange question. "Since Cumberland Island?"

"No," I respond, aware of the dull ache in my chest as I say it. "We're just... friends, I guess, so..."

As he smiles, closing the beige file in front of him and scraping a black pen across the table, a thought occurs to me, one I've already brought up before but want to make sure he understands.

"I, um... I still haven't told Greyson about... the..." I realize my breath is faltering as I try to speak, my throat closing, my chest tightening. I take a second before resuming. "The sexual stuff. On the last day. With Micah. I... I never want him to know that."

"We'd never disclose something like that without your consent, Indigo. You don't have to worry. I promise."

"Thanks," I reply, exhaling a long breath of relief.

"I, um, I don't want to overstep the mark, but... Greyson's a pretty open-minded man. Why don't you want him to

know?”

I shrug. “I don’t want to be seen as damaged goods.”

He shakes his head, concern etched into his handsome features. “That’s not how *any decent man* would ever think, Indie.”

“No, I mean... emotionally. Like some victim. I’m not that. I want to be treated normally. And I just want to move on from it all now.”

I glance down at the black pen in his hand before lifting his gaze once again. “Indie, sometimes when we don’t face things, when we keep things in the dark, they come back when we least expect them to.”

I bristle at his words, biting back the urge to remind him that he’s not a therapist and has no right to dictate how we handle the things that happen to us in life, but out of sheer gratitude, I bite my tongue, nodding until he gets to his feet.

“You have my number. Call me if you need anything at all. Anything. Call any time.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll keep you updated, okay?”

As he leaves, he pushes the door of this sterile gray room closed, not completely but enough to give me some breathing space for a few moments, to take in the relief of maybe finally getting free of my ex even if the relief was tainted by the specter of Grey who I felt so palpably, almost as if he were in the room, even to the point that I swear I smell that subtle singular cologne of his, laced with notes of lemon and wood.

Maybe now that it’s all over, I’ll be able to finally mourn for him too.

To finally move on.

That’s all I want...

Greyson

“How... how did she look?”

“She looked relieved,” Hunter replies after a moment, taking a seat opposite me after closing the door to his office behind him. “She... cried a little.”

“She did?” I drop my forehead, rubbing my forehead as I picture her little face and the tears rolling down her golden skin, teetering on the curve of her lip.

“Yeah. But by the end, she seemed just relieved that it may be over. At least for a while.”

I inhale a deep breath as I curse myself for not being in that room with her to help her through it. It's only the thought of the inevitable damage I'll do to her that's stopping me.

“You know,” Hunter says, and I brace myself for one of his annoyingly accurate insights, “in the dozens of hours you've spent in my office and on the phone trying to get this sorted out, you could have visited her about twenty times over.”

I throw a wry smirk at the asshole Assistant D.A. who has always been a friend to me despite knowing full well that my family use nefarious means to protect powerful people around Washington.

But he's right.

I should have seen her myself instead of getting updates from Gideon through Fran who I force him to maintain contact with, or from the security guards I pay to watch her place despite her ordering them to go away before apologizing later and bringing them croissants, only to repeat it all the next day.

I don't blame her for being angry, for feeling invaded by me, a man who left her the way I did, forcing her to be tailed by a security guard at all times. I know I have no right to do that, but the thought of her navigating the world without help right now sickens me to my stomach, leaving me unable to sleep. As soon as her ex signs that deal, I'll call them off. Leave her alone.

Or try to...

“She’s still here, you know?” he says and my eyes close as I think of her sitting in some small room somewhere.

“She came alone?”

“Alone. She looked... kind of lost.”

“Stop.”

“I’m sure she could do with some comforting right now.”

All I’d have to do is get up and wander to the other side of the building... and hold her, watch her, listen... as I’ve hungered to do for weeks.

“I’ll hurt her, Hunter. Badly. You know that as well as I do.”

“Yeah. I know. But... she did ask about you.”

I can’t help but hear her voice speak my name, just as she did over and over again that night we spent together in her bed.

“She’ll forget me now that she can finally breathe for a while,” I decide. “I’ll be there to help if she needs me.”

“There are different types of help,” he suggests.

“I know. This is the only type I can give her. You understand why?”

He nods slowly.

“I want him signing that deal this week.”

“We’re working on it,” Hunter replies. “He’s already agreed. He just needs to sign. If he had a brain, he’d realize how lucky he is to get five years for what he did to that man.”

“He’d better,” I exhale, the breath a rasp.

I’ve spent several weeks considering going to visit Korhonan *Senior* at his home in South Kensington, a very wealthy neighborhood, not that far from my parents’ house, incidentally. I have no doubt they’ll be mortified at the shame of their son being sent to prison, but they’ll be even more

mortified if he spends a decade behind bars for the abuse and harassment of multiple women.

And I'll make sure that happens if he doesn't leave her alone.

"Don't do anything funny, Grey," warns the ever-perceptive Hunter, clearly picking up something in my face or body language. "I can't protect you from *everything*."

"I won't," I reply. "Just make sure he signs, Hunter. Today if possible. I'll owe you one."

"You'll owe me several. And we're on it. He'll sign."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Grey."

Realizing he's going to need to get back to the never-ending pile of cases he's juggling, I get to my feet as his phone beeps.

"She's left," he says. "I asked my assistant to tell me so you wouldn't bump into each other... against my better instincts. If you hurry, you might be able to catch her."

I manage a joyless smile before thanking my friend again and leaving.

I walk slowly at first in the direction of the elevator, my body agitated as I get inside and suffer through an interminable descent to the ground floor. As I leave the building and step out onto the bustling streets of the downtown Penn Quarter, my heartrate quickens leaving my body jittery as I begin to search without meaning to.

Search for some shock of pink hair aflame amidst the gray of concrete under cloudy skies.

There are two subway stations nearby and I head towards Archives, the one with the line that would take her north towards her place. I barely realize that my feet are moving fast until I reach the end of the block, feeling breathless and out of control as my eyes dart around wildly, my treacherous gaze distracted by every blast of pink or red that goes by, none of which belong to her.

And then, half a block down, I spot a woman. Her hair is tied but wisps of red streak through her bun at the back and I begin to walk faster, dodging people, keeping track of her as I begin to jog.

Only as turns her head to cross the road do I see that... it's not her.

My stomach sinks and my usually strong legs wilt as I head for the subway station, realizing I'm rushing down the stairs as I hear the arrival of a train on the tracks below.

As I grab the travel pass I keep in my wallet and tap the scanner on the side of the turnstile, I hear doors opening and begin to bound down the stairs, making it to the bottom just as the doors close in my face.

I walk in quick strides down the platform, peering into the cars of the subway train for any sight of her, only for the train to begin to move, its motion faster and faster until it finally disappears, swallowed by one of the dark tunnels that lurk beneath the metropolis of DC.

I take a seat on one of the benches near the platform, planting my elbows onto my knees as I peer down at the dusty charcoal floor and try to catch my breath.

What the fuck is happening to me?

As I shudder through the gnawing sense of loss, dread and panic besieging me, I rub my fingers with my hand, looking at the faintest of scars left behind from the knife.

I know they've healed as flawlessly as they have because of the instructions she's texted me this past month on which supplements and natural creams and oils to use to ensure the scars heal well and fade fast. She sent me this despite me knowing how hurt she feels, a hurt I seem to feel inside me. And even though I've been distant so as not to pull her back into me, she never stopped asking how my hands were...

When I think back to the disaster which left me scarred and broken as a boy, I don't recall one-tenth of this concern from the man who watched over my recovery, the stakes so high...

As I make my way back upstairs to find the car I'd parked nearby, I will the longing burrowing in my gut to give way to hope that she can at least finally move on from the madness.

That maybe now *I* can finally move on.

Move on from unbidden thoughts of a woman I barely know but whose touch I yearn for inexplicably.

That I can finally go back to the life I led before this chaotic blaze of magenta light burst most unwantedly into my life.

Go back to the darkness... which I at least was the master of.

Greyson
One Month Later

“**W**hat about you?”

My eyes lift to the pert curly-haired blonde in her late twenties, wondering if there’s a word to describe the boredom that occurs when you’ve already passed *Tedious* in the rear-view mirror about an hour ago.

I watch flatly as she smiles borderline lasciviously at me, leaning into my body at the round table where we’re having dinner with Gideon and his new girlfriend, Sandra, and Kennedy and a date he managed to pick up somewhere, at our childhood friend Tristan’s house.

I contemplate giving enough of a fuck to answer the question.

How often do I work out?

“Most days,” I reply, “though I leave most of my working out for outside the gym.”

I blink at her slowly and her eyes widen as she absorbs the insinuation. While my cock stiffens by default at the sight of her tongue practically hanging out of her unnaturally plump mouth, I feel distracted and irritated, as I’ve been pulled through some fucking portal I just want to dive back into to get back to where I was before.

My gaze is caught by the glimpse of red hair across the room, and once again, my heart rises in my chest only to fall as the woman's face comes into view—Kennedy's date returning from the washroom.

This contaminating goddamn habit of looking out for her taunts me—in the street, at the gym, at work. Any shade of red or pink will have me scanning the room or the street or the building for signs of a woman who would have absolutely no logical business being there.

I take my glass of tepid water, drinking it down to dilute the single glass of Muscat I had earlier before realizing that wine makes me think too fucking much, blurs my senses, turning them into a staticky mess that I don't feel in control of, not something I need right now as they're already consumed by someone who I haven't seen for two months and whom I have no idea if I ever will again, especially as Gideon and Fran are now just friends, upon my insistence to Gideon, after their vacation fling. After they slept together on the island, he lost all interest in her romantically.

God wasn't that kind to me apparently, which is particularly ironic as I've always gloated about my friends being slaves to the women they fall for, and how immune I am to the hell of another person owning part of you.

And she doesn't.

She can't...

It's some stupid infatuation, created by the trauma we shared because of that man with the knife. Me ending things as resolutely and abruptly as I did didn't exactly offer us closure.

I'm starting to believe that that's all we need.

Another few nights of very hard fucking and a proper goodbye, and I'll be free of this muddled mess macerating my mind. It's become apparent that that's the only way I'll get myself out of this maelstrom. If she wants that, of course. The whole fucking plan rests on the idea that she needs closure as much as I do.

Even though I've made sure that we don't talk about anything but the bare logistical bones of the criminal cases, I can't shake the feeling that she needs it as much as I do. Or at least, that's what Gideon has gleaned from Fran who is increasingly tight-lipped about her friend to him.

If it's true, I can give her the closure she needs.

As the blonde's thigh presses against mine firmly, my eyes warm as I watch Kennedy who is giving an animated account of getting the bends during a scuba-diving trip gone wrong. My body rigidifies at the intrusion of the blonde's hand onto the top of my leg under the table.

I sit back in my chair, taking another sip of water as Gideon's date breaks into laughter as Kennedy imitates the state he was in when they pulled him out of the water while the woman who has apparently been brought along as my "date" by Gideon, no doubt in an attempt to snap me out of this state I'm in, edges her lacquered fingertips further until they are grazing my inner thigh, roaming slowly in the direction of my cock.

I flinch as they touch me, her hand moving until her palm rounds and her fingers coil around my thick erection. I don't look at her, nor do I particularly want to right now, the same as I barely looked at the faces of the two women I distractedly fucked since getting back from the island, in the vague hopes that doing so would free me the goddamn affliction of relentless thoughts of someone else, a woman almost impossible to control in any satisfactory way, no less.

The woman leans into me and I tune out my friend for a moment as I listen out for her hoarse voice, inhaling the unpalatably sharp scent of spicy perfume applied way too liberally.

Her free hand winds around my bicep as the tips of her curly hair caress my upper arm. "I'd love you to drive me back to my place tonight," she whispers as I stare straight ahead.

As her hand squeezes tightly and my dick throbs, I contemplate another night of fucking a body that could be exchanged with anyone else's, followed by the hollow gnaw

that comes in its wake as I arrange to leave their place or to have them taken home as quickly as possible.

Rude? Discourteous? Something an asshole would do?

Yes.

But then, I hope I make it clear from the start that they shouldn't expect anything less from me. While Gideon can smile good-naturedly in all the right places and Kennedy would bend over backwards to give a girl a good time and make her happy until the end of his days whether she was married to someone else or not, I don't possess their amiability. I'm the moody prick of a friend who won't smile because I feel forced to, nor pander to you when you need it.

And that includes in bed...

As her acrylic-tipped fingers find the swollen head of my cock and squeeze and stroke it gently, I contemplate fucking her as per her wishes, preparing myself for the contamination and irritability I feel afterwards when all I want to do is run away.

The bottomless hollow I experience after sex isn't new. I've had it for years, but it's made worse by the events of this summer.

By the existence of... *her*.

I'm too ashamed of my own trite and predictable stupidity to even really talk to my friends about the fact that a tiny and impertinent pink-haired brat still infiltrates my thoughts on a daily basis. Fuck, more like an hourly basis. Minute by torturous minute some days.

We must have bonded over the trauma we experienced or something, but whatever the fucking reason, I can't seem to attend one social gathering without seeking her out across the room, distracted by every flash of pink that crosses my field of vision; by the minty smell of her hair, by the memory of how her lips sought out my skin, the longing in her unconstrained and unsolicited movements so acute, her breaths so fast, her body so warm, so eager for me.

And then, her tears and the way she gripped onto me as if I were some life vest.

This little imp of a woman did something to me; fucked with my head in a way I'm not used to.

And every day, I assume the cruel thoughts, memories and flashbacks will end, only for my mind to wonder why the fuck I'm not driving over to her place now, pinning her against the wall and fucking her little brains out until she loses all strength, able to do nothing but submit and whisper my name in that sweet voice of hers.

Over and over again.

The way we made love—God, that asinine fucking term—clearly triggered something inside me, something I don't want. Something I've worked very hard to avoid my whole adult life.

I need to work her out of my system.

What's more, I know how greedy she is for my cock.

I think she'd agree to it.

Raw, deviant, no-strings-attached fucking for our mutual benefit.

The kind where I dominate her, where she offers me her willing submission in exchange for sex she'll never forget and that will make her gasp at the thought of it for years to come.

I've been playing the conversation out these last few days...

She'd probably be outraged when I first suggested it, tell me to go fuck myself, hard, but once I explain the benefits of allowing me to give her the kind of pleasure I know full well she's never experienced with the incompetent fucks she's allowed to fumble around her body, she won't be able to give in.

I need to be rid of this fucking curse, to enjoy a meal without imagining her lips enveloping the food at the table, enveloping my cock, wondering whether she'd be enjoying the main course, whether she'd laugh at Kennedy's jokes,

contemplating how easily I could carry her into my home at the end of the night.

I stare down at my finished plate, blocking everyone out, imagining that the blonde whose name I'd struggle to recall if you put it in a list of three, and who is currently stroking my hard cock is actually the girl who has so rudely infiltrated my mind.

The woman's voice yanks me unceremoniously out of thoughts of another. "What do you say?" she whispers.

As her voice grates, I reach under the table and coil my hand around her wrist, gently pulling it away from me and placing it down onto her lap. Our eyes meet, hers sparkling as she bites her lip in a way that reminds me of a bonobo in heat. I may once have found it vaguely stimulating, but the lack of subtlety is suddenly lackluster in the extreme in light of the unexpected experience of Indigo's vulnerability.

Two months on and every fucking thing still feels tainted by her.

I can't keep going like this. I have to do something.

Hell, maybe she'll thank me too. For all I know, she's afflicted with the dregs of whatever was activated between us and wants some reprieve.

I mean, she does still tell me to go fuck myself a lot if I dare ask how she is. She doesn't like that question one bit. I doubt she'd do that if she didn't still feel something.

"I have other plans tonight," I respond flatly, making sure that she knows I'm not interested in round two.

"Maybe I can convince you otherwise?" she whispers, biting her lip.

"You won't," I retort coldly.

"Honestly, I'd just take a very quick fuck, Greyson."

The utterance of my name by her shoots a net of claustrophobia around me, and as my throat tightens, I unlock my gaze and get to my feet, offering her a cursory, "Excuse me," in the process.

I head down the hallway and use the washroom. As I wash my hands, I stare at myself in the mirror, not even sure who I see.

But that particular dissonance isn't new.

I look like my father—tall and with the same build, with his thick brown hair, albeit his now flecked with gray, and the same golden skin tone and features—the straight nose, the angular cheekbones, the strong chin.

Except for one feature—my eyes.

His are a muddy hazel, brown in low light.

Mine are a pale gray. Like my mother's.

That's why they called me Greyson—because I emerged with what my mother called the most mesmerizing gray eyes... like little spheres of shiny silver.

I remember her using those words when she told me about the day I was born.

And when I look in the mirror, I see my father's face and body, but my mother's eyes staring back at me, every time, as if she's talking to me through the vessel of him. And it jars me each time, taking me back to a time whose memories haven't faded despite the concerted efforts of everyone around me which have led me to my mutism on the subject... especially since the death of my mother's sister with whom I could share secrets. She's the only one I could ever talk to about it.

Gideon knows most of the story, but not all of it. Not the worst part, the part that stops me from being able to take a full breath.

I finish rinsing the soap from my hands, drying them before heading back out to join my friends and tonight's new acquaintance, who have all moved from the dining table to a large chestnut sectional on the other side of the large modern living room.

Only as I make my way towards them, my step falters, and again, my stomach turns and malaise eats into me at the thought of the small talk I'll once again suffer through.

It's not the guests' fault, nor hers.

I'm not myself.

At the peace I felt at inhabiting the cloak of the monster I've been informed I was, has now turned to sheets of metal which close in on me.

Through a girl I barely know, I've tasted a part of myself that I had assumed was extinguished for good. I've seen him, the boy, the man. I saw his face through her, and now the door is closing in on him again... only I no longer know if I want it to.

On leaving the hallway, instead of joining them, I pivot to the left, sliding open the balcony door and closing it behind me. I take a seat on a sturdy wicker bench and peer out onto Washington DC, and the White House off in the distance to the right, glowing in the eerie light of the full moon.

It's a sight that you never get completely used to, even when you're brought up in DC. It always thrills a little, no matter which corrupt asshole happens to be in power at the time, but today, the image is a dull watercolor, as if painted too thinly and coated in an expired layer of sepia varnish.

My fingers curl around the armrest of the bench, twitching as I look for a cigarette... or a joint... both of which I gave up after college after a particularly vicious screaming match with my father during which he told me he didn't want a stoner or a smoker as a son, and that if I didn't quit, I'd be cut out of his vast will.

You'd think me inheriting my maternal grandparents' mansion and money would have put paid to his threats, for I no longer need his money, but apparently not.

A joint or two a month with friends would hardly someone a hardcore addict, but to my father, your value as a son is not intrinsic to your existence. To some parents, their kids are these precious jewels, perfect just for existing.

And then there is a different species whom we don't talk much about—men such as my father for whom my value is entirely dependent on how I present myself, how I make him

look, how much money I earn, and how willing I am to submit unquestioningly to every comment, every demand, every abuse of his seniority.

Questioning his authority is crime number one but there are a plethora of others—hundreds, in fact.

My happiness is not of concern. What matters is whether I submit, and whether I make him look good in the eyes of those who don't even matter, for that man lives to impress strangers while feeling nothing but disdain for those who should be precious to him.

Those like his son.

At the sound of brakes screeching on some street a few blocks away, I close my eyes, waiting for the sound of a crash, a sound that often haunts me.

It doesn't come but I hear it anyway, conjured up by my mind, a spectral artifact from another life.

My well-being didn't factor in for him that day either.

Maybe that's why I still think endlessly about this girl: there has to be some reason why I felt safe enough to tell her things I would normally conceal. She never said a word about the letter, nor did I ask, afraid of what she'd think. I don't even know if she read it or why the fuck I would want to share something so personal, so fucking dangerous, with a girl I barely know?

At the sound of cars beeping and engines grumbling, I undo the top few buttons of my shirt, realizing my chest is tightening.

Fuck.

I lean over, placing my elbows onto my knees and my head into my hands as I breathe deeply and slowly to temper my respiration, not knowing why repressed memories and emotions are suddenly clawing their way to the surface when I've made such a concerted effort to bury them and never let them out.

Maybe as Indigo said, I'm just an emotionally stunted prick...

In fact, I think she hit the bullseye with that observation.

I close my eyes, vexation simmering throughout my body as my mind is once again hijacked, turning me into some pathetic slave to my own thoughts as I bother myself with the kind of trite, lamentable horseshit I would pity others for entertaining.

And yet here I am, wondering what she's doing right this second, wondering if she's touched a man since me. And if she has, where can I find him so that I can slowly slice his tongue out so that he can never taste her again.

You're losing it...

I hear the click and slow, dull slide of the balcony door muffled somewhere a few feet away, but I barely move. My eyes study the seam between two planks of wood on the floor of the balcony, recalling the day I slowly slid my arms up her slim back, her muscles moving under my fingers as tension released from her tightly wound and highly receptive body. That smart little mouth of hers let out sigh after sigh, seemingly unaware that she was doing it.

At the scrape of a chair, I lift my head and sit back to see, Tristan, a man I've known since I was in kindergarten watching me.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"Nothing," I reply briskly. "Just getting some air."

His unimpressed slow blink has me inhaling sharply. "Just... preoccupied."

"By the girl. Happens to us all," he smiles.

"Not to me," I retort, a growl nestled in my throat. "I'm not as *evolved* as you, remember?"

"Falling in love happens to the best of us, Grey."

I snort, frowning in incredulity. "I'm not in love," I shoot back, barely concealed mockery hanging from the words. "I'm

just... She got under my skin. That's all. I just need to get her out of my fucking system. I didn't end things in control and that's what's messed me up. That's all there is to it."

"Haven't you already fucked?"

The word and its application to Indigo suddenly make me want to reach for my friend's ankles and dangle him off his own balcony until he apologizes...

He must see the ire roughening my face for he smiles, softening his demeanor.

"We've had sex," I reply.

I'm not sure that "fucked" could really apply for I didn't drag her around the room by her hair as I wanted to, cane her ass till she's begging me to stop and shoot my cum down her throat to finish off. By my standards, "fucking" would be a stretch for what we did that day...

And yet the memory of it returns to me more often than I want, taunting me with its unfamiliar warmth, leaving me in a state of yearning and sexual frustration that require me to shoot my load half a dozen times a day just to exorcise the memory and function.

Just about.

"Doesn't that usually suffice to work a woman out of your system?" asks Tristan.

"Usually," I respond in displeasure, my eyes finding the wood beneath my feet again.

"You haven't seen her since then?"

"What is this, a Barbara Walters special?" I ask to the glimmer of mirth in his eyes. "You'd make a shitty therapist, just FYI," I add to his chuckle of amusement. "No. I haven't seen her."

"Maybe you need to," he suggests and I shake my head, wondering whether my sanctimonious need to do the right thing and spare her from me is strong enough to outmatch the torment of my desire for her, a desire now so insidious that I

can barely think about her without semen leaking from my cock.

“Or,” he says with a smirk, “you could, um”—he tips his head back towards the guests—“distract yourself for the night. See if it takes the edge off.”

I don't bother telling him I've tried that already and if it had worked, I wouldn't be sitting here, my mind a muddle of unwanted images, my body seething in rancorous aggravation.

I tip my head forwards, my breathing accelerating as I stare at the floor. “How did this happen to me?”

“Happens to every man at some point, Grey.”

Yeah, well, I'm not like every man. I'm not a slave to my fucking feelings like everyone else.

“We always told you it would happen to you when you least expected it,” he adds, flashing me a wide grin as I tip my head up.

“That's not what this is,” I respond through gritted teeth. “It's just... something I need to work through and end in control. That's all.”

“Sure. And, um, are you gonna practise on Shawna?”

So that's the blonde's name...

I glance through the glass of the balcony door to find her peering in our direction, her fuck-me stare leaving me cold.

“Make sure she gets home okay,” I respond, turning to look at him. “I'm gonna have to make an early departure. I hope you don't mind, friend.”

“Not one bit. But, um, going anywhere special?” His bright-eyed smirk calms the tornado whipping through my torso.

I answer truthfully. “I don't know yet.”

Greyson

I sit parked at the end of the block, half an hour after arriving, with a sudden keen insight on what a day in the life of a stalker must be like as I spy the muted light straining through the thin curtains of the narrow windows at the top of her basement apartment.

She mustn't get much light...

At my size, people don't usually intimidate me, but I find my eyes slowly wandering up and down the street, tracking a group of men walking by, rowdy as they fill the sidewalk. I can't help but imagine how she would feel if she were walking past them alone right now.

I hadn't quite realized how unsafe this neighborhood feels at night.

I'm not sure if I can stomach her living here anymore.

There goes the fucking stalker again...

Fuck.

I pick up my phone, contemplating whether I should just call her and tell her I'm here, but she'll probably just tell me to go fuck myself—quite rightly as well.

If I knock on the door after that, she'd have every right to mace me in the face.

I manage a deep breath, wondering why I can deal with famous politicians and the wealthiest, most powerful of people in my line of work, barely batting an eyelid when I meet them, but my stomach is in unfamiliar knots when going to meet an insubordinate little brat who is half my height and weight and who I suspect may still be hungry for my cock.

I drop my head, knowing full well I have no right to be here after leaving her the way I did.

Just as I contemplate turning on the car and leaving, some force propels me to grab my phone and keys and get out, slamming the door behind me before slowly walking down the sidewalk towards her place.

I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing.

My feet are carrying me while my brain is hating every nauseating and intrusive minute of it. I don't need to see her. I just need to... see where she is right now.

My eyes pan up the trunk of a maple nestled in someone's front garden, its leaves already turning to Amber in the early fall. Glancing down, the pavement is dirty and cracked in places with weeds growing between gaps in the slabs.

And as I study the frankly delapidated house whose basement she lives at the bottom of, a thought hits me...

What if she has someone in there with her?

A man...

I mean, I guess I'll be spending the night in jail if that's the case. Make daddy proud.

Apparently, me spending my adult life not feeling more than an ounce of jealousy around any woman I've been with has all been preparation for the entire repressed tsumani of it to shoot forth all over this girl, because I swear to God, while she has every right to do what she wants, the thought of another man touching her makes me want to gnaw through his neck with my teeth until his head falls off his shoulders and I can use it as a soccer ball.

Fucking well losing it...

I keep moving forwards, the weathered brick and wood-faced building getting closer, its façade murky for the sun set some time ago.

I peer at the hedge in front of the building to the sound of voices and the slam of a door as I move at a slow pace towards her apartment until...

I stop in my tracks.

A couple walk out from between two short lines of Berberis—the man, of medium height and wearing dark jeans and an ochre jacket, the woman wearing a black skirt or dress that drops down to her mid-calf, an oversized denim jacket and a thin pale scarf wrapped around her neck.

My heart pounds roughly and I remain as still as a statue as I watch the ghostly apparition and the jolting fucking hell of her looping her hand into his arm as she giggles loudly. And as they pivot, their backs now to me, I see, despite the gloomy light, the unmistakable flourish of pink peeking out from below her scarf, its hue tainted orange due to the old street lamps above.

“It can’t be,” I mutter, beginning to walk, my pace quickening as I try to get closer, to be sure, to refrain from tapping into the kind of sudden unbidden rage that consumes me when I think of her and other men.

“No.” The word falls from me as I stop dead in my tracks in a nightmarish moment of insidious hollow dread and dawning regret at not having come to see her sooner.

I fucked up.

I waited too long.

I did this.

It’s all fucking me and my inability to face my demons in hell.

I did it.

Me and no one else.

I watch, barely feeling my body as the distance between us stretches, each step leaching strength from my body.

At the sound of her voice and the laughter of his, it hits me how empty I feel. And how little she needs me. Maybe I made the whole thing up in my head.

In reality, I've felt empty and fractured since I was seven years old, only I had the means to mask the emptiness before. It's been dawning on me these last few weeks that the convenient balms I've been using no longer seem to soothe the pain the way they once did.

As the couple venture further in the evening light, their movements easy, their laughter effortless, it doesn't escape me that maybe that's what she needs—a man who doesn't carry a fucking lead weight around him everywhere he goes...

As I watch them, torn between ripping the arm that she's holding out of its socket and turning around and never coming back, there's a noise from somewhere—the beep of a horn, loud and suspended, some asshole who doesn't know road etiquette and as I turn to look in that direction, so does she.

Her face pivots a little... and further... and further... until... her gaze crashes into mine, like some high beam lighting up a dark path.

She continues walking only to stop dead in her tracks as the man next to her follows suit, looking down at her as she remains immobile before turning slowly, her whole body now facing mine from a third of a block away.

After a few seconds, I see her mutter something to him as he begins to stare at me, eyes widening.

Unsure what to do, but seeing as I've caused this momentary standstill and avoiding confrontation is not usually my style, I begin to walk towards them slowly, if only so that I can drink in her fucking face again and be sure I didn't make her whole existence up in my head—the inexplicable magic I felt when I peered down in amusement at her defiant little features, when I swam in her deep wide-set mossy eyes, when

I contemplated how perfect her plump lips would look wrapped around my cock, or covered in my cum...

As I make it to within fifteen feet of them, her hand grips the man's arm tightly and my eyes slide to him—handsome with perfectly groomed black hair and wearing... a fucking red and white spotted bow tie.

Maybe I'm a judgmental prick, but I already know just by his ungrounded energy that this fool couldn't make her come if his tongue came with ten different vibrate settings.

Her brows furrow, displeasure and confusion painted over the features of her sensational face. And hurt.

"I... I'm sorry I didn't... call... first," I say, realizing I stammered for the first time in memory.

She shakes her head slowly, her fingertips digging into her date's arm. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just... in the neighborhood"—an internal groan of about 9.5 on the Richter scale drones through my body at the excuse—"and I... I wanted to... I... I wondered if you were free to... talk... for a few minutes. I guess not..."

Her face hardens, her jaw clenching, and as I realize I'm staring at her most intently, I remember the prick she's clinging to, deciding that today will be a good day to try to exorcise some semblance of self-control, seeing as I'm the one rolling up here uninvited. Plus I can tell from his skinny frame that I have about fifty pounds of muscle on him. Beating him to a pulp would be beneath me, even if the sight of her fingers pressing into his bicep makes me want to feed his arm into a wood chipper.

Slowly.

I find his eyes, holding his gaze firmly. "I'm Greyson."

"Yoshi," he replies. "And, yeah, I, um, I've heard a lot about you."

As he says it, Indie's head tilts, her eyes widening as she shoots him what I believe is a "Please shut the fuck up" glare which allows a glimmer of relief to crawl through my body

before she comes to face me again, lifting her little chin with the utmost defiance.

“Well, I’m sorry,” she responds, her voice breathy, as if she can’t catch air. “But I have plans for tonight, so that’ll be a *no*.” She practically booms the last word, speaking fast as if desperate to say it. The word plunges us into weight silence for a few moments but for the whistle of an increasingly feisty wind.

I nod, just as her date turns to look down at her. “I mean... he could come along, maybe?” Despite the second piquant glare she arrows at him, he continues, “It’s her mom’s birthday party.”

“Well, he... he *can’t* come,” she snaps. “It’s invitation only. Sorry.”

“I mean, it’s kind of informal. Are you sure he can’t tag along?” asks her date, raising his eyebrows and wincing as if to brace himself. If I didn’t know better, I’d say the man was actively trying to get me to join them which would make no sense unless... he’s into being cuckolded, something I could gladly accommodate, except for the fact that I may have to talk myself out of gouging his eyeballs out afterwards for having seen her little body naked.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she insists breathlessly, plunging us into leaden silence and possibly making this the most awkward social interaction I’ve ever experienced, which would be uncomfortable if I weren’t quite so mesmerized by the warm blush of red seeping into her cheeks as she loses her sang froid.

I study her eyes for a moment, realizing I hadn’t conjured them up in my mind, and that they were in fact bottomless wells of deep green which shimmer as she glares at you. My gaze trails over the freckles of her button of a nose and down onto the delicious mouth of hers, swathed tonight in a dark orange lipstick. As her date shifts, I lift my gaze to him, my eye contact softer than I thought possible, not least seeing as he’s being so courteous.

“I’m gay, by the way,” he announces, rendering me unable to suppress the short blast of air that leaves my lips, a purling wave of relief which rolls through my entire tense body. My lips widen into a smile which I suppress instantly at the sight of the increasing irritation scribbled into the soft curves of Indigo’s oval face.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to him,” she reponds, seemingly unsure who to direct the bulk of her ire at—him or me. “Also, remind me to kill you later,” she mutters under her breath as her friend throws me a sneaky smile which he dissimulates, smushing his lips together as she shakes her head moodily.

“I... I certainly wouldn’t want to intrude on a birthday party,” I say, “but... I’d... very much like to meet her.”

“Well, I’m not sure my mothers want to meet *you*,” she retorts, though as she says it, her features soften as if wondering if the barbs she’s shooting are too sharp.

I raise a brow. “Mothers?”

“Yes,” she declares with purpose. “*Mothers*. I have *two* mothers. They’re lesbian life partners. And they live with each other. Is *that* a problem?”

“I like them already,” I respond, a smile creeping into the shadows of my face as she tries to calm her breathing down.

She peers up at her friend who shoots her a slightly frightened but still hopeful look.

I’ve heard a lot about you...

Well, if that’s true and he doesn’t want to kill me, I guess maybe what she told him couldn’t have been *all* bad.

“Fine,” she breathes out roughly after some time, her body quivering a little. “But if they throw you out, I won’t be stopping them. And you’ve only got yourself to blame, so...”

I bow my head slowly, not wanting to say too much when in moments of candor that her aggrieved demeanor hides, I think I see shards of pain in her face which disappear into the night as quickly as they appeared.

She turns on the heels of her brown ankle-length boots, gripping her friend's arm while muttering something about hoping he has life insurance which makes me smile.

Taking it that we're walking to wherever it is we're going, I come to walk on the other side of her, careful not to brush up against her as our shoes click on the dirty sidewalk, our faces bathed in a dance of light and shadows from the intermittent streetlamps.

It's Yoshi who takes the lead, making light small talk about the weather as Indigo remains silent, her eyes fixed straight ahead, not looking at me once as my gaze wanders occasionally to her profile.

A few minutes later, we stop outside a building, the façade a little dilapidated and bearing a weather-worn sign in wood, the painted letters faded.

The Wolf and the Wildflower

“Well, here we are,” announces Yoshi, his tone half cheery and half nervous as Indie inhales audibly, leading us down the steps and to the front door of the bar.

Greyson

I hear and smell the place before I make it through the interior doors. Raucous laughter, loud guffaws, animatedly sung sentences and the clink of glasses fill my ears a few seconds before the smell of ale hits my nostrils.

I walk in behind Indigo and her friend only to be enveloped by warmth which melts away the unseasonably cool September air which whipped my skin outside.

And as I enter further, the darkness from out there is replaced by a soothing bath of fiery light. I scan the room: the entire place is constructed in glossy varnished wood in a cherry color, from the floors to the walls, to the booths to the bar behind which stand two scruffily dressed and tattooed barmen bearing wide grins.

The place is in the style of an old Irish pub, the likes of which I haven't been to in a very long time, frequenting as I do the more exclusive bars in the city, their lines angular, filled with tones of black and gray, the textures and materials modern—steel, glass, concrete.

This feels like stepping into another world—familiar, and so congenial that it knocks me off balance for a moment.

A few feet ahead, I see Indie warmly embracing a tall woman, and then another. Both women turn to Yoshi and wrap him in a hug as Indigo whispers something into the tall

woman's ear. Her shrewd eyes immediately flit to me, observing me most keenly, not the hint of a smile in sight.

Indie speaks something quietly into the second woman's ear, who in turn pivots to look at me, her large brown eyes piercing as I realize that the welcome from them may not be quite as warm as from Yoshi.

I certainly don't want to ruin anyone's birthday party, and for a second, I contemplate leaving, waiting in the car until it's over in the hopes that she'll talk to me then. But I watch as the tall woman approaches in cautious strides.

"Hello," she says, her voice raspy, her tone fearless.

"Hello. I'm Greyson. I... I really don't want to inconvenience anybody by being here."

She studies me harshly without apology, glancing at Indigo for a moment before holding out a hand. I take it, noticing how firmly she grips mine.

"We'll let you know if you are," she retorts stiffly as the woman who comes to stand next to her shakes her head with a smile. "I'm Marilla," the first woman adds in a thick Scottish accent. "One of Indie's mothers. This is Orpha, her other."

"Nice to have you here," Orpha replies in an American accent, her altogether more affable than mom number one.

"Well, thank you for letting me stay."

"For now," Marilla corrects and I bow my head, my gaze steering towards Indie's. I can't quite tell if she supports her mother's prickly sentiments or wants her to tone it down a tad.

"Shall we get a drink?" suggests Yoshi and I nod, allowing him to lead me to an empty seat to the right of the pub. Eyes drift our way from across the room as we slide onto the varnished wood of a bench encased in the flanks of a booth and remove our jackets. I glance down at my designer shirt, aware it looks out of place amongst the more casual attire I see around me.

"Two pints, Gerry!" Yoshi shouts across the pub, and the barman puts a thumb in the air without looking up, drawing

some ale from a tall tap. “Is a pint okay?” he asks. “Are you driving?”

“I can have one,” I reply with a smile. “I’ll get a taxi back if need be. Pick up my car tomorrow.”

“An excuse to come back, right?” he suggests with a smirk, and I exhale as I realize there’s excitement in his demeanor.

I nod, my eyes sweeping to Indigo standing at the bar with her moms, leaning into them as she talks. Orpha flicks a long thin braid of her hair behind her shoulders as the warm glow of the pub bounces off her flawless brown skin. Behind her stands Marilla, her countenance altogether sterner, her short light-brown hair greying, her face pale as she leans into Indie, seeming to ask her questions.

Indigo’s gaze shifts, meeting mine from across the room, her face solemn, despite the jolt of current that she must surely feel when she looks at me. The collision is so powerful that my body radiates from it, as if plugged into the mains each time. I’ve never experienced anything quite like it.

I can’t be the only one who feels it...

The silent play of our gazes is interrupted by the clink of two pints of beer being placed onto the wooden table, the color of rust.

“Enjoy,” sings the barman, throwing me a grin as Yoshi lifts his pint carefully.

“Cheers!”

“Cheers,” I respond, bringing my glass to my lips. As I drink down a mouthful of the bitter, lightly sparkling ale, it occurs to me that I haven’t drunk beer for a long time. When I’m at dinner, it’s wines, and when I’m out with friends at a bar or club, it’s champagne, dirty martinis, bourbon or single-malt scotch.

I can’t remember the last time I drank ale, but I have a sudden urge to drink the whole fucking thing down to cleanse me of every tedious night I’ve spent in bars talking to people I feel nothing for.

I place the glass down onto a coaster, eyeing Yoshi who smiles widely, a smile I reciprocate seeing as he's done everything he can to put me at ease.

“So... you... were just in the neighborhood, then?” he asks, concealing a smirk.

A breath of laughter flies through my nose. “Um... not exactly.” His eyes widen and he glances across the room quickly before studying my face again. “I came to see Indigo... if she even wants to talk to me.”

“Oh, I'm sure she will,” he replies. “She's just a bit *fiery*.” He raises his brows. “You know that, right?”

“Oh yes, I do,” I reply.

“Yeah, just checking. She'll calm down.”

“Well, I can't say I blame her for being a bit—”

“Stabby?” he suggests.

“Yeah. I... I didn't really say goodbye in a way that would make someone feel good.”

As I say it, a frigid mist trails across my skin as if a blast of winter air has rolled into the room as I wonder what has changed since that day. I'm not safe to be around. I still wouldn't want to subject her to me, nor to my family. If she thinks *I'm* emotionally stunted, she'd have to invent new adjectives to describe them.

My mind wanders back to the jumbled thoughts I had in the car, and the suggestion I intend to propose to her which I feel certain will be met with a very resounding “*Fuck You*”—the suggestion to allow me to fuck her out of my system, and me out of hers in exchange for pleasure and the release I know she may need.

I remember the way she was with me—she would pull the weight of my whole body into her with so much force, lower herself down onto me in desperation, buck her hips, ride me as if famished as I held her up. Her tongue would reach for the skin sheathing my shoulder, licking it as if hoping to find something to keep her alive.

As Yoshi asks me a question which my mind tunes out, I stare down at the table. Am I doing everything I swore I wouldn't? Making it harder on her? Leading her down a path which will only lead to more pain in the long run? Or am I just the prick she spent a night with who she'd rather forget... or does she need this closure as much as I do?

As I begin to second-guess what I'm even doing, a flash of pink catches my eye as Indigo pulls her scarf from around her neck and removes her jacket, her hair falling loose over her long-sleeved black dress. She peers down at the floor for a moment before looking up, her eyes meeting mine in a way which makes her take a sharp inhale that I feel from the opposite side of the room.

She swallows again before turning to Marilla who puts a hand on her forearm.

"Sorry," I say to Yoshi, realizing he's waiting for an answer to something. "I—"

"I was just asking if you'd lived in Washington long..."

"My whole life," I respond. "You?"

"Just two years. I'm enrolled in the journalism course at Georgetown."

"You want to be a journalist?"

"Yeah," he replies. "A newsreader."

"Well, you've got the voice for it."

His face lights up as I give him the compliment. "Thanks! I've wanted that since I was a kid. It's Indie who encouraged me to go after my dream. Helped me fill out the forms and everything."

I smile at the thought. "How long have you known her?"

"It's been... wow, over five years now. We met at high school. Grade ten."

"Has she changed much?"

"She's calmed down a bit."

“Calmed down?” I snigger, raising a brow.

“Yeah, she was a little hellraiser back then. Well, you would be with the crap she’s been through in her life.”

His words stop me cold, ice encasing me, leaving me cracking from the inside.

What she’s been through in her life...

“You mean, the ex-boyfriend?”

“Oh, no. That’s all done with now. I mean... Well... hopefully.” He pauses. “She didn’t tell you about her family?”

I shake my head, some somber note of trepidation seeping into me. “No, she didn’t.”

“Oh, well, maybe I’ll let her tell her own stories.”

I frown, wondering what he means, and if she’d even trust me enough to tell me.

“I mean, we all go through crap, right?” he adds as if to deflect.

“We do.”

“So, you wanted to chat with her,” he repeats, taking several glugs of beer until the glass is half-empty.

“If she’ll listen,” I respond.

This time it’s my turn to drink some more beer, closing my eyes for a moment as the bitter liquid hits my throat, taking away some of the nerves I’m not used to feeling.

Yoshi sighs out. “Look, I know you don’t know me, but... I’ve got no boundaries so you’ll just have to deal.”

“Alright,” I respond with a smile.

“I’m gonna be blunt.”

“Please.”

“She’s my friend and I love her. Don’t... Don’t hurt her.”

His request leaves my breath caught in my throat for a moment, causing a cascade of guilt to tumble through my body, dragging me with it into the ground below our feet.

“I mean... she’s sensitive. Emotional. Don’t lead her on. Just be honest about what you can give her. I don’t want to see her hurt again, especially after the crap she’s been through this year. She can take anything as long as you’re just honest with her about what you want.”

Yoshi’s brown eyes seem to plead with me silently despite his attempt to maintain a cheery demeanor. I barely know the man and he clearly sees me as a walking red flag, a monument to emotional fuckery, someone who hurts people, who would hurt his friend.

Is that what I do? What I am? I shut people out so much that I hurt them?

He must see my forlorn expression for he leans forwards a little. “I hope I didn’t say something I wasn’t supposed to. I just get a bit overprotective of her.”

“Not at all,” I respond. “I understand.”

As I finish the word, the air shifts, a crackle of electricity zipping through it as my head turns a little. The scent around me becomes sweeter, fresher and goosebumps trace across my skin as I look up to see Indigo walking towards us, her jacket and scarf draped over one arm, a small glass of beer in her other hand.

Her dress fits her tightly, blanketing her curves perfectly. The neckline is a sharp V leading down to tits that bounce on either side of it as she walks, but I notice them only for a second before my eyes meet hers. She looks nervous and angry at the same time, if that’s possible.

I don’t usually tolerate such impertinent glares from the women I frequent. In fact, on another day, such a bold glare would have earned her quite a memorable disciplining, but seeing as I earned the taunt by turning up unannounced, I’ll let it go.

She approaches from our left, placing her glass on the table and inhaling deeply before speaking. “You two... having a nice time?”

“Great,” grins Yoshi as her gaze drifts in awkward steps to me.

“Good,” she nods stiffly before moving closer to sit down on the bench. I shift to the right to give her space.

“Let me give you some more room,” Yoshi announces, getting up off the bench to take a seat opposite me.

My body hums, my awareness of her reaching fever pitch. I’m careful not to brush against her but it does nothing to stop the zigzag of static shooting between our bodies. Or mine, at least.

Yoshi’s wide eyes flit between me and my friend, his lips sliding into the goofiest of grins, causing Indie to lean into him.

“Oh my God, what’s with the terrifying grin?” she whispers sharply, making my lips twist in amusement. “He doesn’t usually act like this,” she mutters, half turning to me.

“Not a problem,” I respond, peering down in her direction as her slight fingers find the stem of her glass, twisting it between them as she stares at the sparkling amber liquid.

But before any of us can speak again, a stocky tree trunk of a man slaps Yoshi hard on the shoulders from behind.

“So, how are we all doing, my lovelies?” he croaks in a Scottish accent, his cheeks rosy above a full brown beard and mustache streaked with gray which seem to melt into his wavy collar-length brown hair. “How’s my girrrl?”

“We’re good, Harry,” she replies.

“And who’s the hottie?” he asks, tipping his head towards me.

“This is Greyson,” she replies, after seeming to exhale her disapproval of his jovial delivery.

He leans in closer, his hands now gripping the top bar of the chair at Yoshi’s back. “Oh, *this* is Grrreyson... *Interesting... Hmmm.*” He rolls the r for so long that I feel the vibration roll across our table before inspecting me carefully.

His indiscreet analysis causes Indigo to shudder out a groan. “God, why is everyone acting so weird tonight?” she moans, pivoting her head towards me a little. “They’re not usually like this.” Her tone is kind of terse and she doesn’t look me in the eyes but I appreciate that she’s talking to me at all.

I smile in response, watching as the rotund Harry takes a seat to the right before gesturing over to the barman as Indie shakes her head. “Another please, barman!”

“So you’re Greyson…”

“God, where’s that sinkhole?” I hear Indie groan to Yoshi before adding, for my benefit, “And this is Harris. He’s Marilla’s brother. All three of them live together between Loch Fyne in Scotland and Washington where Orpha’s from.”

“That sounds like an interesting life,” I suggest as the barman places Harry’s beer onto the table.

“*Interesting?* We live on a fucking farm in the armpit of Scotland. It’s sheep, sheep and more fucking sheep, all day long. And if you get sick of that, there are cows, cows and more fucking cows.”

Indie drops her forehead to her hand for a moment as Harry lets out a mighty guffaw, taking a deep swig of beer. “*One* pub,” he continues. “When it’s open. One shop. One crabby old bat who runs a post office.”

“As old and crabby as you?” Indie barbs, making Harry chuckle broadly.

“Ah, no one’s as old and crrrabby as me,” he shoots back with a good-natured grin. “You know that, girl.”

“Oh, yes, I do,” she responds, managing a chuckle that feels like warm spiced mead sliding down my throat.

“Apart from your sister,” Yoshi whispers with a cheeky smirk, making Harry tumble into drunken laughter which booms from his chest. I tilt my head to see Indie’s chin resting on her palm as she watches him, unable to stop a grin from spreading across her breathtaking face.

“Though don’t tell her I said that,” chuckles Harry. “We’ve all seen what she does to bulls’ bollocks. Once the vet’s chopped them off, what does he do?” he asks, turning to me. “Deliver them to her so that she can make them into stew!” he laughs raucously. “Fucking *ball* stew.”

As he picks up his pint and slams down another mouthful, all three of us stifle grins at his delivery.

“She doesn’t want them to go to waste,” Indie retorts.

“Like hell, she doesn’t!” he bites back. “She just likes massacring testicles! Chomps on ‘em like they’re freaking Tootsie Rrrolls,” he bellows, making Indie groan despite the laughter escaping her.

“*He’d* better watch out,” Harry chuckles loudly with a tip of the head towards me as I smile at the warning, my eyes wandering over to the bar where Marilla and Orpha sit, conversing animatedly with a man and a woman to their left. I’m not unaware that Marilla has glanced over at me several times since I’ve got here, her piercing eye contact not warming up by the slightest degree from what I can tell.

“Stop,” responds Indie, biting down her smile.

“So,” Harry says, turning to me. “Tell me about yourself, Greyson. I’d like to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“Oh God, I need more beer,” gripes Indie loudly, waving over to get the barman’s attention.

Greyson

The next two or so hours pass by in a blur of chatter, laughter, more beer—I'm definitely getting that cab home tonight—and introductions to new people who stop by our table. Not to mention a rather amusing drunken karaoke session on a low stage consisting of nothing but a standing microphone, and involving Harry, Orpha and some very drunk but very committed middle-aged friends of theirs, the entire show topped off by a rendition of Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* by the birthday girl herself, Marilla, who I couldn't help but think had picked the song out for my benefit, seeing as she seemed to glare at me during each of the choruses.

Indigo shook her head in amused embarrassment as she did so. She was pestered to get on stage by Yoshi who also took his turn. From what I gather, she's usually one of the first ones up there, but tonight, she explained her reticence on not being in the mood.

Although we've exchanged a few words here and there, mostly in response to what others have said, we haven't spoken in any depth, nor have we looked each other in the eyes while sitting. We did briefly when I went to use the washroom, and later when she did, but sitting, no. As much as I hunger to look at her, at times I feel the charge fizzing between us so strongly that I wonder if making eye contact in such close proximity would set off some detonation that would

shake the earth from under us, leaving debris scattered all around and our bodies in a state we couldn't yet predict.

Or maybe, once again, that's all me, and all she's thinking is, how do I get away from this asshole...

But...

I don't think that's it.

She seems afraid to look at me, or too angry to maybe, and she's as careful not to brush against me as I am her, despite people joining us at the booth, forcing us to sit closer together. Her gaze seems to seek out my hands, as if checking to see where they are in relation to her, and at several points, I'm sure the hairs prickled on the arm exposed below the sleeve of her black dress...

My eyes fix on Marilla who is making her way towards us from a couple of tables away. As she arrives, she taps Harry on the shoulder. "That's enough hogging our girl. Go bother someone else."

Harry chuckles, groaning loudly as he lifts his bulky weight onto his feet to the sounds of seventies music playing over the pub's speakers and the subdued late-night chatter of Marilla's guests. "Yes, sir. Orders from the general."

"Goodbye, brother. Try to behave." Marilla pulls her chair out and takes up his seat—the one directly opposite from me.

She sits down with purpose, squaring herself to face me. The eye contact she makes is unusually bold. She doesn't flinch nor fidget, nor even look at her daughter. It's only the arrival of Orpha who comes to sit down next to her, opposite Indie, that makes her look away for a moment before pivoting her head back to me.

"So, Greyson... How are you enjoying the evening?"

"It's been... fun," I respond. "Thank you for having me."

"Well, it was rather unexpected," she replies, her voice deep and croaky, so different from her daughter's. "We didn't really have time to say no."

I spot Orpha roll her eyes at Indie who inhales sharply, widening her eyes at her mother who seems to not be affected by Indie's silent plea for civility.

“Well, it was unexpected for me too.”

“But you brought yourself here,” Marilla responds. “To this part of town, to see our girl.”

The words “our girl” cause me to seize for a moment, for despite Marilla's somewhat prickly demeanor, I know that behind it is love and concern for someone precious to her.

And that she sees me as some obstacle to her well-being. This thing that will fuck it all up.

“Yes,” I concede. “I brought myself here.”

Her whole body seems to lift a few inches as she inhales. “Indie, do you mind leaving us for a few minutes? I'd like to chat to your *friend*.”

“God,” she mutters.

“It's my birthday, wildflower. I get to make unreasonable requests.”

Wildflower...

“But a perk of being the birthday girl doesn't include *murder*,” she whispers, inclining her slim frame towards her mother.

“Sadly,” deadpans Marilla, eyeballing me in a way I've only seen the most insufferable of wealthy clients do when I inform them they need to start behaving for the first time in their lives.

Indigo's head tilts a little in my direction and her lips part as if to say something, but she doesn't, instead getting up to join Yoshi and a few other people at a table over to the far left, turning back to look at us once along the way.

I steel myself for what I imagine won't be the most comfortable of conversations. Luckily, I'm used to dealing with the most unreasonable of people, so very little intimidates

me... only in this case, I can't shake the feeling that their concern is right.

So why did I come? Why couldn't I stay away like I was supposed to? Endure the torture for longer?

"So, you wanted to talk to our girl," Marilla drawls, her voice a whirl of sharp rasps. "Why?"

My eyes drift to Orpha who offers me a smile, albeit a muted one.

I contemplate the answer, contemplate the layers of distraction, frustration, irritation, desire and unbidden obsession that have plagued me of late, but I'm not sure my answer will be met with much compassion.

"I wanted to talk to her. I *needed* to."

"Why?" she repeats more firmly.

"I felt that things ended between us without closure. For either of us."

Her sharp pale eyes pierce me as if a needle whittling its way through my skin. "And what makes you think she needed *closure*? Did she tell you that?"

"No," I reply, but maybe it was all the times she told me to go fuck myself by text message, or told me to stop asking her how she was, or called me a prick and ignored me for days if I did. Or maybe it's that I had the arrogant presumption that if I'm this messed up about her, she must feel some of that too. "But I... I felt it."

"You *felt* it?" she sneers.

"Marilla, dear," sighs Orpha.

"It's my birthday, darling. I get to be a cunt," she snaps.

"What's your excuse the other 364 days a year?" Orpha snorts, batting her eyelids, only for Marilla to slide reptilian eyes at her before coming to face me again.

I hide the smile that escapes me by dipping my head, lifting it once my expression is neutral again.

“Yes,” I reiterate. “I felt it.”

Our eyes tunnel into each other’s, blocking out everything but the awareness of a flash of pink in my peripheral vision.

“Was I wrong?” I ask, wanting to know for myself whether she needs closure too, whether she thinks of me, dreams of me, hungers for the taste of me. The touch of me.

That she isn’t plagued by the same insatiable hunger that I am for her that distracts me from what I’m doing, that fills me with yearning so deep that everything else becomes devoid of taste, of scent, of sound, of color...

I expect her to say, “*Yes, you’re wrong, asshole. She doesn’t need closure. She needs you to fuck right off, and not come back.*” Only she doesn’t answer, glancing quickly at her partner next to her instead, and making my heart race in my chest.

“What exactly are your intentions with her, Greyson?” she asks. “What does *closure* look like to you?”

“I... I don’t know. I left in a way that wasn’t pleasant.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“I was hoping to remedy that.”

“And hurt her again?”

Shards of glass whip through the air, slicing at my skin.

“No. I don’t want to do that. I want to see what... works best for both of us.”

“And if she says she wants nothing to do with you?”

“Then, I’ll respect her decision. And I won’t come back.”

She takes a green cardboard coaster in her hand, running her fingers over the rough paper, staring down at it for longer than would be comfortable for the average person.

When she looks back up, I brace myself. “It’s only because of your help dealing with that piece of shit ex of hers that I didn’t get them to throw you out when you stepped foot in here, tonight.”

Her eye contact is so bold that if I hadn't spent years helping the most unpalatable of Washington's wealthiest scumbags to clean up their messes, I may struggle to hold it.

"That's given you a pass. One pass. *ONE*."

Orpha rubs her forehead with her hand, raising her eyebrows as she braces against the storm of Marilla's delivery.

"Now, if you hurt that girl ever again, you'll end up with a storm on your hands that will rock your world, boy. Your money doesn't intimidate me. I'll be over to fuck up your safe little world until you learn some fucking manners. Do you understand that?"

"It seems clear," I reply.

"It is. That girl means the world to us. She's a sensitive one. She's been through some shit. You hurt her, you make her believe something that isn't true, and I'll summon up the power of The Morrigan and rain hell on your ass until you can't look in the mirror without seeing my face."

If it weren't for the second mention of Indie's pain, her words would be borderline amusing. It's not the first time I've been threatened in my life, and I doubt it'll be the last, but I'm not sure a woman has eyeballed me in a way that made me feel like the Celtic warrior goddesses of old were now watching my every move.

"Is. That. Understood?"

"Marilla," sighs Orpha.

"It is," I respond. "Hurting your daughter is the last thing I want to do."

"And yet you're here..."

"And hurting her isn't part of that plan."

"Well, you just remember my crabby old face if the idea even crosses your mind."

I bow my head in concession.

Half an hour later, as we're saying goodbye, Marilla eyes me just as sternly as I thank her for having me and wish her a happy birthday.

"You sure you don't want us to walk with you?" she asks Indie.

"No. It'll be fine."

Orpha's farewell is more amiable and luckily Harry is there, still full of drunken merriment to make walking out next to Indigo and Yoshi feel a little lighter than walking in earlier tonight.

The clunk of our shoes on the sidewalk is broken by a tipsy Yoshi asking how we enjoyed the night and general rambling on, something I'm grateful for.

"Well, this is me," he says a few minutes later as we arrive at a tall brick building not one block away from Indie's place.

"You live here?" I ask.

"I do indeed. When I'm not camped over at Indie's."

"Thanks for coming," she smiles, wrapping him in a tight hug which he reciprocates.

"It was fun!" he exclaims.

"Always memorable when the moms are around," she grins.

"Yep," he smirks back. "Always. You okay getting home?"

"Yeah," she responds, hopefully knowing full well I won't let her out of my sight until she's safely back inside.

"Okay. Nice to meet you, Greyson."

"You too, Yoshi. Thank you for..."

He nods with a smile, knowing full well what I mean, and heads inside, leaving us turning to walk the final block to her apartment.

We walk in silence, heads down, my awareness of her only interrupted by my need to scan the surroundings to make sure she's safe. I want to ask her whether she walks alone around here at night, but I know I've lost the right to. One thing I do know is that having seen this neighborhood with my own eyes, I'm not sure I can stomach her living in it anymore, overbearing boundary-invading asshole or not.

My fingers itch to hold her hand, my body to carry hers down the street, but I don't, of course, uncertain what to say. It's not something which usually afflicts me. I'm not afraid of silence, nor do I usually go out of my way to fill it. But in this case, I'm unsure whether to speak, to not speak, to look at her, to not look at her.

I'm thrown so far off balance that I barely even recognize myself.

Maybe that's a bad thing. Or maybe it's a good one. It's not like I felt at ease with myself before meeting her. It's not like I didn't feel like a monster. I can't tell if what I'm doing now is a growth exercise or an unmitigated disaster, since this entire encounter has been a painful march into the unfamiliar.

Only it's not the cold unfamiliar of a dark place, it's a warm one, one which envelopes me in soft fabric, in light as I discover surroundings I don't understand. Or maybe, that I had just forgotten the existence of...

As we make it to the house that looks like it's seen better days, the wood rotting in parts, the paint faded to the point of non-existence in others, she turns to face me, her face bathed in sepia light from the buzzing street lamp nearby, her eyes solemn but wildly ethereal.

The tension between us is thick, some terse bubble constantly pushing and pulling, drawing us in and throwing us out of each other's orbit.

Her lips part as if about to utter words.

Only I do it first...

Indigo

I'm aware of the wind whipping my face as I stare up at him, unsure what to say, or if I even want to say it.

I've spent the entire night trapped inside some tornado of conflicting emotions that whirl through me so fast, changing course so unexpectedly that at times I've wanted to run out the door, at others, throw a drink in his face, and at others, to wrap my arms around him until this twisted knot of tension I've felt for weeks has unwound from my belly.

And then there's the other sensation which comes from the endless awareness of his tall, powerful body, from his relentless gaze on my face, from the visceral power of our chemistry—one that blasts that which I've felt with other men out of the stratosphere, leaving a blazing trail of metal sparks in its wake.

Or at least, for my part...

Between moments of anger, of claustrophobia, of relief, of bitterness, there have been other moments that trickled through me like warm streams of pleasure winding their way through my body, opening up paths in soil that has been dry since he touched me.

There's been no one since him.

But then, there couldn't be. Between the trauma of dealing with my ex's plea deal, and the relief at finally having the hope

that I can move on from him, I've ached from the loss of Greyson's presence, while hating him for every minute of the discomfort he left behind.

I don't even know why I'm this angry. By rights, I shouldn't be...

I'm not boyfriend material. I can't offer you anything other than this night.

He told me that. *Twice*, if I recall.

It's not like he made me some false promise or didn't warn me.

It's just... the way we made love. It was unlike anything I've ever felt—more intimate, more raw, more powerful.

God, I feel like such an idiot; the simpleton whose hormones are whipped up to the point that she can't tell when a holiday romance is over.

Maybe for him, it was just like any other night. I know full well that a man like him has probably slept with hundreds of women in his life. It can't have affected him the way it did me. After all, the next day, he made it clear we shouldn't see each other again.

He dealt with the case with that man and the knife, as well as the case, texting me daily updates until I couldn't take hearing the sanctimonious concern in his words anymore and told him to leave me alone.

If you really gave a shit, you'd be here, I'd mutter to myself as I got them.

Except he already went above and beyond what he had to, not to mention getting stabbed stopping a man who was sent to scare me.

He's almost a stranger and he had the assistant DA on the phone to me several times, he had his annoying security guys stalk me. He'd check on me. He did everything short of be here.

Not only should I not be angry, I should be fucking well grateful.

And I *am*, but... I can't seem to stop the anger, even though I know annoyingly well that behind it is hurt, pain, longing.

God knows why. I mean, before those last two nights, he was just the arrogant prick who made me inconveniently tingly.

The prick who left as if he felt nothing after that night.

And yet he's here...

If he feels nothing, why is he here?

What does he want to accomplish? Messing me around again?

And why am I oscillating between shouting at him to go fuck himself, and jumping up and straddling him in the hopes he carries me inside, fucks me very very hard, and never lets go?

As the silence bears down on us and I try to ignore how ludicrously handsome he is, his hair slightly longer than it was this summer, framing his face whose cheekbones are as if carved of stone, sharp shadows cut beneath them due to the lamp overhead, my lips part as I attempt to muster up words.

Only my effort is arrested by the sound of his deep voice. "I... I should have called first. I'm sorry."

I wrap my hands around my waist over my oversized denim jacket, one so at odds with his designer one. "Why didn't you?" I ask, my jaw tightening. "What did you want?"

"I needed to talk to you, Indie. Indigo," he corrects, as if unsure he has the right to use my name... or rather, my chosen name, the one I picked for myself when I got out of my mother's so-called "care", and went down to city hall to ensure it was forever legally my name, and not the one that someone who had wished me so much ill throughout my childhood had chosen for me and spat out at me for eighteen years as if the sound of my name was some bitter taste on her tongue.

I search his eyes. The usual annoyingly impenetrable poise isn't quite there today. Instead, there's some solemn note

painted into the shadows around his almond-shaped gray eyes.

“What about?”

Behind us across the street, a rowdy group distract him, making him turn around as they shout something stupidly loud. Once they're far enough away, he turns back around.

“I...” He drops his head, breathing heavily for a few moments. “Can I come inside? I can't do it like this. I have too much to say.”

“No, you can not come inside!” I snap, but the second I do, I slap myself energetically for my inability to keep my cool, especially because I want him to come inside. I want to listen to him, to have him listen to me.

He sighs out a silent breath, nodding. “Maybe we can do this another time when... I give you some warning.”

I dread the moment he'll turn around. “How are you getting home? You've had too much to drink.”

“I'll get a cab,” he replies.

“It's Saturday night. They take forever to get over here.” I turn around in exasperation before coming to face him, taking a moment to collect my thoughts. “I'll call you one from inside. You can wait until it arrives. And then you leave.”

He bows his head as I turn, opening the rickety wooden gate which he grabs and holds open before leading him along a discolored concrete path next to the garden and then to the right and out of sight of the street.

As I get to the white side door, covered in stains, which suddenly make me cringe, I realize that my room looks like a bomb has gone off, which I didn't care about Yoshi seeing because his is never much better, but suddenly, the thought of a sophisticated man like Grey seeing it makes me feel mortified.

I force myself to tap into the anger I still feel, muttering “Fuck it” as I turn the key in the door and open it, fumbling for the light switch in the dark as usual, lowering the dimmer to hide the God-awful yellowy light in this room. I take my boots

off on the mat and stuff them into the overstuffed wooden shoe cubby thing next to the door. I take off my jacket and hang it on the twisted bronze hooks I hammered into the wall a few months ago.

I see him doing the same as I head to the living room—well, living room-slash-bedroom because apart from a little wall between the main area and the kitchen, it's basically a studio apartment at the bottom of someone's house.

The cold sweat of mortification sweeps into my skin as I scan the stacks of clothes I took out of the dryer on Monday and have meant to put away since but haven't. While it takes an hour to wash and dry your clothes, apparently it takes at least five business days to hang them back up in your closet.

I walk past the butts of incense sticks and the yoga mat still unfurled next to the bed... which is, of course, unmade, and grab a handful of clothes off a gold velvet armchair and shove them into a cupboard which I painted purple when I decided the place needed more color, a decision I've regretted ever since.

As my eyes sweep through the room, I compare it in my mind to his place. I mean, I haven't seen it but I already know that in addition to it being about ten times the size of this one, it will be dotted with elegant furniture in muted tones which doesn't look like a group of hippies just had the orgy of the century in it and left all their belongings behind.

Between the multi-colored rugs, the Tibetan prayer flags, the Inca throw blanket, and the Maidenhair Ferns and Trailing Jades hanging in wooden pots suspended from the ceiling by taupe strings, you can barely move without being hit in the face with some brightly colored or living thing, unless you take up that strip next to the bed where I do my yoga or the other section I keep clear next to the kitchen where I practise my headstands.

I head over to the bed and roll up my eco-friendly yoga mat before shoving it underneath, and then grab my white quilt, throwing it over my pillows and neatening it up before

laying the woven indigo and magenta blanket I bought on a trip to Peru neatly down on top of it.

“I... I wasn’t expecting company,” I offer as an excuse as I turn around, trying to sound like I don’t need to give one... which I don’t.

“I like your place.”

I swallow as he watches me from across the room, wondering if I should offer him something to drink like I usually would.

But instead, I head over to the landline lurking on a side-table which I salvaged off the side of the road a few blocks away before bringing home, steam-cleaning, sanding and painting turquoise.

As I approach the phone just a few meters away, I bristle as he watches me as I pick up the receiver and press 4, the speed dial number for the local taxi service. But as I bring the phone to my ear to the automatized beeps of the numbers, a hand appears, and a finger presses down on the tab in the dock to arrest the call.

I glare up. “What are you doing?”

As his eyes meet mine, his chest lifts and falls visibly. “I need to talk to you, Indigo. Please, just let me talk. You can throw me out after that.”

I shove the phone back down into the dock and take some steps back until I’m just a few feet away from the only bare wall in the apartment—the one I practise my headstands against.

“Fine. You get five minutes. No more.”

He nods, taking a moment to compose himself. I’ve never seen him look like this. I remember that first day we met when he chewed me out for my cycling skills. God, he was such an arrogant asshole... And then at that office—sitting there in his designer suit with people fawning over him all day. Christ, it was nauseating. And then on the island, the way he’d carry me, dominate me, pin his weight onto me as he slid inside me, glaring down, not letting me look at anything but him.

Seeing him ungrounded like this is unnerving, but then I feel so shaky that I feel like I could either vomit or pass out at any moment.

His words, uttered so solemnly, make me want to run away. “I shouldn’t have left the way I did. I panicked. I thought I was doing the responsible thing. I know how it must have felt for me to end things so abruptly.”

His words, while soothing, don’t do enough to extinguish flames of hurt that have smoldered since that day, as irrational as they are irascible.

I should have just filed him away in the *Assholes to Never Talk to Again* category and not given him a second thought apart from the odd, “Remember that stuck-up asswipe on the island with the talented tongue?” when drunk with my girlfriends...

So why didn’t I? Why has the longing and distress burrowed deep into me like this?

My hands coil even more tightly around my waist and I feel myself shudder internally. “Is that all you had to say?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been sorry since I left. I wish I could redo that last day.”

“Why?” I shrug before adding, “Didn’t you say you aren’t boyfriend material?”

“Yes. I did. And I meant it.”

His words tear at the fabric of a hope that I hate the very presence of. “Then... then what are you doing here? Come to mess me about again?”

His brow furrows, his lips parting as he stares down at me, inching forwards, just half a foot or so, but enough to make me take a step back. He’s not getting what he wants this time... even if my entire core is hijacked by tingling warmth as my eyes scan the broad curve of his shoulder, the pale muscle of his neck, the full muted pink of his lips which kissed me so gently... and so roughly... and in such intimate places...

“Mess you about?” he says. “You mean you’d want to be with me?”

The question rankles. *No I do not.*

And anyway, why does it have to be *me* who wants that? I don’t want the crumbs he’d offer me. I want him to *want* me as much as I want him. I’m not some charity case.

“What’s the point?” I shrug. “Aren’t you *too fucked up* to be a boyfriend? *Not relationship material?* Let me guess, too tortured to put yourself out there? How original, by the way... Another tortured man who refuses to put in the effort to sort himself out and ends up messing everyone up along the way... Excuse me while I let out the world’s biggest yawn.”

His face hardens.

“We’re *all* relationship material, you know?” I continue, blowing through any attempts to hold onto my dignity or pretend he doesn’t affect me the way he does. “*All* of us. It just depends on how much effort we’re willing to put in to heal whatever’s going on inside us. That’s what some of us do. Those who are not cowards, that is...”

He takes a step towards me, his respiration accelerating. “I’m not a coward.” The rumble of his words is a tremor through my body. “I’m just not delusional. I’m not healthy for you.”

“Then why are you here?! To make me think of you again? Is that it? Or do you expect me to beg? Convince you that you can be in a relationship, put myself out there, only for you to freak out at some point and run away like last time...”

I heard my voice shake as I said it, partly because the stakes have never felt so high in terms of my heart before, and because I hate every fucking thing I’m saying.

It was a holiday romance, for fuck’s sake, as he told me very clearly.

And here’s me talking like he pledged his undying love for me and then ran away the day before our wedding.

I don't know what's wrong with me, but after this descent into the irrational, I suspect he'll be walking out that door and won't be coming back.

Only I'm not finished, apparently...

"Well, if you think I'm going to beg you or talk you into it, you've got another thing coming! In fact, I wouldn't beg for anything from you if I was shipwrecked in the ocean being circled by sharks and you came along in a boat after one of them had just enjoyed its first nibble."

His eyes gleam for a second until his features darken again as I shake under the weight of his glare, kicking myself for my inability to hold onto any semblance of sang froid in his presence.

Which has pretty much summed up our entire relationship since day one.

"I'm not asking you to beg, Indie. *I'm* the one here doing the begging. Not you."

"Begging... for what?"

"I... I don't know..."

I shake my head. "You don't know? Well, could you maybe have thought about it before disrupting my night by coming over here unannounced?! Is this the plan? You show up every few weeks just to mess with my head some more before fucking off so that you can navel gaze and lament about how emotionally stunted you are?!"

Girl, you really need to stop talking at some point...

And fucking fast.

I drop my head, trying to breathe as I stare at the floor between us, wondering why I have to be so fucking mean—meaner than I've ever been to anyone else. I don't want to say these things to him, but the frustration of him messing with my head just as I'm trying to heal from everything has me feeling panicked, out of control; my mind hacked, my thoughts derailed, drawn endlessly to a man who has given me a ten-point presentation as to how many red flags he's waving about.

Maybe it's me who's fucked up, not him.

I've spent my life searching for connection, knowing full well that it's not your blood family who will always provide that, but those special people who blaze into your life and who you have to do everything in your power to not let go of. I felt that with Marilla, with Orpha, with Harry, with Fran, Rami, Yoshi, and the handful of close friends I have.

And I felt it with him.

Some hormonal stupor, no doubt.

"I don't want to hurt you, Indigo. Or keep you in limbo."

I lift my gaze from the floor. "Then, *what?*"

"I've... been unable to get a sense of closure," he replies. "After our time together."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"I know it's my fault. I just... I wanted to know if you had the same problem as me? If you needed closure?"

The word irritates me, conjuring up closed doors.

"No," I lie. "I don't need *closure* from you. What I need to do is express how it feels when the man you've just spent the night having sex drops you off at home and announces you'll never see him again, especially when you've just been through something... traumatic together."

Tears well up in my eyes as hurt bubbles to the surface, coupled with my own shame at being so judgmental—I mean, he'd just been stabbed with a knife trying to protect me. Maybe him running away was a way to deal with that...

"Okay," he responds. "Go ahead."

"What?"

"Tell me how it felt. I'll listen to anything you have to say without judgment, anything that will help us get it out."

"Us?" I sneer.

"Yes," he responds, eyes so focused on mine that every time I look away and then back, they're still roaming all over

my face, as if he sees nothing in the room but me. “*Us*. I don’t believe I’m the only one who’s struggled to move on. Or am I wrong?”

“And what evidence are you basing that on?” I ask, feeling affronted at his presumptuousness, even if he is right on the money.

“I know you’re hurt. I can feel it in my chest.”

“Oh, what tipped you off, Sherlock?” I scoff, and dammit, a treacherous tear falls swiftly down my face before I can stop it. I wipe it away fast, but I know he sees the glistening smear left behind. I drop my head, composing myself, wishing I could cool myself off before talking and not just tornado my way through every conversation with him.

In truth, I’m not used to talking to men like this—so disrespectfully, so openly. It hits me how safe I feel saying these things and how unsafe I felt in my last two relationships. Kohl wasn’t abusive but I guess I never quite felt like I could fully be myself around him, and I never talked to him like this, ever.

But then, my heart never hurt when things ended with him the way it did when Greyson looked me in the eyes, handed me a letter which I have no intention of reading, and walked away.

By the time I look back up, another stupid tear is running its slow path down my face and as I meet his eyes, he grimaces as he studies me.

“I’m hurt too, Indie. Even if it was my fault. And I hate this fucking feeling you inflict on me. We need a way to get this out.”

“How?”

“For a start, tell me how I hurt you, and I’ll tell you all the ways you’ve taken control from me.”

“An impromptu Saturday night therapy session? How considerate of you.”

“I mean it,” he replies, the words harboring a growl. “I want to hear it. I want you to call me an asshole if you need to.”

“Oh, I *need* to.”

“Then do so.”

“Fine. And by the way, that offer isn’t reciprocated,” I spit out. “You call me *one* insult—*one*—and I’m throwing you out and you can walk home as far as I’m concerned.”

He nods again, but this time his eyes warm as if in mirth before falling into shadow again.

“Go ahead,” he says. “Say what you’ve wanted to say. I want to hear it.”

I lift my chin, my jaw tensing. “Fine. Forcing some to leave a vacation early ‘for their safety’ after you’ve spent the night making—” I reconsider the phrasing seeing as I already know my emotions have run away with me—“having sex, and then dumping them the second you get them home is a dick move by any standards. And then sticking these security guys on me without me even asking? Do you know how dehumanizing that felt? As if I was a problem you could just throw money at but not have to look at...

“And then, we went through something together. *That man*. And I know you got it much worse than me, but that’s that point. You were injured by him. Because of me. And I wanted to be able to make sure you were healing properly... or something. It would have reassured me. Made me feel less guilty over it.”

“You had nothing to feel guilty about,” he replies resolutely. “Not one thing.”

“Yeah, well, just for your information, millions of year of evolution have taught women to care for men who have gotten hurt protecting them, but I didn’t get that chance. Instead, I spent weeks wondering if you were healing properly.

“The whole thing... it... made my heart hurt. And if you’d have left in a decent way, talked to me for more than three minutes as though I was this thing you couldn’t wait to get

away from, I wouldn't have felt like the ground just ripped open under my feet. I wouldn't have left angry and frustrated and worried. I'd have... understood. I mean, you told me you didn't want a relationship. Nor did I, for that matter, if that's what was freaking you out."

He stares at me, unmoving, watching over my attempts to hold onto my composure with quiet equanimity... or what seems quiet, for beneath the still outer shell, I see tension in his hands and the clenching of his jaw.

"Dumping me as if you couldn't get away from me fast enough... it hurt me. It made me ache inside. It made me cry —" I hear my voice quiver as another tear rolls down my cheek. I wipe the salty droplet from my face, trembling a little. "That's all I have to say."

My words plunge us into silence as his eyes meet the floor, closing for a moment before opening to find me. "I hate what I did. How I left. I thought I was doing the right thing, to protect you. I was wrong."

"Protect me? From yourself?"

"You wouldn't understand, Indigo."

"Why? Beyond the realm of human comprehension, is it?"

"It's beyond what I'm capable of explaining. I'm not good for you. But nonetheless, I shouldn't have left like that. It made everything worse."

"Fine. Is that all you have to say?"

He takes a step towards me. "No. That's not all. I..." He inhales thickly. "I... I need to tell you that I've thought about you, Indigo. A lot. In fact, you've consumed me since the day I left."

I shake my head slowly, wondering if he's trying to torture me. "Why... why would you tell me something like that?"

"Because I need to get it out. I need to get *you* out of my system. And I'm no closer to accomplishing that than the day I left."

“How charming,” I spit out. “Just what every woman wants to hear.”

His face hardens. “You don’t understand what it feels like for a man like me to be out of control of his own fucking life.”

“A man like *you*? No one likes that feeling. Including me! What makes you so special?!”

His body encroaches further, his eyes wide on mine. “No one likes it. But to me... it feels like... something crawling under my skin. Something I can’t get out.”

“You’re saying I’m like bugs crawling under your skin? How charming...”

“I don’t mean *you*, Indie. I mean... the absence of you.”

I swallow down my ire, hating how every word he speaks burrows its way under my skin.

“It’s been more painful than I’d anticipated,” he continues. “And I don’t fully understand why. All I know is I can’t keep going like this. I’m... distracted. And irritated. Nothing tastes right anymore.”

“You told me you don’t want a relationship with me.”

“It’s not that I don’t want one. I *can’t* have a relationship with you. Not the type you’d need, anyway.”

“What exactly do you think I’d need?”

“Not me. I’m not a normal man. I don’t feel things the way other men do. Or at least I didn’t until you came along.”

“Well, I’m sorry to be so inconvenient.” I shake my head in irritation. “You’ve said your peace. Has this little therapy session helped you to move on?”

“No. It hasn’t. And I didn’t come here just to talk. I don’t believe that will be enough to cure either of us.”

I frown at him, my hands tightening into fists. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I told you, Indie. I need to get you out of my system. *Thoroughly*. What’s more, I want you to get me out of yours.”

I feel blood seeping from me. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I want you to let me fuck whatever this thing is out of us.”

“What?!”

“I don’t repeat myself for many people. You’re one of the few. So let me make it clear,” he growls. “I want to offer you my body to use until you no longer suffer the ache we both feel. I want you to let me fuck you, over and over, until I can make it through the day without my mind wandering back to you. Until you no longer feel the hurt I left you with.”

“You’re out of your mind,” I utter breathlessly, making his face harden, as does mine.

But in reality, outrage is not the only thing I feel, for the second he said “let me fuck you”, my body lit up in tingling warmth, my pussy pulsating, opening up, wetness pooling in the gusset of my panties.

“You know what I can do to you, Indigo. That night we had was just a very very mild taste of the pleasure I can give you.”

“Well, I hate to deflate your ever-expanding ego, but I have several battery-operated devices that can do just as good a job as you... without the emotional torment afterwards.”

He encroaches another step, forcing me to take a pace backwards.

“They can give you relief,” he snarls. “I can fuck you so well that you remember the feel of our bodies against each other for the rest of your life. That just the thought of us fucking will give you enough material to—”

“Stop,” I respond swiftly. “I mean, I hate to burst your little bubble whereby you get to just fuck me as you please and leave again to be with other women, but I’m a demi-sexual. I can’t have sex unless I feel a connection with someone, feel safe.”

“I know what a demi-sexual is.”

“Good, because I felt safe with you back on the island, but right now, all I’m feeling is like I want to throw you out and never see you again, so joke’s on you. I’m not participating in your self-serving little fantasy.”

The gap between us closes to little more than a foot, forcing me to crank my neck back to look up at him.

“You felt safe with me... on the island?”

“Yeah, well, that feeling has well and truly passed.”

He shakes his head slowly. “First of all, I’m not sure that’s true. I don’t believe you felt fear when you let me in here.”

I would call him an asshole, but he’s right. I felt a lot of things. Fear isn’t one of them.

“And second of all, I wouldn’t be with other women. *Not one.* And you certainly wouldn’t be with other men. *Not one.* You’d use my body for as long as you needed it. My cock would be your plaything, Indigo. You could touch it. Suck on it. Climb onto it and ride it. Or kindly request that I fuck you with it. In the hole of your choosing.”

Holy fuck...

Literally.

“As fast or slow as you wanted. With whatever props that would please you. You would be safe to try out the things you’ve always wanted to but never dared ask the incompetent fools you’ve been with...”

Shit...

“My body would be reserved for you. No one else would be allowed to touch it. Just as that greedy wet pussy of yours would be reserved for me. *And. Me. Alone.*”

At his uncivilized growl, liquid heat lights up my neck, spreading upwards until I just know my cheeks are as red as Harry’s face when he goes out in the summer without his sunscreen.

I bet his royal presumptuousness can practically feel the heat radiating off them from ten feet away.

“And what? You’d fuck me and then put your clothes on and leave? How do you think I’d feel afterwards?”

“We can make rules,” he replies. “No leaving with an hour of fucking. Or no leaving without spending the night. I’m willing to work with you on this...”

“Work with me?! Hey, don’t do me any favors. You’re the one that waltzed back into my life tonight to make some lukewarm suggestion about you getting to fuck me whenever you wanted to, no strings attached!”

“It wouldn’t just be for *my* benefit,” he retorts. “It would be for both of ours. Or can you deny you’ve spent the last two months thinking about me?”

“You’re such an *asshole!*”

He takes another step forwards until I can practically feel his breath on my face. “Because that’s what I’ve been doing about you, day and fucking night, and that’s why I’m here suggesting something that I know will hurt at times... because the alternative, your absence, is no longer an option if I want to hold onto any semblance of sanity.” His eyes drop to my lips for a moment before finding my incensed glare. “I’m offering you my body to use until such time as you don’t want me anymore, you don’t miss me, you don’t ache to hear my voice, the way I’ve ached to hear yours. What do you say?”

What do I say?

I want to curse words of outrage, to throw him out, to ask him how he dare suggest something like that to me... but the truth is that that night we spent together did more than just move me—it removed something from me, or at least some of it—the feel of someone else who took a piece of me without consent.

It removed the skin-crawling horror of feeling out of control, the black ice of fear, the rage transforming into terror, and the contamination I have felt since.

I haven’t felt as infected by someone else’s unwanted touch since. I didn’t seize up the way I did with Kohl, even though he never forced me.

Grey's touch was like the water of some pool, continually filled by a waterfall originating in the clouds. It was cleansing. It was powerful. It was transcendent.

But... Could I do it? Use his body to rid me of the poison I have felt, to allow me to take pleasure once again?

And what of the consequences? Wouldn't I just end up in more emotional distress?

As I stare up at him, my body buzzes in anticipation.

"I can't," I say, shaking my head, only for him to close the gap between us quickly, his palm finding the wall next to my head as my hands push into the hard muscle of his chest beneath his crisp light-gray shirt.

He dips his head, eyes boring into me. "Why not?"

"Because... I'll end up getting hurt. You don't care about that part of things, do you?"

"I told you I won't touch anyone else. You can use me for as long as you want... until you don't need me anymore. I'm not in any hurry to move on from you. It'll take as long as it takes."

Use me...

The thought of having ready and exclusive access to that talented body of his addles my brain for a second and as my fingers slide against the solid slabs of his pecs, it's all I can do to stop myself from wondering how hard the rest of him is.

"Use you?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you some big Alpha Dom who gives orders and requires control?"

"Indeed," he replies. "And that will be happening."

Fuck...

"But those words should show you how desperate I am if I'm making such an offer."

"Desperate to get me out of your system..."

He must hear the somber note in my voice, for his eyes soften. “Desperate for relief from this torment, Indigo.”

He slides his lips onto my cheek, brushing against them softly, causing my eyes to close and my breathing to quicken.

My fingers ache to reach for his cock, to slide up and down, to feel how hard he is... how big.

He doesn't kiss my skin, but traces tracks across it so tenderly that I feel myself dissolving into him.

As if reading my thoughts, he whispers, “Do you want to touch me?”

When I refuse to answer, he weaves his fingers into my hair at the back, pulling back and causing a whimper to flee from my throat.

“Do you?”

I glare back at him, hating how desperate I feel to unzip his pants and pull his cock out, to wrap my fingers around it, my lips around it, the clenching walls of my pussy around it.

When I remain mute, he says, “I'm hard, Indigo. Very very hard. For you. In fact, I get hard every time I think of you. Tell me you're not wet. Tell me you don't want to feel me inside you...”

“You think the fact that we get turned on by each other overrides all other considerations? You don't care if I'm hurt, do you?”

“Of course I care.”

“Well, then, if you cared, you'd leave. I can't just sleep with someone and feel nothing. I'll end up in pain. But then, I doubt you'd give a shit about that, would you?”

His fingers release from my hair, finding the wall behind me, and I hate that they do, for what I really want is for him to spend the night fucking me, holding me. I want to use his body as therapy. To replace every bad memory I have of someone else with the memory of his, the imprint of his.

Sure, maybe I'd end up hurt, but the constant ache of the absence of him has plagued me since the island anyway and the pain of memories of my ex was soothed by the touch of him.

Maybe he could be useful to me.

Maybe we could be useful to each other.

“You think I don't care,” he growls. “You think I haven't spent night after night worried about how you are, desperate to find out for myself. You think I pay to have security stationed on the other women I've fucked. It's never happened before.”

“I didn't ask for that. And anyone with money can throw it at a problem.”

His strong heartbeat pounds beneath my palms as his thumb brushes against the shell of my ear.

“You're right. It's cowardly to do that. I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm here, facing the mess I made. I want to make this feel better... for both of us.”

As his finger caresses the skin of my cheek just next to my ear, my body moves internally, as if drawn to his light, or whatever the hell it is about him that makes every cell of mine suddenly ravenous.

My lips part as the large pad of his strong thumb sweeps down my face, inching closer to my lips, taunting me with the need to take it in my mouth and suck... just as I want to suck something else of his for the first time—or rather, have the right to take him all the way into my throat after the deprivation he subjected me to last time.

I want to lick and suck and taste his cum on my tongue if only to remove the feel and taste of someone else, the memory of which has haunted me at times, leaving me pacing, or unable to sit still, unable to enjoy yoga, reaching for alcohol to sanitize myself of the phantom taste that unexpectedly floods my mouth.

His eyes tunnel into mine as the digit approaches my lips, pushing into the flesh of them, and I fight the urge to bring out

my tongue and lick the thing, to draw it into my mouth and suck on it as I stare into his eyes.

What's more, he knows full well what he's doing to me.

I bet he loves every minute of it.

As his thumb presses into my lip, in a sudden loss of self-control, he growls as he lifts me in the air, shoving my dress up to the tops of my thighs so that I can straddle his hips, my feet locking into each other around the hard curve of his ass.

"Wait," I whimper as my back hits the wall and he begins to breathe heavily into my ear, the sound low but shaky.

"I'm not going to do anything you don't want," he growls, his lips scraping against my ear. "*Ever.*"

The words feel like a thousand years' worth of therapy.

My fingers curl around his shoulders as he presses his wooden erection between my legs. I inhale audibly, moaning a little as he begins to pulse it into my clit, separated only by the fabric of his charcoal gray dress pants and the increasingly wet cotton of my black panties.

As my sex begins to swell, I pull myself into him. "That's it," he whispers, "Rub that naughty little clit on my cock."

His words immerse me in pleasure as I drop my head to his shoulder and begin to rub up and down, desperate to pull my panties to the side and insist that he fucks me immediately.

"You like the feel of my cock?"

"Yes."

"Good. It's yours to play with whenever you want. No one else gets to touch it until you say so."

As turned on as his sinful words make me, I can't help but panic a little.

Until you say so...

How long will that be?

And what if I never want to let go?

I close my eyes tightly, and try to forget about the human I'm getting to know, and focus instead on his strong male body which, despite everything, I feel safe being held by... and which gives me the kind of pleasure I never thought I'd experience again... plus the promise of the elusive orgasm I didn't think men were capable of giving me...

As I can't help but rub, a low rasp floats from his lips. "Describe your pussy to me."

"What?" I whisper, not used to talking so much during sex.

"Don't make me repeat myself. How does it feel?"

"It's... wet."

"What else?"

"It's aching."

"What for?"

"You know what for."

"Say it..."

My head tilts, my lips locating the skin of his muscular neck. I brush them against it, breathing in his scent—sandalwood, citrus and musk. My tongue aches to lick the thick ridges of his neck, to taste only him.

"What for, Indigo?"

"You," I reply, and he groans his appreciation, his breathing quickening.

"Can I feel?" he asks as my lips hover against his ear.

"Yes," I reply and in an instant, he shifts to hold my ass up with just one hand, pressing some of my weight into the wall as easily as if I were a bag of air. He slides the other hand up my thigh, lifting my dress until it's bunched up around my waist before locating the gusset of my panties and pulling it to the side, fast, the movement desperate.

My cheeks flush as he exposes my wet sex while my eyes remain closed as he hisses his arousal as his fingertips enter into contact with the slick outer folders of my pussy. As he

explores further, feeling the copious amounts of gloss, he lets out a sinful groan, locating the tight opening.

“You have no idea how many ways I want to defile that naughty... tight... wet pussy of yours. I really hope you know that.”

I moan as he pushes a finger in, just a little, running a tight circle around the entrance. Without a word, he grabs for my panties, pulling them hard until the elastic makes it past one knee. He twists, pushing my leg wide with his thigh until he can yank the elastic past my foot. Shifting weight again, he does the same on the other side, throwing my panties onto a chair nearby.

He presses his erection into my now naked pussy with increasing fervor.

“Your pants,” I mutter with a gasp, knowing they’ll end up covered in my own wetness.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he snarls. “I like your naughty pussy juice on my clothes.”

“Shit,” I whisper, aching for his penetration as he slides me deftly up and down the bump of his erection. “Wait.”

He stops. “What?”

“I... I don’t want you to be too forceful,” I respond, lifting my eyes to meet his. “I need to be sure I can do this.”

His eyes soften as he watches me. “Not leading is against every single instinct of mine. I ache to dominate you, to earn your unequivocal submission. I want to make you beg for me. I need you to know that.”

“I’m not begging,” I reply. “And I already know all this. That’s why I need to be sure I can do it.”

“We’ll take it as slow as you need. I’m going to give you instructions. You decide, not me, if you want to obey them. Shall we try that?”

I nod, the lust in his eyes making me rub against him once more.

“Good girl,” he whispers. “Now take off the dress. Show me those tits of yours. I want to watch them bounce as I fuck you.”

“I still haven’t decided if we’re doing that,” I respond.

“Good, because I still haven’t decided if you’ve earned the right to feel my cock slide all the way inside you. I’m still debating that. I want you to take off the dress for me like a good girl... because I want to look at you.”

I want to look at you.

I’d better not tell him that I think those words might be my kryptonite.

On instinct, I want to defy him, but I can’t resist the urge to reset in his arms—reset the sensations that happen when a man touches me, reset my own ability to be aroused, reset how I feel when I’m naked in front of a man.

I glare at him for a while, wondering whether he has the right to see me naked again, while fighting my desperation to arouse him with my body.

He waits, holding me up with ease until I reach for the waist of my dress, and pull it over my head, throwing it onto a chair nearby. I reach behind me for the clasp of my bra, undoing it before peeling it off my chest, sweeping the straps down my arms and discarding it.

I glance down at my tits before lifting my eyes to a bestial groan of arousal from Grey. “Such an obedient little girl for me.”

I shake my head. “I’m not doing this for you,” I respond, though I only wish that were completely true. “You’ve offered me your body, so I’m going to use it.”

His eyes glitter darkly. “It’s yours. I want you to play with it.”

I frown. I’m not in the habit of having sex just for pleasure. I guess that’s a new skill I’ll be learning... I’ve always been jealous of my friends for being able to have no-

strings-attached sex. I've seen about three therapists to try to make this demi-sexual thing go away... to no avail.

I don't want to be a slave to my emotions anymore... and maybe he can finally fix this problem.

"What do you want to do next?" he asks.

"Your belt."

He watches me patiently, silver-hued eyes flaring in the dim light until I reach down for the buckle, shifting my body so that I can open it fully. Without asking for permission, I unbutton his expensive-looking dress pants, trying to ignore my own wetness now making them glisten, before unzipping them.

"Indigo," he warns sternly as my hands grow more famished and I reach for his cock, pulling it out of his briefs. The thing is so big, so girthy and so fucking hard. I squeeze it, tipping my body forwards until my head leans on his shoulder. I buck my hips positioning the head of his cock at my pussy and using it to slide up and down onto my clit, moaning gently as I do.

"I'm on birth control," I whisper truthfully, and he stiffens, pulling back a little.

"What are you saying?" he responds, his lips caressing my cheeks and his hot breath lashing my face.

I'm saying, Grey, that I want to feel you properly—that I want you to replace the feeling of someone else. That I want your cum to replace his...

Only I don't say that.

I won't ever say that to anybody.

So instead, I tremble as I say, "I want to feel you... if that's an option."

He pauses for a few moments, before carrying me a few feet to the left and placing me down on my dining table which I thank God I barely ever use so it's one of the few half-tidy things in my apartment. He reaches into his back pocket for

his phone, presses something and hands it to me, watching me as I stare down at the screen.

“I’m careful about protection,” he says, “but I was tested this week.”

I stare at the STD-test results on some health app, all negative, before nodding and throwing his phone onto an oversized cushion on the floor nearby.

“I’m clean too.”

“When were you tested?”

“Not long after I left the island,” I respond truthfully only for his eyes to widen and his breathing to quicken.

“Has any man touched you since me?” he growls.

“That’s none of your damn business.”

“Yes it is.”

“I told you I was clean. I’ve been tested.”

“I trust you about that. That’s not why I’m asking. I want to hear it, Indigo,” he insists, breath escaping him as he begins to glare. “Have you touched a man since me?”

I cock a bratty eyebrow. “Why?”

He leans into me, forcing me to crank my neck back. “Because if someone else has touched you, I want to know who and how many times so that I know how hard and for how long I have to fuck you to get the feel of him off your skin. *Permanently.*”

My lips part on a high-pitched exhale, for he has no idea how badly I want him to cleanse me of the touch of any man I’ve known before him.

I contemplate being a brat and not telling him, for I sure as hell don’t want to know who he’s slept with since me, but the jealous rage etched into the tense angles of his sensational face temper my need to provoke him.

Deciding to torture him a little longer so that I don’t end up losing all power with him, I remain quiet only for him to

rasp something in irritation as he leans into me. “You don’t get my cock unless I know if I’m fucking the feel of someone out of you.”

“I haven’t been with a man since you,” I respond.

The exhale of relief that unfurls his body fills the room.

“In any way? Kissed, touched?”

“In no way,” I respond, truthfully.

“Good. No man will have to die today.”

“But... I...” I swallow. “I want you to do that anyway.” He frowns. “To remove the feel of anyone else that came before you.”

I swallow hard as his frown turns into a grimace and his eyes dart between mine, his expression stern.

I didn’t mean him to react. It just... slipped out.

“I will be doing that,” I reply. “That much I promise you.”

I soften my expression and after a moment, he pulls his shirt off his impossibly hard chest and discards it before doing the same with his pants. Without a word, he slides his palms under my ass and lifts me back to that free spot against the wall, raising me up until the head of his cock strains at the entrance to my pussy.

Desperate for release, I pull my weight down only for him to wrap his arms around me, stopping the descent. “Say please, little girl,” he whispers into my neck.

“Fuck you.”

“Say it.”

As my pussy clenches in anticipation, the word floats from me. “*Please.*”

Barely a second later, he sandwiches me firmly against the wall and groans loudly as he pushes his cock all the way inside me until it won’t go any further. My feet lock around his ass as I close my eyes in relief at feeling him there.

I open my eyes and he remains silent as he begins to fuck me, except for low exhalations of pleasure. I grip his arms, dropping my head to his neck, breathing in his skin, as he seems to do mine as we make little sound, listening to the deviant squelch of his greedy cock as it makes use of the wet hole that is so engorged that I can think of nothing but what his cock entering me must look like.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he whispers. “I’ll slow down.”

My tits slip against his bare chest. “Don’t stop,” I implore.

“You like it?”

Despite the walls I so very much want to erect around me, I can’t help the words which escape me. “I love it,” I respond, feeling the type of pleasure I hadn’t known for so long before him.

How can I possibly feel safe with a man who doesn’t even want a relationship with me?

I don’t know but right this second, I don’t care. I close my eyes, clutching his neck and savoring the deviant slip of his huge cock as it stretches me out, as he uses the walls of my pussy to stimulate himself with.

As a wave of pleasure hits me, and I gasp at the sensation, I open my eyes, feeling his bore into my profile.

“Let me hear you,” he whispers.

“Grey...”

“I mean it. Let me hear that naughty little voice of yours.”

I exhale soft notes of pleasure, my body a trembling mess, my strength seeping from me, leaving me barely able to hold on to his arms.

“Louder, Indigo.”

I comply only to be hit with more praise. “My good little girl. Such a naughty little voice. His deviant lips locate my ear nestled into my hair. “But you’re holding back. I can hear it. By the time I finish with you, you’re going to learn to scream in pleasure.”

As my tongue leaves my mouth and I lick the salted skin of his neck, desperate for the taste, unable to control my hunger anymore, he carries me silently across the room, withdrawing from me and placing me down onto the bed.

He climbs on, lying down on his back next to me, bending his elbows and placing his palms under his head, watching me as if I'm a servant sent to tend to him.

“I want you to play with your new toy, Indie.”

Jesus...

“It's yours. No one else's. I want to watch you enjoy it, ride it. No shame. Use it.”

I haven't done that in so long. Both Micah and Kohl liked to be on top, either of my front or back, and I was never much in the mood for putting on a show for either of them.

What's more, I know this whole “Enjoy my cock thing” is the exact opposite of the way Grey likes to fuck—in control. Despite his relaxed body language, I see the tension in his muscles when he offers me the control that I know full well he needs.

“Ride me, Indigo,” he presses. “I want to watch you.”

Taking a breath, I lift one bent leg over him, positioning his cock at my pussy and slowly sliding my weight down to his hiss of approval and the narrowing of his eyes.

I rock my hips, planting my palms onto his torso, using my strength to slide backwards and forwards, my tits bouncing as I do.

His greedy gaze roams up and down my body as I close my eyes, tip my head back and exhale in pleasure, pausing so that I can feel the head of his cock straining against my cervix.

After a moment of sheer relief, I tip my head back down.

“You look so good bouncing on my cock.”

I slide myself up and down his shaft to his grisly growl of approval.

“You like it?” I ask, desperate for him to feel pleasure.

“I like when you’re my little slave girl.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I whisper, the words melting into a moan.

“An asshole whose cock you’re working very competently, Indigo.”

I bite on my smile, realizing the stretch of him is beginning to ache, especially since I haven’t been penetrated since the island.

“Can you come?” I ask, letting my breasts bounce above him as my hair tickles his chest.

“Have you done enough to earn my cum?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Then, you know what to do.”

As I frown, he adds. “Beg for it.”

I shake my head.

“Beg for my cum. I know you want it.”

“I’m not begging you.”

“I can do this all night if you like,” he retorts sinfully, and frankly, if it wasn’t for the soreness, I’d gladly let him.

As I hesitate, he says, “Come here.”

“What?”

“Lie down onto me.”

I comply, leaning forwards so that my breasts push into his chest and my mouth nestles into the crook between his neck and shoulder. I can’t stop myself from moaning his name, from kissing his skin over and over and over in utter reverence at his body and what he can do to me.

He wraps his arms around me tightly so that I can’t move... only I don’t panic as I did with someone else. I melt into the sensation, trapped and unable to pry myself up, moving by nothing other than the fast and rough impalement of his cock into and out of me.

When he tells me I have to take a little pain, pleasure floods me, as it does when he tells me that next time, my hands will be tied behind my back.

How can I feel this safe when he's defiling me so viciously?

"No more," I whisper.

"Then beg for my cum."

"Please come inside me."

His hands wind around my back, tightening the cage around me as his cock buries deep inside and he increases the cadence of his thrusts, the movements positively savage. "Do you like when I fill you up?"

"Yes. Please."

"My naughty girl..."

A second later, he emits the most diabolical of rumbling groans which pummel my chest, keeping his grip on me tight as he pumps his cum deep inside me.

A while later, as he helps to ease me off his frame and his cum pours out of me, he wraps my quilt cover around us, our legs intertwined as he pulls me into him.

Greyson

I'm aware that I'm awakening at the sound of her voice in my dream, some whimper the like of which she breathed into my ear last night as I held her against me so she couldn't move and fucked that open wet pussy she was offering me. She wasn't bound and gagged as I would have preferred and yet pleasure surged throughout my body in scorching waves from the second I first entered her, to the moment, I shot my copious load inside her.

My eyes open a little to perceive a frail stream of light peeking through the gap between her thick curtains. It must be after eight which will make it the latest I've woken up in a long time. What's more, I believe I slept most of the night which is unusual for me, not only because I'm not used to sharing a bed to sleep in, but because I wake every night, often several times a night, unable to go back to sleep.

I wonder for a second if it's the alcohol that did it, but I recall her face nestling into the crook of my neck, as if unsure if I'd allow it and then her curled fingers pressing against my chest.

And then drowsiness...

The warmth under the duvet cover makes me shift a little, my eyes opening more. Every single thing about this feels

unfamiliar—from sharing a bed, to wanting to, to wanting to watch her as she wakes up, to not wanting to leave...

I picture her last night, riding my cock, pushing herself down all the way to the root of me, moaning as she closed her eyes at the sensation. And then as I held her against me and fucked her tight wet hole, my hands couldn't help but want to inhale every piece of her.

I don't know how to navigate this thing I suggested. Day one and boundaries which make this doable are already crumbling. If I can't respect the boundaries of our agreement, she won't be able to.

I don't know what the alternative is... A relationship with a man as disturbed as me?

I'd need therapy for a start. A lot of it.

She'd have to meet my fucked-up family, and the morally questionable people in my life.

And then, what would I do when the events I repress day in and day out overwhelm me, leaving me unable to speak, to get up, to go out, to be human for days or weeks at a time?

My world is so dark, both at work, and inside my own diseased mind. I don't know if I can lead her down a path when I can't be sure I can lead her out safely.

I never cared much before because I've never felt protective of someone like this. I've never felt someone's pain before. I don't even know how it happened to me, but as of right this second, the plan to fuck each other out of our systems is already faltering as I feel desperate to watch her eyes as they open for the first time, to listen to the sweet noises she makes, to watch her make me tea, an order she might accomplish with less attitude this time...

At the sound of a whimper, my eyes open wide, my body instantly awake, for this was not some whimper of pleasure or sigh of awakening, but something which makes my blood turn to ice.

As I turn to face her, I see her stir, locked in a nightmare, her body twitching as words fall from her lips.

“No. No. Please. No.”

I grab her arm, shaking it a little. “Indie.”

Her body convulses, her word a desperate scream. “No!”

“Indie!”

I shake her body, only for her to squirm a little, a desperate scream muffled in her throat.

“Indie!”

As her eyes open in a rush and her body begins to still, she peers into me as if not understanding. She pushes her weight backwards, sitting up, her breathing so labored that I feel the panting on my naked chest.

Her hands wrap around her knees and she dips her head as she catches her breath. Her body is misted in rivulets of sweat, every inch of her skin suddenly covered in them.

They take me back to my own nightmares, the ones I have of that day, seeing it happen over and over in my mind...

My fingers run over the slick skin of her lean arm. “Are you okay?”

She nods, her respiration audible. “I’m okay. Just... a bad dream.”

“Do you get them a lot?”

She lifts her head a little, her solemn jade eyes finding mine from between her long pink-tipped hair. As I push the strands to the side across her misted face, tucking them behind her ear, she flinches, getting to her feet, naked but for the short night dress she put on to sleep.

She paces a little, bristling, losing control. “I can’t do this.”

“Indie.”

She turns to face me. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I’m gonna end up really badly hurt.”

“We can change the—”

“No rules! I can’t do this! Even after one night, I know I’m gonna end up in pain. In a month, I’ll be in hell! I don’t want to depend on someone who’s not going to be there.”

“Indie, I’m working on it.”

“Oh, lucky me. And what if you can’t work it out?!”

I drop my head, staring at the floor between us, my heart hollow in her chest, both at the idea of leaving, and because I want to know what her nightmare was about, but know she won’t tell me.

But then, I can’t exactly talk. I’ve never shared the things that plague me with anyone. Not the full story, anyway.

“Indie, I want to try.”

“Well, trying’s not good enough!”

Sweat makes her skin glisten, turning the white cotton translucent in parts. It begs me to pick her up and hold her until she calms down, but I’m afraid I’ll only make her panic more.

A single tear floats down her face. “I’m sorry. I... I can’t do this. I need you to leave. Please.”

“I can’t leave while you’re in this state.”

“I’ll get over it. It’s not the first time. Thank you for all the stuff with my ex, but I can’t see you anymore, Grey. Not like this. Maybe one day we can be friends or something.”

The word grates through me.

I want to fight. To tell her that I’ll be there, but I don’t know if my pain will become her disaster somewhere down the road.

“Please,” she insists, her respiration shaky, her hands quivering. “I’m sorry but I need you to leave.”

I take a step towards her. “Indigo.”

She thrusts her palm out, taking a step back, panic coursing through her system. “No,” she mutters breathlessly. “This arrangement is not going to work for me. Thanks for the

sex... and the closure, or whatever this was, but I can't do it again. I'm going to end up in hell. I just know it."

"Indie, listen to me."

"No!" She takes a step back. "We can stay friends. That's it. I can't see you anymore. I need you to leave. *Please.*"

Indigo

One week later

“Come on. He’s really nice. Plus, it’ll do you good.”

I swirl the rooibos leaves around in my glass teapot as I try to tell Carrie for the fifth time that I’m not into blind dates, especially seeing as I keep hallucinating the taste of Greyson Everitt’s tongue in my mouth.

This date technically wouldn’t be blind, for apparently, I met this guy she wants to set me up with at the wedding, although my thoughts were so polluted that day by both my ex and a certain breathtaking groomsman whose eyes I felt burning into me for every minute of the ceremony, that I barely remember anyone but them and the gorgeous bride, at this point.

“What’s this guy’s name again?”

Carrie lets out a sigh of exasperation, though I detect a breath of amusement lingering therein. “This’ll be the third time I’m repeating it, girl. Philip. *Phi-lip*.”

“Sorry. Also, I swear to God, I have no memory of talking to a Philip.”

“Well, he remembers you. Tom says he’s a really great guy.”

“You don’t know him yourself?”

“I mean, I’ve met him. Just not that well. He’s Tom’s friend. He says he’s a nice guy.”

“Oh God,” I groan. “Nice guy. That sounds like a red flag at this point.”

“You’re nuts,” she laughs. “Tom has good taste.”

“Tom? Girl, face it. Men have *no* clue when it comes to what women want in a man. How does he even know him?”

“They met at some self-empowerment camp for men that he did a few years ago.”

“Oh, God. Red flag number two.”

“Stop it,” she chuckles.

“Do you have a pic so I can at least tell if I’m vaguely attracted to him?”

“Hang on.”

“Oh, wait a minute,” I say as the pic comes through. “I did chat to him. It must have lasted like three minutes. I barely remember what we even talked about.”

In fact, just looking at him reminds me how unmemorable chatting to him face to face was, though in fairness to him, that could have been because I was still reeling from the visceral effect that talking to Grey had on my insides, an effect I never really talked to Carrie about.

She knows we had that dance and she knows there was some tension between us but after the way things ended, I was too hurt and humiliated to talk about him, so when she asked about him after she got back from her honeymoon, I told her he’d left and insinuated that nothing had happened between us. I’m guessing Grey was similarly discreet with Tom as well.

“Well, you left quite an impression, Indie.”

“Come on. Let’s face it. It doesn’t take much to impress heterosexual men, though, does it? I mean, a pulse seems adequate these days.”

Carrie giggles. “Stop trying to worm your way out of this. Look, you don’t have to go back to his place.”

“Oh, trust me, I won’t be.”

“Just get out a bit. You’ve been through enough shit this year. It’s time to have some fun again. Just think of it as dating practice. He’s really nice, apparently.”

I’m sure he is. He could be the nicest man in the world. It’s not him. It’s not even about the socially unbearable hell of going on a semi-blind date.

My mind is still wrapped up in someone else.

As I pour the tea through the filter nestled in my large handmade mug and place it back onto the wicker place mat on my messy coffee table, my mind wanders to Greyson and to what an ass I made of myself that morning after he spent the night at my place.

The nightmare shook me... and then the touch of his hand.

Only it wasn’t *his* hand that made me flinch—in the blurry post-nightmare confusion, I mixed up his with someone else’s.

He must think I’m a basket case after the way I panicked and threw him out.

Hell, maybe I am.

I guess that would make two of us, by all accounts.

It’s probably all for the best. I’m not sure that two fucked-up people like us are even capable of a harmonious relationship.

So then why can I still smell the scent of him in my apartment? Feel his presence? He was there less than twenty-four fucking hours, but it’s as if he imprinted on the damn place or something. I keep seeing him in various places, remembering where he dropped his clothes, where he kissed me, where he fucked me. I’ve washed my sheets twice at this point just to get the energy of the way he fucked me out of them.

Tingling warmth radiates throughout my body as I think of how we ended up in bed, how he leaned back and watched me as I rode him.

What's more, I wasn't even that self-conscious. I felt... *safe*... and desperate to feel him deep inside me. And then he wrapped his arms around me so tightly that I couldn't move, but I didn't want to, nor did I feel like I was being held, that I was unable to get away.

I liked the dominance. I liked my ability to submit without feeling anxious. I liked the way he used my pussy and holy God, the bestial noises he made as he ejaculated inside me...

I could have come again just from listening to them.

“Indie?”

Fuck...

I need to stop this thought merry-go-round of insanity, once and for all.

I inhale swiftly, about to do something that no part of me wants to, but at this point, I'll do anything to get rid of the memory of that fucking man haunting me. I can't even look at his messages. I need him out of my system.

“It'd have to be in a public place.”

“Of course,” she affirms. “How about near our place? That way if things get uncomfortable, you can text me and I'll come over with Tom or something.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that. And if you turn your phone off, so help me God, I'll kill you and bury your body in the woods.”

“There's this bar-restaurant like two blocks away from our place,” she laughs. “You'd have to come downtown. Friday night.”

I sigh out. “Okay. Let's do it.”

Greyson

Two Days Later

“**W**e’ve told him if he does it again, we’re dropping him as a client.”

“What did he say?” I ask Tom, sitting opposite me at the oversized table of the conference room, its floor-to-ceiling window looking out onto DC.

“You know what he’s like,” replies Tom, still sporting a faint tan from his honeymoon in Saint Kitts. “One day you can reason with him, the next he’s acting like a fucking maniac.”

“It depends on whether the fucker’s sober or not,” I reply.

“Yeah, well, he thinks he has it under control this time.”

“Don’t they all?” I groan, glancing out at the sun setting behind the DC skyline.

I close our entitled and enabled, but very rich dumpster fire of a client’s file, glancing at my phone for the fiftieth time today on the off chance that Indigo has finally decided to answer one of my fucking messages so that I don’t have to do what I don’t want to and turn up unannounced at her place. Again. I’d rather my relentless urge to stalk her was left unnoticed by her.

Irritation rattles me as I see nothing from her.

“Wanna go get something to eat?” Tom suggests.

“Sure,” I managed distractedly. “Doleson’s?”

“Um, it’ll have to be somewhere nearer our place. Carrie wants me to stay nearby tonight.”

“Oh?” I ask absently as we get to our feet, picking up our stuff. “Yeah, we’ve set her friend up on this blind date with a friend of mine, and I’ve been ordered to be on standby in case it gets weird.”

I stop in my tracks as he says it, my eyes drifting upwards to meet his. “Friend?”

“Yeah. One of her brides—” His eyes light up. “Oh, you know the one! The one you bet on. Pink hair. Smart mouth.”

An ice-cold wave of jealousy and outrage washes over my body. “What?”

“Indigo. Remember? I mean, that was *a lot* to spend on just one dance.” He smirks, lowering his voice at the sound of voices in the corridor. “Hey did anything ever come of that? Carrie said you didn’t see each other again after the wedding...”

My eyes bore into him as my body turns rigid. “Where are they meeting?”

“Um, Lupine, I think.”

“Fine. Let’s eat there.”

He frowns, his brow creasing nervously. “Um, you sure?”

The snarl that leaves my throat takes us both aback. “I insist.”

I hear Brackson, another colleague who joined us, speak words to Tom and me, but my mind doesn’t process them, focused as I am on the pink-haired girl who is audacious, foolish or outright insane enough to be sitting at the corner of the bar

next to some sweaty asshole I vaguely remember from Tom's wedding.

Her back is to me, her hair tied into a high ponytail, the tips of it brushing against the exposed skin of her back above a tight burgundy top. As she lowers her head to stick a fork into some food, I swear I see the greedy fuck who is delusional enough to think he has a snowball's chance in hell of fucking her glance down at her tits which must be nice and pronounced in that tight top.

The more I look, the more I realize that it's a miracle that his eyeballs are still intact and he doesn't currently have a large fork rammed through one of them.

"Grey?"

My eyes slide to our colleague Brack, and only then do I spot a waitress standing next to him at our table.

"Ready to order, sir?"

"I'll have what he's having," I respond tersely with a tip of the head towards Brack, turning my attention back to the couple at the far side of the bar.

I spot the man asking Indigo a question only for her to shake her head. He smiles in response, and asks the barman for something, putting up two fingers, making me wonder whether the dead man walking is making her take more drinks than she wants to.

My fist clenches around my glass as the barman puts two glasses of white wine down next to them, and the poor unfortunate whose life I may just have to destroy bit by bit seems to insist that she take a sip.

"Grey," says Tom, drawing my unwelcome gaze. "Looks like they're having a good time." He signals over to the couple, one of whom I'm about to permanently cremate with a smile.

"What do you know about this guy?" I ask, my body still tense.

"He's a good guy. Bit intense but he's alright."

“Intense?”

“Yeah. Or just focused, I guess. He kept asking about her, so—”

I can’t look at his ruddy neck without wanting to sever his carotid with my teeth.

“Hey, you didn’t really have a thing for her, did you?” Tom asks. “I asked Carrie and she said you didn’t hook up or anything. After you left so quickly, I assumed—”

“I don’t want her set up on any more dates with your fucking friends, Tom.”

“What?” he sniggers before his features turn more serious. “I asked Carrie. She said she was single.”

I consciously loosen my grip on my glass before it smashes in my hand as the man leans his stocky torso into Indie’s slender body.

“Yeah, well, not for much longer,” I decide, reaching for my wallet. I draw out a hundred-dollar bill and place it on the table. “Sorry, gentlemen. I’ll be calling it a night.”

“Grey... what are you up to?” asks Tom, a half-hearted warning drawing the words out.

“You’ll find out,” I mutter as I slide my wallet into the back pocket of my pants and put on my jacket.

“Oh fuck,” I hear Tom mutter, but before I can get to my feet, a little face turns, and then more... and startled green eyes lock onto mine...

Indigo

I swallow down a piece of cucumber as Philip once again encourages me to have some more wine.

I guess this is part of that Nice Guy™ routine.

I shake my head. “I’m a lightweight,” I repeat, my tone more insistent than last time. “If I have more than one, I start giggling incessantly which is no fun for anyone.”

“Sounds fun to me.” He flashes me a long smile. “This one’s from a vineyard in Napa. My uncle knows the vigneron. He buys it by the caseload.”

I don’t know if that’s supposed to impress me but so far, none of it has, including the borderline creepy way he keeps glaring at me before glancing down at my tits, and the uber-confident innuendo-laced way he’s talking. The guy sounds like he’s swallowed some manual on how to pick up women and is just going down the list of techniques one by one.

I can’t believe Carrie would think we’d be a good match. Although, maybe that’s not entirely fair. I am aware that I’ve been looking for flaws since I walked in.

“Just have one sip,” he pleads with a smile. “For me.”

Or maybe not...

He can’t surely believe it’s okay to pressure a woman to drink in this day and age, can he?

I glance at my phone, contemplating whether to text Carrie now and order her to get her ass over here so that I can bow out without him insisting we go on another date, or worse, go someplace after this.

He's a handsome guy and based on his suit and watch, apparently quite wealthy, and I suspect another woman would be loving his company, but right now, all I want to do is find out if there's an ecstatic dance class nearby where I can blow off some energy and forget the contents of my brain for an hour.

For no other reason than to get him off my back, I bring the glass to my lips, taking a sip that a hamster would consider restrained, just enough to coat the tip of my tongue. "Mmm, delicious," I lie, barely tasting it as I place the glass back onto the bar.

He smiles as I distract myself with my meal, which I will definitely be paying for myself even though it's gonna cost me about a week's worth of groceries. I guess I should have checked the prices on the menu before agreeing to this place...

"Your hair has faded a bit since the wedding," he says, peering around the side of me at my hair tied up at the back.

"Yeah, red and pink wash out pretty easily." I take a bite of tomato as he swallows down a piece of steak.

"So, you're gonna let it all grow out then?"

"Um, I don't know," I shrug. "I never plan these things out. Honestly, I just wake up one day with a need to dye my hair," I chuckle. "Change up the energy a—"

"Because," he interrupts as I take a sip of water, "I think you'd look amazing if you got blond highlights." I blink at the horse's ass very very slowly. "Maybe you could get them to strip that pink out and just go blond." His eyes fall to my lips. "You'd be so fucking hot."

It suddenly dawns on me with razor-sharp focus that I don't have the social skills to navigate this date because right now, I truly can't tell whether the average woman would be

flattered when all I want to do is cram the rest of his filet mignon down his esophagus... in one piece.

“Well, thanks for your opinion,” I respond, smiling at this point *only* for the sake of Tom’s friendship with him. “I may take you up on it one day.”

“I hope you do.”

As I take a sip of water, the cubes of ice clunking against my lip, my gaze is drawn to a waitress carrying a tray with at least four plates on it, her balancing skills bordering on supernatural. As my gaze pivots a little to the right, a chill seizes me and the skin prickles on my exposed neck and upper back.

I turn my head a little further only to have the air sucked out of me at the sight of a man sitting on the other side of the restaurant, his eyes smoldering with dark flame, his face a cloud of thunder. He’s sitting at a table next to Tom and some other guy.

What the actual fuck...

An unconscious whisper escapes me. “*Greyson.*”

My jaw tightens as I begin to glower. What the hell is he doing here? And moreover, what the fuck is that unholy glare of his about?

The sound of Philip’s voice has me swiveling back to face him.

Shit...

“So, what did you get up to after the wedding?” he asks. “I thought I might bump into you, but I didn’t see you.”

“Oh... Not much,” I stammer, glancing back quickly to find Grey still stalking us like a freaking wolf. “Um... just... hung out with friends, finished my yoga retreat.”

“You do yoga?”

“Yeah. I teach it too... Well, it’s my first year teaching.”

He swallows down a mouthful of food, eyes widening on my face. “I’d love to see that. I hear yoga teachers are extra

flexible...”

What an ass...

I force a smile. “Look, I’m so sorry. I never normally do this, but I completely forgot to text someone something really urgent before I arrived. Do you mind if I send them a quick message?”

“Of course not,” he replies.

“Thanks.” I grab the phone from the top of the bar, scrolling down to Grey’s name.

What the hell are you doing here?

Afraid to peer behind me for fear that Philip finally realizes I’m checking out another man in this place, I stare at the phone, hoping he has the decency to respond... which he does.

Deciding which way your date is going to die...

And in which very memorable ways I’ll be making you regret the decision to dare talk to another man.

Oh, shit...

Philip must see my pale face, for he asks, “Everything okay?”

“Um... Yeah... Just... one second.”

I type back, my hands so shaky that I have to delete every second word and rewrite it.

I’m single and can do what I want.

Now go away and leave me alone.

I want to enjoy my date.

I know that last line was kind of an asshole move, but I don't care right now.

Suddenly, I'm determined to actually take this date seriously, if for no other reason than to piss off the presumptuous asshole who thinks he has some claim over me... despite the fact that I'm finding his particular brand of unhinged-in-a-designer-suit possessiveness panty-meltingly hot—not something I ever thought possible after my history with Micah.

“All done,” I say, reaching for the glass of wine to steady my nerves, not daring to turn around to see Grey's face as he reads my response. I gulp down a mouthful. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem. You... um, like it?” he gestures to the glass I put back down.

But before I can answer, a staticky whirr of movement has me tilting my head as the familiar scent of a certain cologne sets my senses on fire and the space to my right fills with a dark figure.

Fuck...

“Good evening.” The unusually gravelly rasp of a deep, elegant voice cuts through the chatter and irritating lounge music pervading the room.

I look up to find Greyson creating the triangle from hell with Philip and me. My mouth hangs open for a few seconds as he takes his wallet out and puts down two hundred-dollar bills. “For your meals,” he utters, his tone callous.

He turns to me and I realize from the roughening of his handsome face and the rapid way he's speaking that his body is some metal overcoat filled with gunpowder, just ready to blow and send shards of shrapnel flying everywhere.

“Put your coat on, Indigo,” he orders through gritted teeth. “Now.”

“What?!”

Philip, eyes wide as if in shock, gets to his feet, standing shorter than Grey but still over six feet. He squares up to him. “Sorry, um, who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the man about to take your date home with him,” Greyson responds, his voice a bestial growl. “And teach her a lesson in manners.”

His rage-filled eyes dart to mine for a split second. “Coat on. *Now.*”

“Do you know this asshole?” Phil asks me.

“I... He’s a fr—” Grey turns his head a little to peer down at me. “Look, I don’t know what you think you’re doing but you have no right to barge in and tell me what to do!”

“Oh don’t I?” he snarls. “Let me make it clear. You either get on your fucking feet and walk out that door, or I’m throwing you over my shoulder and carrying you out.”

“Like fuck you are,” Philip snipes as Grey turns to face him. “We’re on a fucking date, here.”

“Oh yeah. And who’s gonna stop me?” Grey asks, derision dripping from him. “*You?*”

But instead of speaking, Philip cocks his fist and lands a punch right on Grey’s lip, splitting the skin open as blood rushes out, though the movement of my “date’s” fist was slow and awkward and I kind of suspect Grey didn’t block it on purpose.

“Oh my God! Stop!” I shout, hurtling myself to my feet, pressing my palm into Philip’s chest. Leaning over, Grey shakes his head, wiping a trail of blood from around his mouth as Tom suddenly appears behind him with urgency.

“*What the fuck, guys?*” he asks, his eyes darting between the three of us.

Greyson, noticing my palm on Philip’s chest, grabs hold of my wrist, yanking my hand away and easing me behind him. He glares down at Philip whose eyes are wild, flitting all over Grey’s face, his body trembling, his hand seeming unsure whether to make another fist.

Before I can stop him, Greyson grabs for Philip's shirt, pulling him mercilessly into him until his face is inches away.

"I would retaliate," growls Grey, "but it would be a highly unfair fight, and I wouldn't want your *date* to have to see your face turn into roadkill."

Oh my God...

"Now," he continues, his profile a storm of ire. "Are you leaving or am I calling the cops and pressing charges for assault and then calling my lawyer to start civil proceedings against you? I can have him drag you through courts for years if you like..."

"Grey," Tom warns as the barman suddenly makes an appearance next to us from behind the bar.

"Do you know this lunatic?" sneers Philip.

"You either stop or you take this outside," orders the barman.

Philip trembles before pushing Grey's hand off him. "You know, fuck this!" He staggers back a little before grabbing his jacket from the back of the stool. "Have her. I knew the little prick tease wasn't gonna put out anyway."

As Grey takes an irate step towards him, Tom shoves him back as Philip, still breathless and outraged, grabs his phone from the bar and puts his jacket on.

Adrenaline still playing havoc with my body, I watch as he storms out, almost slamming into a waiter along the way, banging the door behind him.

"What is wrong with you?!" I exclaim, trying to keep from shouting.

"Coat on, Indigo."

"Grey," begins Tom.

"Now!" He turns to his friend. "My apologies to you and Brack for disturbing your evening."

"To them?!" I scoff. "What about to me?! I'm the one who had to be subjected to your live caveman performance."

“Coat,” he snarls before addressing the barman hovering over us from behind the bar. He takes out his wallet, adding another three hundred to make a total of five. “Does this cover the food, wine and inconvenience?”

The barman picks up the notes. “That’s plenty, Mr. Everitt.”

“Grey, how about if Carrie and I take her home?” suggests Tom.

“What am I, some bag of food?”

“We don’t need your help,” replies Grey, ignoring me. “You and Brack enjoy the rest of your night.”

“You okay with this, Indie?” asks Tom.

No, I’m not okay with it...

If Grey thinks he’s gonna treat me like some possession, he’s got another thing coming...

Only I can tell by the frankly menacing glint in his eye that he’s losing patience with his friend and for the sake of their friendship, I tell Tom it’ll be fine and pick up my coat, throwing him and the barman a mortified goodbye and storming out, ready to give Greyson Everitt a piece of my mind.

As we make it onto the sidewalk, I turn around to face the wolf, his expression still wild with fury, even if it does make the boundary-less prick look hot as all hell in that trademark moody way of his.

“I suppose in your alphahole brain you think what happened back there was acceptable?!”

I swear I heard a growl come from his throat.

“Well, it wasn’t! I’m not into being stalked! Nor am I into neanderthals interrupting my dates to piss all over everyone when it looks like someone else wants to play with their little toy du jour, so you can kindly... fuck off! And as for your oh-so-kind offer to take me home, you can fuck off with that as well!”

Shaking my head, I turn, incensed, and begin to walk down the street in the direction of the subway station, only to yelp as he grabs my arm and spins me around. “You’re coming with me, Indigo, whether you like it or not.”

The sight of blood around his split lip steals the worst of my fury. I shake my head, feeling my cheeks burning and my body humming with the maddening kinesis that is born of the incongruous mix of outrage and arousal. “Like hell I—”

But before I can complete the sentence, Greyson leans over me with a groan, lifting me across his body and beginning to carry me down the street.

“Put me down!” I shout, wiggling a little only for him to reaffirm his grip on me.

“You have no idea how much fucking trouble you’re in, little girl,” he growls into my ear as he walks, carrying me as if I weigh nothing.

His head pivots a little and our eyes collide, my breathing quickening as I take in his stern face, his jaw tight, his eyes wild.

And while his words scare me and also make me want to blast him with a well-prepared speech about how most men manage to control their inner troglodyte, I can’t deny the arousal spilling into my body like water trickling into a parched riverbed.

You’re in such trouble...

Indie...

Our gazes unlock as he veers left a little, placing my feet down next to a black Bentley. His.

There’s a beep and he opens the door. “Get in,” he orders.

“No! I’m not getting in, asshole!”

He takes a step towards me, caging me between his tall, athletic frame and the interior door of his ridiculously sturdy-looking car.

“Don’t make me make you, Indigo,” he warns. “You’re already in more trouble than your unicorn-fluff-filled brain can comprehend.”

“Like hell I am!” I retort, though my mouth suddenly goes dry at the deviant words coupled with that unrelenting glower of his.

“Get in.”

I lift my chin. “Or what?”

He leans into me, tempestuous gray eyes a savage stampede of jealous fury. “Or I will use every second we stand here to contemplate how to make your punishment more severe.”

“That sounds like something you’d hear on CSI: Miami, just FYI. And secondly, *you’re* the one who should be punished for your blatant lack of self-control.”

“Get in. *Now.*”

We eyeball each other for what feels like a minute as passersby glance at us, before I finally turn and get into the car, flinching as he slams the door shut behind me.

As he gets in a moment later, he reaches for my seatbelt, drawing it over my body and buckling it in place. He does the same to his, checks his rear-view mirror and drives off, the car’s engine growling down the street.

To where he’s taking us, right this second, I really don’t know.

Indigo

I throw stealthy glances at him as he drives in silence out of the city, leading us south in the direction of Port Washington, the opposite direction to where I live.

“Where the hell are we going?!”

He remains silent as he has done since we got into the car, his expression wrathful and so tense I feel it in my body.

“Hey, I have a right to know where we’re going, you know? And news flash, you’re not the aggrieved party here. You’re the stalker asshole who interrupted my date, so don’t start acting like the victim here.”

His fingers grip the steering wheel tightly as my eyes can’t help but roam to the blood dried around the cut through his lip which secretly makes me want to tend to it despite my ire.

“I mean, I get you’re all descended from cavemen, but that was some Homo Erectus shit you pulled back there. Just because we had sex, doesn’t mean you get to dictate who I can and can’t go on a date with.”

He pulls a sharp turn off Highway 210 and onto a smaller road, one enveloped entirely by woods, his face hardening and his breathing quickening with every second he drives.

“Hey, where are we going? I’m not kidding.”

I peer around as he turns onto an even narrower path, the woods denser, shutting out the night sky, the tall dark trees closing in on us.

I reach for my phone in my purse as my heart rate begins to spike. “If you don’t tell me where we’re going *right fucking now*, I’m calling Fran.”

He remains wordless, as I swipe my phone on, finding her name in my recent call list.

“I’ll call her, you know.”

“Go ahead,” he replies through gritted teeth, the first words he’s spoken since he got in the car.

“Fine!” I press the green phone button next to her name, suddenly wondering if I’ll even get reception here.

“Hey babe,” she sings to my sigh of relief. “How’d the date go?”

“Um... it went a bit off track.”

“How?” she chuckles as I glance up at Greyson’s stern profile wrapped in the shadow of the dimly lit road he’s driving us down.

“Greyson turned up.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah. I’m in his car right now.”

“Oh, fuck. He’s taking you home?”

“I’m gonna tell her, you know?” I whisper to him, moving the phone away from my lips.

“Be my guest, Indigo,” he replies as he turns down a path to the right.

“Fine!” I bring the phone under my chin. “He’s driving me... somewhere.”

“Somewhere?”

“Yeah. We left DC and headed south.”

“What? He won’t tell you where you’re going?”

“No, apparently he’s sulking at the fact that I *dared* talk to a male member of the species other than him.”

“Okaaayyy,” Fran drawls as I stare up at him again, the car slowing, the crunch of gravel beneath its huge wheels signaling that the path is now strewn with stones and twigs. “Where exactly?”

“We turned onto this road called Bumpy Oak Road a few minutes ago. And now we’re on this gravel path.”

“Doesn’t he own some huge mansion outside the city?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I respond truthfully. “Being the moody caveman that he is, he’s refusing to answer my freaking questions. I can’t tell if I’m being driven to a house or into the woods to be buried.”

“Well, can he hear you now?”

“Yeah, he’s right next to me.”

“And did he stop you from calling me?”

“No,” I respond.

“Then I’m taking it you’re not about to get buried, babe.”

As my mind flashes back to the protective way he was carrying me down the street, I’d guess that’s probably a safe assumption.

“I mean, he’s letting you call, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck’s sake. Put him on!” she blurts out. “Let me talk to him.”

I put her on speakerphone, lifting the phone closer to him. “Frannie wants a word with you.”

“Greyson.”

“Hello, Fran.”

“Hi. Look, where are you taking Indie?”

“To my home. It’s in the woods just south of Ripley.”

“Why?”

“Because your friend is going to enjoy a very, very severe punishment there. The kind that requires extreme privacy.”

His words seem to make Frannie go mute for at least fifteen seconds during which there is no sound but the rumble of tiny stones beneath the tires of his huge Bentley.

Grey’s head tilts to the right and he makes eye contact with me for the first time since getting in the car. My lips can’t help but part at the deviant way he’s devouring me with his eyes.

“Um... Indie, can you take me off speakerphone,” Frannie asks as Grey turns back to look at the wood-encased path.

Relocating my voice, I say, “Done,” lifting the phone to my ear.

“Um, you sure this is a situation you need rescuing from, hun?” she asks, mild amusement hanging off her words.

“Um... I...”

“Cause I’ll call the police right now if you do...”

“No, don’t do that.”

“Look, how about you call me tomorrow? Put me back on speakerphone.”

“Okay. Done.”

“I’m gonna call Indie tomorrow. And if she hasn’t got back to me within twenty-four hours, I’m gonna call the police, okay?” she says though there is an entirely frivolous note to her voice which kind of dampens the threat somewhat.

“Very well,” replies Grey. “Your friend should have her voice back by then. Just about.”

My mouth unlatches in incredulity at the insinuation, and for a second I can’t tell if he means I’ll be screaming, or my throat will be otherwise engaged. I can’t deny that I’ve found myself irritatingly frustrated as I’ve wondered what it must be like to choke on moody prick’s cock more than once in the last few weeks.

“O-kaay, then,” sings Fran as out of the darkness, a tall wide black gate looms up before us.

As we approach, there’s a loud metallic click and the ominous gothic-looking gate slowly opens, allowing him to drive us through.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say, glancing behind me at the sight of the gate shutting us in. As I turn around, my breath hitches at the sight of a huge house appearing like some ghostly apparition bathed in chartreuse light. “Oh, and it looks like we’ve made it to a house,” I add to Fran. “A big one.”

Grey ignores me utterly, parking the car in between the house and a large stone fountain.

“Um, still want rescuing?” she asks. “Because I’ll do it.”

As Grey turns off the engine and gets out, slamming his door shut, I whisper, “I’m pretty sure you should, but I don’t think my pussy would ever forgive either of us,” realizing that I’m in some whirlwind of both fear... and anticipation.

“Okay then,” she snorts. “You enjoy that punishment,” she says, “and that dick,” she adds in a whisper.

After spending the last two nights listening to me rant and nauseum about what a prick he is, while also waxing lyrical about what an insanely thick, long, greedy dick he has, I think Fran knows this is the kind of punishment I might not be able to say no to.

“And make sure not to forget any details of it,” she adds as Grey swings my door open. “I’ll be wanting them all.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I whisper as he leans over me, unbuckling my seatbelt, before reaching under me and lifting me out.

“Just a minute,” I protest as he places me back onto my feet and slams the door behind me, but before I can say more, he bends over, his shoulder hitting my waist.

“Hey!”

Before I know it, I’m being carried across the wide pebbled driveway over Grey’s shoulder like some freaking

deer he went out and hunted and is now dragging back inside to chop up and eat.

“Put me down!” I shout, my head hanging upside down. “Who do you think you are? *Thor?!?*”

But instead of an answer, I hear the sound of another pair of footsteps coming from the right.

Oh my God...

I turn my head to see an upside-down pair of feet in sturdy black boots walking down a path to the side of the house.

An unfamiliar voice shoots through the air like a firecracker going off. “Good evening!”

“Good evening, Stanley. We’ll be needing privacy. All weekend. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

I tilt my head up to just about make out a late-middle-aged and bespectacled man wearing a hunting jacket eyeing me curiously. As he tilts his face to the side almost as far as I do, I can just about make out a note of amusement creeping onto his weathered face.

“You must be Indigo,” he says, his voice as warm as whiskey.

Between the ridiculousness of my current upside-down predicament and the fact that he knows who I am, I feel like I could remain mute for quite some time, but instead, I manage, “Yes. Nice to meet you,” unsure if it’s possible to feel more mortified than right this second.

“Well, you two enjoy your evening.”

“We will. Goodnight, Stanley.”

“Do you need me to open the door for you?”

“No. I’ve got it.”

“Very well. Goodnight, all.”

As Grey makes it up the three wide stone steps at the front of the house, I feel him remove something from his pocket and hear the clicks of a lock.

“How did he know my name?!” I ask to his infuriating silence. “Do you know how mortifying that was for him to see me like that?!”

“Stanley’s a big boy. He’ll recover from the shock.”

“What, is he used to seeing you drag women into your man cave like some flint-chomping maniac?”

“No,” he replies, carrying me inside. “First time. Though it’s good he gets used to it. I highly suspect it won’t be the last time he sees me dragging you into my house like this.”

A high-pitched breath flutters from me as he slams the front door behind us, using one foot to push off the shoe on his other, and then vice versa, before marching us down the unlit foyer of his house.

“All the blood’s rushing to my head,” I moan.

“Don’t worry about that. Very soon it will be rushing someplace else.”

“You’re funny, you know that?! Where are we going?!” I shout as he carries me deftly down a corridor, the only light seeming to be the faint glow from somewhere near the ceiling.

“To the room you’ll be getting your first punishment in,” he growls. “And it will *not* be the last...”

Indigo

By the time I'm placed down onto my feet, I'm thoroughly disorientated, unable to resist as he yanks my jacket down my arms and throws it onto the floor nearby.

In the dim light, I see a huge heavily varnished wooden table and before I know it, I'm bent over it despite my protests, my stomach and breasts pushed into the wood. Grey reaches for the waistband at the back of my navy leggings, pulling them and my panties all the way down my legs.

“Hey!”

The clunk of metal and the zip of fabric tells me he's undoing his belt and pulling it out, but before I can say another word, the sharp lash of leather hits my bare ass.

I breathe into the table, barely able to believe he just whipped my ass, but before I can speak, another stroke of leather hits me hard and I yelp, taking a moment to absorb the sting left in its wake... one that mixes with unfamiliar pleasure, radiating between my legs.

As I try to turn my head, I'm stung once again by the merciless strike of his belt, this time administered with an unabashed growl. At the sound of the muted clang of metal onto the hardwood floor, I feel his fingertips on my ass.

“Hmm... Nice and pink,” he snarls. “You mark nicely.”

“Now, hang on a—”

My words are arrested by the twist of his hand around my ponytail followed in short measure by him cranking my neck way back as he leans his full weight onto my back until I whimper from the sheer dense heft of all highly uncivilized six foot three of him.

His lips rub my ear from behind as he breathes into it heavily, the blasts of air coarse and untethered. “I hope you enjoyed the date, Indigo. Because that’s the last one you’ll ever be going on with a man other than me.”

“Like hell!” I shoot back only for him to twist my head back by my hair, letting out a thunderous growl into my ear.

“Let me make it very clear to you, you insubordinate little brat. You don’t talk to men anymore. You don’t look at them. If I catch a man looking at you again as if he wants to fuck you, he may walk out of the room with his eyes stapled shut.”

“You’re delusional, you know that?!” I bite back. “News flash, I can date *whoever the hell* I want.”

His heated breath scrapes against my profile. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he gnarls. “From this moment on, you belong to me and me alone. You, your body, your mind. Every fucking piece of you is now mine. And you don’t get to touch another man ever again.”

“You can go to hell, Grey! I told you straight I’m not interested in your sordid little fucking experiment. That doesn’t work for me, sorry.”

“Good... Because that’s off the table,” he responds. “From now on, Indigo, you’re my property. You touch another man and I’ll chop off the body parts you touched. And I don’t talk to or touch another woman.”

He leans his weight over me, the prod of his thick erection against my ass making my body feel light as air.

“Grey...”

“It’s Greyson to you when I fuck you. And did I make myself clear enough? You touch a man other than me with the

knowledge that I will rip him to pieces if you do. We're going to figure this out as I train you to be my obedient little slave."

"Um, do I get a say in this?"

His tongue licks my ear as his uncivilized erection pushes angrily into my ass from beneath his pants. The growl of an animal makes my body quiver. "No. You do *not*."

"Monogamy?" I manage, the words emerging in a high-pitched whisper as he presses his full weight onto my back. "That sounds like you're wandering dangerously close to *relationship material*. I thought you were too *stunted* for that," I sneer, trying my best to give him attitude despite the fact that I literally can't move... but unlike the last time a man held my limbs down, stopping me from getting away, I'm not afraid.

Not one little bit...

After Micah, sex with Kohl, no matter how gentle, made me break out into a cold sweat, my skin crawling at times as it triggered memories of the man that came before him.

And now with Grey, a man so much stronger and more dominant, any fear I feel is steeped in arousal. Yearning. Hunger for him.

I don't understand why.

"I intend to get help," he responds. "I'm going to go to therapy."

The words stun me.

"Well, that's reassuring," I scoff anyway, trying to ignore the wrathful pulse of his cock against me. "Every woman wants to start a weird undefined relationship with the guy saying he's so messed up that he'll need therapy to get through it."

"Not just me," he replies. "*Both* of us are going. You don't get a choice in that."

My blood runs cold at the audacity of the man. "What?!"

As his lips slowly streak across the side of my cheek, I can't help but close my eyes for a moment, wishing I could

press my fingers to my clit to help relieve the pressure building. What's more, unlike the other men I've been with, I know he'd approve. In fact, I think he'd like it.

"You heard," he whispers against me, gently pulsing the rigid column of his erection against me. "You've been through a lot this year. You need therapy. We both do. I'll pay for it."

"Well, you don't get to decide whether I get therapy or not!"

"Yes, I do. We're going to—"

"To what?! Be in a relationship? Work each other out of our systems?"

"I don't know yet," he snarls. "My obsession with you doesn't help me to think rationally. In fact, every single fucking thing about you has been a pain in the ass since the first minute we met."

"You're such an asshole," I mutter as he twists his wrist, rendering his grip on my hair less merciful.

"An asshole who will make you come so hard that you can't speak once I'm done."

"Hey, don't do me any favors," I snap. "I don't even know if I want a fuck buddy as emotionally stunted as you."

He presses himself into me harder, pulling my hair back as his lips kiss the side of my face. "That's not what this is."

"Oh, yeah? Then what is it?"

"I don't know yet... But what I do know—"

"Ow!"

"Is that you even touch another man, I will bury his body in the ground and leave his head out so that he can watch me fuck you in every position."

Jesus...

"And then once I'm done, I'll encase his head in soil so that he gets to enjoy a nice slow suffocation before rotting in the ground."

“Well, I mean, I guess that’s cheaper than fertilizer...
Ow!”

He tilts my head until my neck hurts a little. “I want to hear you say that my order is duly noted, Indigo. No man touches you from now on other than me. Touches or talks to in an intimate manner. And the same applies to me. You’re the only woman I’ll speak to like this, or touch. Am I making myself clear or do I need to take more drastic measures before it computes in that disobedient little brain of yours?”

I try to stop his hand from delving under my belly, but I can’t, closing my eyes as his fingers slide over my pubis, onto my clit, only to find my sex dripping from my own arousal.

As a sinful sound of pleasure rumbles from his chest and into my back, he releases my hair and I tilt my head to the side, dropping my cheek to the table, only for his lips to find it... and then his tongue as he slowly licks the side of my face while pinching my swollen clit over and over between two fingers.

I open my eyes as he begins to breathe low notes of arousal into my ear, causing me to gasp at the diabolically delicious sound.

“Explain to me, little girl, how you’ve *dared* to ignore my messages this week.”

“I just wasn’t in the mood for you,” I respond flippantly to annoy him.

“Hmm...” His two fingers pinch my clit harder. “I really want you to be very aware that I am going to tame you, you insolent little brat.” He glides his finger downwards, locating the tight wet hole. “Whether you fucking well like it or not.”

I’m aware that I’ve reached that tipping point where my sense of outrage at his possessive presumptuousness can no longer compete with my arousal.

He curves his finger, pushing inside just a little. “Mmm... Nice and tight,” he groans. “The perfect little vehicle for your apology to me.”

“My *what?!?*”

He pushes his palm against the thick sturdy tabletop and lifts his weight off me. I twist my torso and look to see him bend down and feel him pull my shoes and my leggings off my feet before removing first his shirt and then his pants and briefs, discarding them all.

As I peer up, our eyes catch and he studies me most severely until my gaze can't help but pan down the mammoth sculpture of his body, lit by the faintest of glows in this dark dining room. His shoulders are so broad, his biceps hard, as if carved of wood. I wince as I find the heated gaze of this dark statue who takes a step towards me, planting a hand on the table beside me and leaning the carved mass of his body over me, though this time not pressing his weight onto my back.

He wraps my ponytail around his hand, pulling my hair back until I whimper.

“Are you ready to administer your apology to me, Indigo?”

“I'm not apologizing for anything,” I snap.

“Yes you are,” he breathes roughly. “You don't get to go on dates with other men unless you have my express *written* permission.”

“Well, I'm single. And I can do as I want!”

“That's where you're wrong, wildflower.” My heart flutters as he uses the nickname Marilla calls me. “You're not single anymore. From the second you have completed your apology to me, I will own you, Indigo.” My naked pussy pulsates at the deviant words, and the image of his hard cock inches from it. “I will own your body. I will do with it as I please.”

“Stop.”

“I will fuck you whenever it pleases me. In fact, you will beg me to.”

I close my eyes, trying to ignore the sin on his tongue.

“Now...”

He removes his hand from my hair and instead uses it to angle his shaft in line with my pussy, easing the head onto it

until it rests at the juicy opening.

“Oh my God,” I whisper under my breath before I can stop the words from coming out.

“You and that tight little pussy of yours are going to apologize for allowing a man other than me to think he had a chance of touching my property.”

“I’m not your property, asshole.”

“Oh, yes you are,” he growls into my ear. “*You* are. And so is that greedy wet pussy of yours that will soon be making a thorough apology on your behalf. And after today, you will apologize some more by getting on your knees when I enter the room, opening your mouth and saying “Please fuck my mouth, Master.”

“You can always dream,” I throw back.

“Mmm... It won’t be a dream when I brand you and make you ride my cock so hard that you feel me inside you day and night.”

Holy fucking shit...

“I’ve never felt jealousy before you. And seeing as you’ve inflicted this fucking on me, I’m coming to realize that I can be very possessive over what belongs to me. Very uncomfortably so. Now say sorry to my cock for your insolence and for making me lose my fucking mind. And make the apology very thorough.”

I want to protest but all I can think about is how desperate I am to push backwards and feel him fill me all the way up.

“I’m not apologizing,” I offer up as some frail dregs of resistance.

“Yes, you are,” he breathes, the swollen head of his cock still resting against the entrance to my pussy. “Now begin your work. I’ll inform you when you’ve apologized sufficiently.”

“You’ll be waiting all day,” I shoot back, wishing I believed it.

“I’m a patient man, Indigo. I guarantee you’ll give in before I do. Now please slide the tight cunt that now belongs to me slowly backwards onto my cock. I *dare* you to make me wait...”

I feel him watching me as I breathe through the frustration, wondering how long I can resist the urge to relieve the ache pulsing through my pussy, the desperation to have him fill me up and fuck me very very hard.

Each time he does it, it feels like he’s shifting the cells of my body, cleansing me of something else, the beautiful armored mass of him so overwhelming that I feel him on my skin even when he’s not there.

I breathe deeply against the wood, amazed at his self-control. He’s rock hard and ready, but he doesn’t push in, not even an inch, as if willing to wait until I “apologize” first.

Fuck that.

I’m not willing to apologize for going on a date because I rejected his fuck buddy request.

My mind starts to wander... What did he mean by us working it out? Is that just some excuse to keep fucking me? Or does he want us to actually try and be a couple? And if it’s the former, could I use him as much as he’s using me? I crave him so acutely and he shifts the energy of my body so competently that I can’t help but wonder if maybe this is the kind of bodywork my erstwhile therapist told me I needed.

I clutch the table, trembling as I resist the urge to push myself backwards on the delicious hard dick just waiting for me.

In an effort to give myself some release, I edge the fingers languishing underneath my belly slowly downwards towards my clit, only for his hand to grab my arm, pulling it out—the force strong, but his touch gentle.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You’ve been a very disobedient little girl. There’s only one way naughty girls like you get a release... and that’s with a cock inside them—”

But his words are cut short as I push backwards, just a little, an inch, maybe two, a moan escaping me as he fills up the opening, stretching me out with his stiff girth in a way that feels too sinful for words.

His deep thick exhalation has me losing control and I slowly begin to rock backwards and forwards just a little until I can't take it anymore and plant both hands firmly onto the table, pushing back in one rough movement which has him filling me completely.

My high-pitched moan dances with his bestial groan as I begin to slide myself up and down along his shaft, unable to get enough, to feel enough, to go fast enough, to go slow enough, or get him deep enough inside me.

“Good girl,” he hisses, but drowning as I am in pleasure, I'm too distracted to respond, and instead relish my own capitulation. “Show daddy how sorry his girl is.”

“I'm not sorry,” I mutter, rocking my pussy backwards and forwards to feel him inside me as much as I can. “I'm just using your cock for my own enjoyment.”

I can't even believe those words fell from my mouth.

A few sharp blasts of air hit the side of my face, as if him letting out breaths of amusement.

His lips find the skin next to my ear and his tongue emerges to very slowly lick the side of my face as I moan in pleasure, riding him faster. “And for mine, wildflower,” he whispers, using his own force for the first time to venture deep inside me and stay there.

He thrusts inside me roughly. “Did that feckless fuck turn you on, Indigo?” he sneers.

“Stop,” I whisper, his jealous rancor making me nervous.

“Did he?”

“No,” I reply in earnest.

“I sincerely hope not for your sake.” He pries my feet apart with his, still not dropping his full weight onto my back.

“Pleasure daddy’s cock, Indigo. Make the apology a rigorous one.”

The words, spoken so measuredly, with such assertive grace, leave me pulsing my ass back and forth so that the tight, clenching walls of my pussy can give him pleasure.

With my cheek planted onto the wooden tabletop, I whisper the word “Grey” without meaning to as his rock hard-cock fills me up.

“It’s *Greyson* to you when I fuck you, Indigo. Greyson. Mr. Everitt. Sir. Or Master.”

A gentle chuckle escapes me as he says it and I feel his lips widen into a smile against my cheek, but when he speaks, his tone is altogether more authoritative. “You think I’m kidding, Indigo?”

“*Greyson*, I’ll give you,” I shoot back. “The others, you can dream about.”

“Hmm,” he groans most devilishly, and suddenly my top is being pulled off my body and my bra unclasped and thrown across the room. “I’m gonna make you pay for that.”

He lifts me by the waist, pushing me further down the table until I’m completely prone, my entire naked front pressed into the wood. He climbs on top of my back, spreading my legs far apart, and then further, and further with his and then with his hands until my legs are at right angles to my torso.

He locates the entrance to my pussy with his cock and drives in in one merciless stroke, holding my ankles wide apart with his strong hands as he blankets my back with his chest, using his legs to fuck the opening to me.

“All that yoga practice you do is going to make fucking you most pleasurable, little brat.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I whisper as he groans against the side of my cheek, alternating strokes, fast then slow, reveling in the body he thinks he owns.

I can’t allow that to happen... can I?

The guy is a walking red flag. He's told me more times than I can count that he's afraid he'll hurt me.

So why does this feel better than anything I've ever known?

He lets go of my ankles, weaving the fingers of one hand into the hair beneath my hairband and sliding his other hand around to my mouth as he fucks me.

He pushes the tips of his fingers between my lips. "Suck."

I barely even wait for the order, desperate as I am to suck on him, albeit his cock rather than his fingers, but I really hope that's coming.

As if reading my mind, he drawls, "If I didn't know better, I'd say that accommodating little whore mouth of yours was hungry to suck on my cock..."

I close my eyes as I suck on his fingers. His dick makes fast and short thrusts inside me before sliding deep.

"For your information," he continues. "You'll have earned that privilege when you're blindfolded, handcuffed and on your knees, mouth wide open for me, so that you gag on me properly and better taste my cum as I generously deposit it down that thirsty throat of yours."

He sweeps his lips firmly across my cheek as his other hand forces my head further to the side so that he can withdraw his fingers and replace them with his tongue which he pushes into my mouth, making me moan in pleasure at the double invasion.

As he withdraws from my mouth, my gaze collides with his as he fucks me very deliberately, the strokes measured but for occasional grunts and curses that he makes when the pleasure mounts too much, forcing him to pause for a moment.

"Rock your pussy back onto my dick," he instructs, stopping all movement.

"I can barely move," I reply, my entire torso weighed down by the heavy mass of his.

“Try,” he responds. “This apology isn’t meant to feel comfortable.”

“The apology is over,” I announce, his glare scorching my face.

“I say when it’s over. Now, do your job. And work your pussy along my cock.”

As he lifts his weight from my ass just a little, I manage to move, angling my hips up and down. We’re silent for a moment, hearing nothing but the slip of my increasingly sore pussy along ten rock-hard inches of cock.

“You like that, little brat?”

“Yes.”

“That’s quite a greedy little pussy you’ve got there, isn’t it?” he whispers and the words jar me for a moment because I was sure my libido would never come back.

“Yes,” I reply, biting my lip.

“Good girl.” He pulls my hair back a little as I slide my ass all the way back until the head of his cock is straining against my cervix. “Now who does that thirsty little hole belong to?”

“Me,” I moan as he pushes further, causing my cervix to pinch.

“If I could push all the way through,” he whispers hoarsely, “and impregnate you right now... I would.”

My eyes close as I breathe through the pleasure swirling with the pain of his deep intrusion into the most sensitive part of my body.

He presses his full weight back down onto me. “Notice how you can’t move?”

I nod.

“That’s how I like you.”

Holy shit, surely it’s illegal to talk like this...

“I intend to bind you, Indigo... leave you unable to move as I play eeny, meeny, miny, moe with your holes.”

He withdraws from me and drives in in one slow push.

“Whose is this pussy?” he asks.

“Mine.”

“Try again, wildflower.”

“It’s all mine,” I repeat, only this time I break into a wide smile, my gaze lifting to his as he leans over me. His eyes narrow most mischievously as his lips twist into a taunting smile.

“I see.”

He removes his hand from my hair, sliding it between my body and the table, maneuvering it down beneath my pubis and into the folds of my sex.

As my legs begin to come closer together, he orders roughly, “Keep your legs nice and wide for me. I want your pussy accessible at all times. That’s part of your apology.”

I drop my cheek to the table, closing my eyes as he begins to tend to my clit, rubbing circles around it, lubricated by my own copious arousal.

“Grey... Greyson,” I correct.

“I want to hear your voice,” he whispers. “Let me hear your pleasure. That’s an order.”

I swallow hard, trying not to be self-conscious about taking pleasure, allowing myself to believe that sex is as much for the pleasure of the woman as for the man, not something I’ve really observed in my twenty-three years, or at least, not before him.

“Louder,” he snarls as I moan as his finger plays magical tricks on my body.

The combination of him flicking my clit and thrusting his large greedy cock into a wet hole that’s too tight for him sets every nerve fiber in that area alight, making my body melt into the table below me, turning my cells to mush.

I buck my hips, trying to get as much of his cock inside me as I can, and to rub my clit against his fingers.

“What do you want?” he asks. “Make it clear to me.”

“Don’t stop,” I plead.

“Why not? What do you want exactly?”

“I want you to... make... me... come.”

“You do, huh?” he groans, removing his hand. “Then beg me, Indigo.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me fucking well repeat myself. Beg me.”

“You’re insufferable,” I moan, desperate to relive what I thought was an urban myth—that a man, no vibrating dildo in hand, can turn you on so much and press in just the right places that he can make you come.

“Indeed. Now beg.”

“Please... Please make me come...”

He puts his fingers back onto my clit, beginning to fuck me harder, sliding three fingers left to right and back.

“Louder,” he barks as I moan, allowing me to exhale deeply in pleasure.

“Beg me to fuck you.”

“Please fuck me.”

“Whose fat cock gets to pleasure itself with your holes from now on?”

“Yours,” I whimper as he drives in deep with a bestial grunt.

His lips scrape against the shell of my ear which he breathes into roughly. “And whose property is the pretty little pussy that I’m currently fucking?”

“Mine,” I respond, causing him to chuckle darkly.

He lifts his fingers from my clit. “You don’t get to come until you acknowledge who you belong to, Indigo.”

“That’s grotesque,” I moan and I feel his lips widen into a smile against my cheek.

“Nonetheless... I’ll ask you again... Who. Does. This. Pussy. Belong. To?”

“Make me come and I may reconsider my answer,” I taunt.

“Fuck, I’m going to enjoy training you, Indigo. And I’m going to pay particular attention to taming that smart little mouth of yours.”

I can’t help but moan breathily as he conjures up the image of his cock fucking my throat, an image I’ve been unable to get out of my mind since... practically the first day I met him, frankly, when he chewed me out for my bike-riding skills, or lack thereof.

“Now, answer again.”

“I... I guess I could share,” I concede, a cheeky smile escaping me that I know he can see as he glares down at my profile.

“Not good enough.” His fingers ease into my clit again, pinching and brushing them, until I jerk my body in agony as he deprives me of an orgasm that is so close.

He lets go.

“This is torture,” I groan.

“Good. It’s what you’ll get until you answer satisfactorily.”

He fucks me while purposefully drawing a circle around my clit, edging me closer... and closer.

“Please,” I beg.

“Whose is this greedy little cunt?” he repeats.

“Mine.”

“Again!”

“It’s mine sometimes... and yours at others.”

I feel the exhale leaving his body as it presses against my back. It’s as if the concession allows him to breathe, to feel in control again. He contemplates my answer for what feels like forever before finally speaking.

“Seeing as this pussy is being more apologetic to me than you are”—he drives into me, his muscles straining above me —“And seeing as your training hasn’t begun yet, I’ll take it. For now.”

And with that, he begins to fuck me in earnest, first pulling both of my hands behind my back and holding them together with one hand, using the other to press into my clit over and over as he slams his dick very deep inside me, while whispering deviant words into my ear.

By the time he orders me to come for him and my body goes over the edge, I squeal into the table as a ridge of ecstasy rolls in a wave up my body, turning my limbs to liquid, as he begins to groan more loudly, his thrusts unforgiving as he uses my pussy to bring himself to orgasm while inhaling the desperate sounds I make as I experience another mind-blowing, body-disintegrating orgasm that I thought would never come.

His lips slip against my temple. “You like that, huh, little brat?”

I refrain from telling him he’s God, and instead close my eyes, my body totally limp as he uses it to get what he wants.

He positions his mouth over my ear as he comes, exhaling the most sinful notes of pleasure over and over as he shoots his load deep inside me, growling like the most savage of beasts.

We don’t move for a while. He blankets my back as he breathes me in, until finally slowly withdrawing, leaving his cum dripping out of me.

Greyson

The crackle of a log splitting makes her shift beneath the blanket she's swathed in, a high-pitched exhalation floating from between her ever-enticing lips.

I study the freckles dotting that cute little nose of hers and the way her slim fingers coil inwards as if to protect her neck.

The dancing flames of the fire behind me and the very first gleams of light from a rising sun are the only light in the room, illuminating her face in wisps of heat.

I lift the large blanket covering us a little, placing my leg over hers and drawing her into me so that my lips hover over her ethereal face.

My cock is as hard as wood as it is every morning and laying against her taut abdomen. I contemplate easing her naked body onto her back and slowly fucking her awake, but after the ravaging she bravely took last night, I'm not sure how sore she'll be, so decide to leave that particular wake-up call for another morning.

I've never been able to sleep in bed with a woman—not since I was a child, anyway. I've attempted it in the past but ended up so agitated, my mind and body wracked with memories of long ago that I've had to either leave the bed, or spend all night in physical torment waiting for it to be over.

Or at least, I once did, many years ago, when I tried to be normal.

When I pretended I was.

I gave up that pretense years ago, with Gabriella happy to let me do it.

Now lying here, not only does my skin not crawl at sharing a bed, a makeshift bed on the thick rug next to the fireplace, but I can't take my eyes off the vexatious little creature lying next to me.

My fingers can't help but gently press into her skin, our naked bodies warm for being wrapped in each other, incubated beneath the blanket.

I can't help feeling my treacherous internal smile as she stirs further, little noises and sighs fluttering from her lips as she shifts as I bend my knee and pull her in closer from behind, wrapping one arm around her as I stare down at her face.

“Am I dreaming?” she asks, eyes still closed.

The sweet words jar me, taking me back to that violent nightmare of hers I witnessed a week ago, the reasons for which I never got a chance to ascertain.

“You might be,” I whisper only for her to inhale sharply, letting out a long slow breath.

“Then you're a very mean man to wake me up.”

Her wrist twists, her fingertips finding my chest which she presses into, exhaling pleasure as she explores the muscle. My cock throbs against her skin as her hand delves down, investigating the ridges of my body until she lets out a sweet gasp which I hunger to inhale as her fingers enter into contact with the stiff column.

They wrap around it, her eyes still closed as she pulls at my cock, moaning her arousal.

“It's so hard,” she whispers as she tends to it with her hand, her lips parting as I groan my appreciation.

She pulls her leg out from between mine, placing it on top of my thigh as she slides her other hand down to her pussy and tilts her hip, angling my cock in line with the hole. I don't

normally allow women to take control but there's something so uncalculated about the way she's exploring me that I can't help but study what she's going to do, as if a creature utterly alien to me.

As she shifts forwards, the swollen dome reaching the entrance to her pussy, she tilts a little, wincing as it pushes against the walls at her opening.

"Shit. I think I'll end up in the emergency room if we go again this morning," she mutters, making me smile.

I find her ear with my lips, pulling my hard cock back, not an easy feat considering that it wants nothing more than to ravage her insides again and fill her up with my cum.

"Seeing as I'm in a good mood and you apologized thoroughly," I whisper, "I'll give your pussy a few more hours to recover from what it went through last night." She moans as I say the words. "And if it's still not ready then, there are other holes we can explore."

"Are there, now?"

Before I can respond, she begins to shift downwards, her head reaching my chest. I stop her instantly, knowing full well what she wants. I pry my hand beneath her armpit and pull her back.

"You were the one who mentioned other holes," she explains.

"Open your eyes and look at me," I order.

She complies, blinking a few times before she finds my face. Fuck, she's delicious to behold. Her eyes are so earnest, her lips so plump, so insanely fuckable.

"I want to suck," she whispers as I resist the urge to grab her by the hair and make her choke on my dick for the next hour.

But I can't. She can't take control of these matters. I need the control myself.

"That's not how these things will be happening, Indigo. You'll be blindfolded, handcuffed and on your knees the first

time you get to suck on my cock,” I respond and her eyes gleam as her top teeth bite into that taunting bottom lip of hers, the one I wish to rest the head of my cock until I’m ready to allow her to suck. “Is that understood?”

She peers so deeply into me that I almost feel myself falling. “Don’t you want the release?” she asks, her fingers coiling around my cock and gently stroking it, something I allow out of sheer curiosity as to how greedy this girl is.

“I need to build up my self-restraint with you.”

“Why? Do you sense that failing?” she asks naughtily.

“Yes,” I growl and she inhales sharply. “Plus, if I fuck you all day long, it won’t be quite as good. I want us frustrated. I want you afraid, wondering when I’m going to pounce on you.” She moans as I tilt my head to brush her lips with mine. “I want you in a state of anticipation. Of fear. I want your pussy wet all day long, waiting for the moment I decide to have you.” I coil my fingers around her slim wrist and pull her hand off my dick despite my hunger for the release she can provide me. “It will make each time more... *deviant*... which is the way I intend to fuck you.”

Her cheeks flush pink as I watch her in silence but for the crackle of the charred wood behind the glass doors of the fireplace and the occasional caw of a crow nearby.

Her lips form a muted smile before she lets out a sigh, staring down at my neck, the light seeming to dim.

I slide my fingers onto the side of her face, tilting it up so that she has to look at me. “What is it?”

She studies me in silence so intently, as if trying to read me, quite a feat seeing as I don’t fully know who I am myself.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says earnestly.

“While you were asleep?” I smile.

“Let’s do the fuck buddies thing.” My body stiffens, my expression roughening at the words. “You use me to... get me out of your system, or whatever it is you wanted, and I use you as... body therapy.”

“I told you last night that that’s not what this is.”

“Well, that’s what I want it to be.”

She must discern my displeasure for her eyes grow timid for a second.

“I told you that’s off the table,” I growl.

“And I told you that I’m not willing to date someone who has a strong feeling he’s going to bail on the relationship because he’s too *fucked in the head*, or whatever. I don’t want to get hurt by you... shutting down, or opening up and then turning back into a clam without warning.”

I feel my breathing quickening as I glare into curious eyes. In truth, I do want to fuck her out of my system very thoroughly, to make her willingly submit to every one of my unpalatable desires, and yet... when I stare into her face, I can’t help but feel like I’m falling back into water—except for once, it’s not cold unforgiving water which will pull me under, but it’s warm, its waves gentle, soothing.

It’s fucking with my head.

And yet I can’t exactly reassure her because every risk she’s evoked is a real one. It is true that I have coped with the unrelenting torment of certain events by shutting others out, by shutting myself out, by attempting not to feel, and by most concerted never inflicting romantic love on myself.

Her earnest gaze weakens me, for I know what the smart thing to do is.

In truth, there are days when months of trying not to think collapse onto me and I shut down completely, unable to work, to get up, to move. For those few days, I block out the existence of everyone and everything—Gideon, Kennedy, Stanley, Gabriella, my siblings, my mother... and my father. *Especially him.*

What if I did that to her?

In the on-off relationship of sorts I’ve attempted with Gabriella at our parents’ insistence, I don’t hesitate to take off or shut myself away until I’m pulled out of the paralysis. The

difference is I don't give a fuck whether she likes it or not, nor does she attempt to intervene beyond a few messages which I don't return until I choose to turn my phone back on.

Indigo...

Well, she's not exactly the docile type, nor the type who doesn't like to talk about her feelings. I can't imagine her sitting back and watching me implode in on myself, unable to move or speak or function for days at a time.

And more importantly, what state would I leave her in after repeated bouts of insanity? Would I damage her... beyond repair?

"I'm not putting myself through that," she decides. "So... to sum up, you can use my pussy for your enjoyment, and in exchange, all I want is your dick."

"That's all you really want? My dick? Or you're too afraid to want anything else?"

"Hey, you're the one who came up with that brilliant fuck buddies idea," she snaps, "so kindly please stop messing with my head."

"I don't even know if you could handle my dick, Indie. What I did to you last night is tame compared to what I really want to do to you." Her lips part, just begging me to tie her up and fuck her mouth. "I'm a Dominant. You're a sub."

"Oh, in your infinite wisdom, you've figured that out?" she scoffs.

"Yes. I have. The more dominant I behave with you, the wetter you become... and the more you yield to me. Or am I wrong?"

She contemplates me, her body trembling a little in irritation. "You're not wrong... but you *are* an asshole."

"You're right. I am. But I don't think we're afraid of hitting each other with reality, are we? And as for your idea, I told you that what I previously proposed is off the table. We're going to dedicate the next few months to figuring this out."

"What does that even mean?"

“It means that we’re going to fuck very very hard.”

“To get each other out of our systems?” she utters in scorn.

“Yes. And at the same time, we get therapy. We try to heal, or begin to.”

She shudders in a breath. “Don’t couples usually go to therapy *after* they’ve been dating a while and hate each other’s guts?”

I can’t help but smile internally at the way the cynicism rolls off those pretty little lips of hers, a smile dampened by the concern hiding in the shadows beneath her vibrant eyes.

“We do this for a month. Then we reevaluate.”

“What, like have a board meeting?” she scoffs. “Should I bring some visual aids?”

In a burst of frustration, I reach around her, pulling her tiny naked body into mine as I lose control of my breathing in the face of her constant insubordination.

“*One* month. It won’t kill us. You’re giving me that, Indigo. After that, we’ll make a decision. Either we walk away, or you belong to me... *permanently*.”

She shifts a little, but I hold her tightly so that she can’t move.

As she frowns, tiny within the cage of my frame, I struggle to stay afloat in the warm pools of her large eyes, wondering why the thought of walking away feels like black smoke entering my lungs; why I hunger for this walking disaster zone of a woman day and night with no respite. It can’t surely be just because she is the diametric opposite of the family I have been molded by...

“You’re afraid,” I say.

“Of course.”

“What of?”

She shakes her head slowly. “What do you think?”

“Of being hurt. I’m afraid too.”

“Yeah, right. Don’t you switch off your feelings at will like some robot?”

My fingers thread into the hair at the side of her head, tightening.

“Seeing as I’ve felt like every part of me has been hijacked since I left you of late, apparently not.”

“Fine,” she decides. “One month. But I’m not doing it for *one* day longer. Not one. If after a month, one of us still doesn’t want an actual grown-up relationship, then we walk away. For good. No friendship. No unexpected visits. No fuck buddy bullshit. Just... goodbye.”

Her voice is almost breathless as she says words.

“One month,” I respond, wondering what kind of alchemy it will take for me to let this strange creature go and never look back. Maybe this month will do it... I certainly intend to try.

“And I have another condition,” she blurts out, her fingertips digging into my chest.

“Go ahead.”

She shifts, tilting her pelvis a little, reaching down between us to grab my cock, angling it and using it to stroke her pussy. Wet. Very wet.

“Careful, Indigo.”

“My condition is... I expect you to fuck me very competently... in every way possible.” She slides down a little and the dome of my cock finds the silken entrance to her, forcing me to hiss in order to relieve some of the temptation of her very tender little pussy. “Every room, every angle, every position. I want you to erase everything I’ve ever felt before.”

Her words make me freeze. It’s not the first time she’s said something like that. The question is why. I asked her if her ex had hurt her in that way. She told me no, yet every time she says those words, my heart sinks to the floor as violent urges surge inside me.

“What do you mean, *Erase*?”

She moans as she presses down on her cock. “I mean... I want to only feel you at the end of it. Even if it only lasts a month. I want you to fuck me in a way which will cleanse me of everything that’s come before you.”

“Indie, I need to know—”

“That’s all I want to say about it,” she interrupts, her expression resolute despite the pain painted across her eyes.

Her rabid respiration has me wanting to ask questions I fear the answer to because it may require me to consider murder as the only way I can tolerate it.

“Ow,” she moans as my cock penetrates the first inch of her.

I grab her torso, pulling her off me.

“Hey,” she gripes and I resist the urge to ask the questions I want to, for I know what it’s like to feel safe for as long as you never tell a soul what has happened.

“I can’t fuck you as hard as I like if you’re sore. You’ll be waiting a few more hours. As for your little request, I can confirm with utmost certainty that you will be fucked day and night in ways you can’t yet conceive of.”

“Good.”

Her eyes dance with mine, flickers of light gleaming as she dares me to resist climbing onto that tight naked body of hers and push my hard cock deep inside her once again in an effort to allay both of our concerns.

We don’t speak for a while, her face impossible to look away from.

“What?” I ask to some glint of curiosity in her eyes.

“Is this your house?” she asks.

I nod slowly. “I spend most nights at my apartment in DC. This is for... when I need to relax. It was my maternal grandparent’s house.”

“Are they still alive?”

“No,” I reply.

“And they left it to you or your mom?”

“To me,” I respond.

“Who was the guy that came out last night?”

“Stanley,” I answer. “He takes care of the house and the grounds.”

“Are the grounds big?”

“I’ll show you them later. Hungry?”

“Thirsty. Hey, you know what, I could really do with a cup of tea. Black, please. With milk. Soy, coconut, hemp, almond or rice milk is fine. No sugar.”

She bites down on her lip to hide her mischievous smile in a way which floods me with amusement.

“Starting the trouble-making early, I see? If I didn’t know better, I’d say you enjoyed last night’s punishment more than I realized.”

“What?” she giggles faux-innocently. “I like tea.”

“Will I ever be forgiven or my tea-making requests, Indigo?”

“No way in hell,” she grins.

“Hmm... You do realize I am going to enjoy punishing that smart mouth of yours for your impertinence?” I respond as her bare body shifts against mine.

“And I’m gonna enjoy saying things to get punished for,” she whispers.

“Good,” I respond, finally pulling away.

I get up, making sure to lay the thick brown blanket back down onto her as I head out, glancing behind me only to see her brows furrowed, and her eyes tracing my back as I walk.

I know she’s looking at the scars.

They’ve healed a lot in the last twenty or so years, but there is no mistaking the thick white lines snaked across the

center and left side of my back and my tricep where the metal sheered me open, cutting through veins, arteries and muscles, breaking ribs and vertebrae in its vicious wake.

As she sees me turn, her eyes dart upwards to meet mine. “Nice ass,” she sings as a deflection.

“Not as nice as yours, Indigo. Especially after I’ve whipped it raw.”

She smiles nervously before I head down the hallway towards the washroom. As I wash my hands once I’m done, I catch sight of myself in the mirror I often avoid looking in—seeing my father’s face once again... and my mother’s eyes peering at me.

Exhaling slowly, my movements stilted, I wipe my hands dry and head out, taking a left towards the kitchen, one just about the size of this girl’s entire apartment. I fill the kettle with filtered water and place it onto the stove, my mind wandering to the venomous prick I call a father who will expect me to check in with him as he does every Saturday morning.

As I wait for the kettle to boil, I decide to text him so that I can relax for the rest of the day and not have to wonder what pills of poison he’s been texting to me if I don’t respond. I head towards the study at the back of the house behind the dining room to grab my phone that I put in to charge before I went to join Indigo under the blanket by the fire.

Unplugging the thing from its charger, my stomach flips as it does every time I prepare myself to see his messages.

I glance out of the window onto the trees and flowers planted so meticulously in the back yard before flipping through a few from Gideon asking if I’m okay and if I want to go for a drink tonight, an offer I decline, telling him instead who I’ll be spending the weekend with.

No more hiding.

If I’m going to make myself uncomfortable by attempting the kind of relationship which inherently leeches control from me, then I’ll make the world uncomfortable along with me.

Although with the amount I've droned on about her since this summer, I think Gideon will be pleased. That's not the case for everyone. My family, or rather, the paternal side of it will have a veritable fit.

I think I might find some dark relief in watching that...

I scan a message from Tom asking if I've calmed down and if Indie got home okay because she's not answering Carrie's messages, to which I respond dryly:

She's at my house where she'll be spending the weekend.

And enjoying it.

Thanks for setting her up on that date, asshole.

The busted lip was worth it by the way.

Next time it will be his.

Or yours if you introduce that woman to another man.

I hope that's clear.

Grey.

Stanley asks if we need anything and I add my secretary Janet to the chat, asking them to work together to go get some casual and comfortable house clothes for a woman of about five three and a hundred and twenty-five pounds, including some night dresses and slippers. I make sure to give Janet a fat bonus at the end of each month if I have to bother her at the weekend which I try to do as little as possible, so hopefully, she won't mind.

I make a mental note to inquire about Indie's tastes when it comes to food and drinks so that Stanley can procure the items she likes but in the meantime ask him to get a variety of fruits, vegetables and plant milks, chocolate and ice cream.

I do believe I will very much enjoy hand-feeding her the foods that she likes.

Pulling my thoughts to something altogether less pleasant, I flip to the four messages I see waiting for me from Landon Everitt.

Also known as my father.

I scroll up to the first one, malaise rattling in my chest.

I see you're too busy to respond to your father's messages, he writes, no doubt in reference to last night's demand that I have dinner with him to discuss an engagement to a woman I never proposed to nor have any inclination to marry, and can barely stomach at this point.

There's urgent work to be done today.

I need you in the office now.

Fuck you.

It's rarely urgent. He just enjoys pulling the strings and making me dance like he does everyone else in his world. That's his version of fatherhood.

These last few months, I've been less and less inclined to go along with the dynamic he's offering me, even though this insidious goddamn need for him to one day express a shred of remorse, or even insight into what happened, to acknowledge that my life matters, that he cares still taunts me, despite me knowing full well he'll never give me these things. The twisted high he gets off withholding them is just too pleasurable to him.

Instead, he'll demand submission in exchange for occasional dregs of lukewarm approval which will vanish as quickly as they appeared, and some semblance of family life—fractured spectral pieces of an unsplintered warmth I once felt, something that made sense... until the day it was lost, never to return.

Other than when staring into inquisitive green eyes which bathe me in warm light, melting the cold dark inside me, albeit

taking control from me in the process.

Even the thought of her lying naked on that rug next to the fire waiting for me to return takes the bitter edge off conversing with my father.

Are you getting my messages?

Have you just forgotten that you have responsibilities?

Or are you busy with some whore?

He can't know I'm with her...

The thud of my pulse in my chest batters me with anxiety at the thought of Indigo being in his crosshairs. I can cope with the venom he'll spew my way, but if he goes anywhere near that girl, I'll do what I should have done to him a long time ago.

As I stare at the screen, another comes through.

Your mother and I need to see you immediately.

The way you have disrespected Gabriella is unacceptable.

"Fuck you," I mutter under my breath as the pallid thought of her is blasted away by an insubordinate blaze of magenta.

My body turns rigid as the ever-present threat of Gabriella floats over the face of the girl lying naked in my living room.

I've never disrespected her. I've told that woman from day one that I feel almost nothing for her, certainly not enough to sustain a marriage, and have asked her for assistance in convincing our parents that this union is unwanted by either of us on multiple occasions.

Only she *does* seem to want it.

I don't fully know why.

Through sanitizing and dissimulating the fuck-ups of powerful people, my family is now wealthier than fifty percent of our clients. Whitewashing pays, apparently, though if you have a conscience the price you pay for said wealth is revulsion to the point that looking yourself in the mirror is a challenge some days.

I have attempted to get out of the business more than once, but as the eldest with two younger siblings, I have responsibilities to my family, as they've hammered into me my whole life. The hell they rained down on me when I tried to leave arrested my momentum.

While my family is amongst the richest in the DC area, our wealth pales in comparison to that of Gabriella's family, and yet both her and her father, Vitaly, are dead-set on this marriage going ahead.

Maybe her father thinks what my father lacks in wealth, he makes up for in power, for if you know the darkest secrets, you yield the darkest power. You also face the most danger, a fact which forces you to push the boundaries of your conduct and principles further and further to protect yourself until the stakes become so high that the operation feels deadly.

A union with Gabriella's family would concretize my family's status as one of the most powerful and well-connected in the city.

The only obstacle to my father finally having the power he has craved his whole life is me. And to solve that problem, I have to sacrifice myself "for the good of the family". I'm not entirely sure what that word even means anymore.

This wedding is going forwards within the next six months.

We're inviting Vitaly over to start the plans.

I want you here tonight. No more of your bullshit self-serving me me me excuses.

This is about family.

Honor your fucking responsibilities for once.

That's all I've ever done, father.

Every day of my life, no matter the cost to me.

7pm tonight.

Your mother has arranged for some food to be served.

Don't upset her.

My stomach twists as I contemplate my response, torn between attending, like I usually would, and telling him to go fuck himself, something I've wanted to do my whole life but not dared to since I was a child.

Since he learned that if he beats me, after a while, I will stop speaking.

Though those days are long behind me now.

He wouldn't fucking well dare.

I can tell any human on the planet to go fuck themselves while eyeballing them in a way which will have them remembering my face for a long time to come, but for a reason I don't understand, I can't say it to the man who has damaged me the most and who most deserves to hear it.

The whistle of the kettle catches my attention and my breathing shortens as I decide what to do.

I type fast, before I lose my nerve, learning to speak to the man the way I would anyone else who dares disrespect me:

I have no idea what you're talking about.

Gabriella and I are not an item as she well knows.

In fact,

I inhale sharply, my heart the frenetic beat of a drum.

I'm dating someone else.

Gabriella and I are over.

For good.

I won't be in the office until Monday.

Enjoy your weekend.

I send the message with a hand that quivers, my usually strong body frail for a few moments until I'm distracted by the song of a bird somewhere outside.

And then, my name.

I select the messages I sent to my father, forwarding them to Gideon who has always supported me and despised my father, despite not fully understanding, coming as he does from a loving family who worship him just for existing.

No conditions.

As they should do.

At the flurry of movement through the gap in the door, I put the phone down, only to see a message come through.

Gideon.

Good man.

Oh and enjoy Ms Pink.

I type quickly.

Oh, I will do, friend.

Putting the phone down once more, I leave the office in my bare feet, silently stalking a naked creature walking tentatively down the wood-paneled hallway towards the kitchen, wrapped only in a woolen throw that usually hangs over the back of an armchair which long ago belonged to Esther, my maternal grandmother.

Her loose hair, warm dark blond but for about eight inches of pink of various shades which stain the tips, lies over the throw enshrouding her.

Stalking her like this arouses my need to hunt, a need I've never really experienced before as I'm not used to resistance of any kind. What she doesn't know, is that I enjoy stalking her, especially when I can hear the fear in her voice. I ache to take her down to my dark basement and leave her there, forcing her to hide from me, to run from me, to scream as I catch her.

In fact, the more she owns of me, the more uncivilized the things I want to do to her become. The more I want to punish her...

"Grey," she calls out nervously, walking in increasingly slow steps towards the whistling in the kitchen twenty feet in front of us.

"Yes, Indigo."

She screams, turning around, clutching her arm to her chest.

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" she exclaims, her throw nearly falling off her delicious body. "You scared the shit out of me!"

I walk towards her, leaning down and putting my arm beneath the underside of her knees before lifting her up and carrying her down the hallway towards the kitchen to turn off that fucking kettle.

"How very unwise to go wandering around my house alone... naked," I breathe into her ear as she catches her breath. "Very dangerous, Indigo. You never know who could catch you."

She shudders, managing to whisper, “Hah, hah, hah. That whistle. You were freaking me out.”

“I had to speak to someone,” I offer as an explanation.

“And how big is this freaking house? It’s like half my steps for the day just to find the kitchen. I mean, you have a butler in his own little house out there, for fuck’s sake.”

“He’s not a butler. He’s a housekeeper.”

She peers up at me, highly unimpressed, as I carry her into the kitchen. “Okay, you’re gonna have to explain the difference between those two things to me, because from what I’ve gathered, you own some gothic-style chateau in the woods, with a butler on call. Do you have a freaking Batmobile down in the basement or something?”

I smile before setting her down on her feet and taking the navy-blue kettle off the stove.

“Which tea would my little secretary like?” I ask, but she doesn’t seem to hear my taunt, for by the time I look up, she’s over on the other side of the room, peering out of the large kitchen window at the back onto the garden and the fields beyond.

I walk across the room, studying her profile, her lips parted as she stares out, the day sunny, the land sheathed in a silvery mist.

I come to stand behind her, dipping my head, my lips grazing her temple.

“Like the view?” I ask.

“Like it?” she utters, her voice little more than a wisp of air. She turns up to look at me. “Is this your land? All of it?”

“I inherited it,” I respond.

“You don’t have to say that. It doesn’t make it any less yours.” I nod as she turns back. “Oh my God, you do have a barn,” she utters, no doubt thinking back to our conversation when we danced at Tom’s wedding—a dance worth every penny—during which she told me that her wedding aspirations

involve a barn, some rescue animals and a culinary free-for-all.

Wouldn't my mother just love that...

"I told you I did. Would you like to see it?"

"Yeah. I would. What do you do with it all? The land?"

"Not much," I respond. "Stanley hires a couple of men to come and keep it tidy, take care of the trees. We have an herb patch."

"You should grow your own fruits and vegetables!" she exclaims, turning to look up at me. "Tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, peppers, eggplants. They'd grow so well in this climate. I could help you. You can get worm bins for the compost," she continues, practically tripping over her words in an effort to get them out. "I know the best organic fertilizers. And I know all the principles of permaculture so you could cut down on all the pruning and all that and let bits of it grow wild. And you could set up some owl boxes at the back for the local owls and kestrels, and some hummingbird feeders at the front, and maybe get a few rescue chickens in so you don't contribute to the egg industry. And—"

She must observe my look of amused curiosity for she stops cold, letting out a long sigh with a shake of her head. "I'm sorry. You must think I'm a lunatic with no boundaries."

"That happens to be one of the things I like about you," I deadpan and she chuckles, swatting me on the arm.

"Yeah, you think I'm nuts. I *do* know it's *your* garden," she insists as I smile down at her, reveling in the natural beauty of her bare face. When I remain quiet, her inquisitive eyes search my face. "Sorry, it's just... I only have that little planter I made at the back of my basement suite, and even then, I had to beg the asshole landlord to let me put it there. You're so lucky to have your own garden."

I drop my lips to her cheek, brushing it gently. "I want you to help me do something with it."

"You do?"

I nod, inhaling that light floral scent of hers. “I’ve not known how to best use the land.”

She grins “Okay.”

“And, um, *rescue chickens?*” I smile, repeating her suggestion.

“Yep. Some of them escape the hell they’re in.”

“Escape?”

“Sure. Not just chickens. Pigs sometimes escape during transport or if a fence is compromised. Cows. Goats. Or sometimes the animal isn’t usable for meat and the slaughterhouse is decent enough to hand the animal over to an animal sanctuary instead of just throwing it into the meat grind — You get the point.”

“I think I do.”

“I have two friends who work in a sanctuary. Maybe you could meet them?” she asks almost nervously, as if unsure if I’d want to. She shakes her head. “You know what, scratch that. Ignore me. I think my brain is still in my crotch today.”

“I’d like to meet them,” I respond, aware of how incongruent that urge is with the way I usually conduct the *relationships* I attempt, if you can even call them that.

“You would?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if we survive the *test month*, maybe you can,” she responds. It’s a naughty answer, but one tinged with something darker.

As she turns back around to look outside, an internal tremor rattles my body as my arms stiffen and I fight the urge to wrap them around her slight body and look out of the window with her, realizing that I barely ever do it.

“I’ll show you the grounds later,” I say instead.

“Okay.”

She follows me over to the countertop and I pull a large wooden box full of different varieties of black tea. She takes a small box marked *Vanilla* out, staring at the loose charcoal leaves.

“It strikes me that this might be the only *vanilla* thing that happens in this house,” she says, hiding a naughty smile.

“Careful, Indie,” I warn to her mischievous grin.

She unscrews the lid, bringing the box to her nose, closing her eyes and inhaling the sweet aroma deeply.

“Oh my God, it smells so good,” she sighs in front of me.

I slide my hand down her chest and under the fabric of the throw she has wrapped around her, pulling it down to expose her breast. I twist my torso and lower my head to envelope my lips around her teat, flick it with my tongue and suck for a few moments as she sighs in pleasure.

Standing back up, I breathe into her ear. “You need to stop making those cute little noises. You have no idea how badly I want to bend you over this countertop and fuck you right now.”

She moans, pivoting a little. “What’s stopping you?”

My hand slides up that beautiful imp-like face of hers and I hold her jaw firmly. “Several things. Including the fact that you deserve to be tortured a little first. I want you begging later.”

Her lips part on a clear exhale as warm pink spreads across her cheeks. “Sadly, I’m not sure I’m the begging type.”

“Oh, you will be with *me*, wildflower.”

Indigo

As we leave the house via the back door of the mudroom behind the kitchen and close it, Grey's fingers send a bolt of lightning into me as they interlace with mine while we take a step down and make it onto the stone patio.

I stop in my tracks, pulling against his grip, my head still spinning from this morning's conversation which didn't leave me much clearer as to what the hell we're even doing here. He pivots to look at me. "What the hell is this?" I ask, lifting our hands a little.

"*What?*" His cantankerous tone is entirely unimpressed with my question.

"Why are you holding my hand?"

He takes a step towards me. "Because I want to. There are no safe words for hand-holding unless I've done something egregious just before it, so you'll tolerate me holding your hand whenever the fuck I want. And *I* won't tolerate any resistance to it."

"Fine," I snipe. "Just checking. It does seem very relationship-y of you."

He turns, pulling me along, his grip tightening. "This is going to be another of those days where you test my patience, isn't it?" he growls.

“Um, it is looking that way,” I smirk. “Shit.” I stop in my tracks again, only this time Grey’s eyes are bright with mirth as he turns to look at me as I stare over at Stanley who is pulling some bags out of his expensive-looking black truck outside the house.

“Don’t make me carry you over there,” Grey warns. “*Again.*”

“Oh God, what must he think of me after last night?”

“He’s not the judgmental type.”

He tugs at my hand and I walk against my will as Stanley closes the trunk, smiling widely as we approach.

“Probably thinks I’m the kind of braindead simpleton you usually attract,” I mutter, reliving the excruciating embarrassment of being carried into Grey’s house like some feckless woman won in a caveman competition, as Grey leads me down a path towards the small house that Stanley must live in on the grounds.

“I highly doubt that.”

I inhale a deep breath and attempt a relaxed smile.

“Good morning, Stanley,” says Grey smoothly.

“Good morning, sir. And Indigo. It’s nice to see you upright today.”

My lips part in incredulity as my mortified gaze staggers up to Grey who is staring down at the floor, stifling a smile.

“Um, well, I do usually manage to make it into buildings on my own two feet,” I respond to his smile of appreciation.

“Well, I have no doubt that Greyson will remedy that in the coming weeks,” he responds and I spot Grey’s smile widen as I stay frozen to the spot, unsure what to make of this kind and respectable-looking middle-aged man who clearly has quite the sense of humor, only I can’t tell if he’s roasting me or both of us.

Grey glances to the side at me, smiling at my bewildered expression. I mean, this is the point at which I’d usually start

giving someone attitude, but between the Tweed jacket, the sensible grey flat cap and the worldly-wise demeanor and relaxed eye contact, I'm slightly flummoxed as to how to respond.

"I... I'm sure he'll try," I finally respond clumsily.

"I've just come back from getting you two a few things," Stanley says, lifting his bags. "Greyson told me he thinks you might be a vegetarian, Indigo."

"Um, no. I... I mean, I try my best. I avoid dairy, but I eat some fish and I occasionally crack and have a hamburger or a chocolate bar. So, plant-based, I guess. As much as I can."

"Well, I've brought some food you might enjoy."

My eyes stagger to Grey, not sure what to make of any of this Lord of the Manor weirdness. "Well, thanks."

"You're welcome," he replies warmly, turning to Grey. "Janet will be around shortly to drop off the other items you texted me about. I'll sort it all out for you."

"Thank you, Stanley. Can you leave them in the kitchen?"

"Will do."

"We're off for a walk," says Grey, his fingers still threaded between mine. "I'm going to show Indigo the grounds."

"Well, you two enjoy yourselves."

I manage a smile as Grey walks me back down the path towards his garden. It stuns me for a second how ridiculously strong his grip is, and how safe it feels when he holds my hand like this, doubly so for I'm swathed in a large cream woolen sweater of his that drowns me and leaves only the lower half of my leggings and my shoes visible. I washed my panties in the sink upstairs after breakfast and hung them up, hoping they'll dry by the time I have to go back home.

The thought of going back alone leaves me hollow for a moment, conscious despite Grey's grip on my hand that our relationship is destined to shatter like a pane of glass in a tornado. It might not come today, tomorrow or even this week, but it's coming. I can feel it.

And yet I'm making the stupid decision to walk beside him right now, only I'm not sure if it's a decision exactly, for my body hungers for this man like for nothing else.

"God, that was mortifying," I groan.

"Stan's a big boy," Grey replies. "Not easily shockable."

"I can tell. Is he used to you carrying women into that house like some time-travelling homo erectus?"

"I told you before," he snipes in a breath of irritation. "I've never brought a woman to this house before."

"C'mon, Bruce Wayne," I chide. "You don't have to try to make me feel better. I don't mind."

He stops in his tracks, turning swiftly to face me, his expression growing sterner by the second as his eyes suddenly become flame-throwers.

"First of all..." He grinds his teeth. "I *want* you to mind. Because the very thought of another man being taken to your apartment makes me want to hire a bulldozer to knock the entire fucking building down... with him in it."

Oops...

"And second of all," he continues, eyes spheres of silver in the shimmery morning light. "I'm an insufferable asshole. I can be moody and withdrawn. I'm dominant and demanding. I'm already picturing the rooms I'll be spanking that tight little ass of yours in this weekend, for example. As well as on which pieces of my land."

Words fail me as I attempt in vain to pull my hand away, caught in what is now becoming the signature Greyson Everitt maelstrom where I'm torn between arousal so tingle-inducing that foreplay becomes redundant, and outrage at his dominant suppositions.

"I'm emotionally stunted, as you've kindly pointed out," he rasps, "and part of me wishes to hide away from humanity for the rest of my days so that I don't have to start murdering people in order to feel a sense of peace."

He takes a step towards me, towering over me like one of the trees back there, nestled around the back of his barn.

“I possess a host of unpalatable personality traits which I have no doubt I’ll be subjecting you to within short order”—he leans into me, his usually elegant face so hardened that I almost forget I want to give him shit for that spanking comment, I mean, if I wasn’t so damn aroused by it—“but *lying* isn’t one of them.”

For reasons unknown, some sense of respite softens my body.

“I don’t lie,” he reaffirms. “I’ve had women before you, Indie. Many. But when I say I’ve never brought a woman to this house, I mean it.”

“All that just to say you don’t lie?” I shrug. “I believe you. Are you done with the speeches?”

“No,” he growls, his fiery eyes veritably gleaming like a sun-kissed lake in the glow of the morning. “I don’t want you to be *fine* with me bringing women here,” he adds, echoing what he said before. “I meant what I said about being possessive over my property. And I’d rather not feel like I’m losing my fucking mind alone.”

“Alone?” I raise a sassy brow. “Listen, when we were at that restaurant on the island, I don’t know if you saw this, but one of the waitresses kept checking you out and I swear to God, at one point I was about three seconds away from throwing her and her little notepad into the pool and then dive-bombing her.”

The rigid tension in his body dissolves as his lips twist up.

“So don’t worry about me being jealous,” I add. “I’ve seen how women look at you, including all those so-called colleagues of yours in the fuck-me heels. I’m already envisaging a stint in jail if we go out in public again.”

He closes the space between us, his body stiff but his gaze melting a little. “I’m glad that makes two of us,” he grumbles like the volatile jerk that he is and frankly with the way he’s eating me with his eyes, if it weren’t for Stanley being around,

I'd quite possibly be dropping to my knees right now just out of sheer naked lust for this man with his flighty moods.

I throw him a cheeky smile and his eyes narrow before he tugs me roughly along the path towards his garden like some caveman on a mission.

“How did Stanley know my name last night?” I ask after a moment, glancing to the right where, a hundred feet or so away, stands the large barn made of vertical planks of wood which look very weathered, as if unused. Its roof is one of those gambrel ones, with two slopes on either side. I spot a large flat slab of stone to the left of the barn, nestled in some long grass, but as I pull his hand towards it, he tugs it back, directing me away.

“He and I are close. I trust him. And I confided in him that there was a smart-mouthed, pink-haired brat who was consuming my every thought and asked him what I should do about it.”

He glides his mischievous gaze onto me as we walk.

“And, um, what were his words of wisdom? Did they involve carrying me into your house like a troglodyte who'd just been dive-bombed by hornets?”

“No, that was a little surprise. I'm sure it amused him. He did advise me however to... explore the only woman who has ever been able to get under my fucking skin.”

“Explore?” I repeat dubiously. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“I guess we'll see soon enough, wildflower,” he responds as he leads me through an arched passageway between two short, dense hedges and into a meticulously pruned garden sporting some herbs and flowers planted in the beds, but not much else apart from a pristine lawn.

I glance around. “You could grow so much food in here!”

“Do you want to be in charge of my garden, Indie?”

“Um...” I try to raise my eyebrows cutely. “Yes?”

“Good. How about you, me and Stanley hatch a plan for it next week?”

My heart kind of sinks at how relationship-y that statement feels when I feel in my gut that we’re not building one, but walking towards its destruction. I can’t help the word that emerges anyway.

“Sure.”

The garden is encased within the walls of a tall hedge, but in the right-hand corner at the back is a little gap in the hedge.

“This way.” Grey leads me to the back of the garden and through the gap in the hedge, closing us off from his house. To the left is a small thicket of trees, but to the right, behind a five-foot tall fence, I see open land if I stand on my tiptoes.

“This fence is discrimination against the vertically challenged,” I moan before he helps me to stand on one of the slats so I can see what can only be described as a meadow beyond, flanked on all sides by pine trees of some sort.

The land is unkempt compared to the perfection of the lawn and filled with wildflowers, weeds and tall grass. With the light of the luminescent early-fall sun, the vibrant colors dance softly with each other.

And as I look out, I can’t help but imagine a group of wild horses running across the terrain, their manes drifting as they gallop, the thunder of their hooves shaking the earth.

I think of my friends, Carol and Jim, who rescue wild horses the federal government has basically forced into captivity, using low-flying helicopters to make them stampede so they can round them up and remove them from public lands only to stuff them into tiny pens one on top of another until they can barely move. I can’t help but imagine a few running free here.

Control yourself, Indie, I mutter internally, knowing I have a tendency to try to problem-solve for the causes that matter to me by shoving them down people’s throats.

I’m not gonna do that this time.

Boundaries, woman.

“Like it?” he asks, pressing himself against my back, gently easing his erection into my ass as his mouth explores the side of my face.

“It’s so beautiful.”

“Do you have ideas on how to best use it?”

“A million,” I reply.

“Good. I have no doubt you’ll tell me all about them.”

He reaches under the sweater of his I’m wearing for the waistband of my leggings beneath, sliding his hands into them. He groans as he fondles my naked ass cheeks as I hold onto the top of his fence with my hands.

“I have to fuck you in every part of my land,” he growls.

“Stop,” I whisper as he squeezes my ass cheeks. “Stanley could be nearby.”

“We won’t be doing it now. You’re still too sore to be fucked properly. I just want you to prepare yourself mentally. Now, tell me where you’d like me to fuck you first—the woods or in that field?”

“You’re a deviant, you know that?”

“Tell me where, Indigo, or I’ll drag you into the garden and fuck you there.” He spreads my ass cheeks wide, pressing the hard ridge of his erection into the gap between his hands. “Tell me.”

“The woods,” I eke out.

“Good choice,” he whispers. “And the best place to find props for your training.”

“You can’t be serious with that word.”

Ignoring my protest, he picks me up with a growl of irritation, carrying me a hundred or so feet into the woods to the left, the tree canopies closing off the sky as the woods wrap around us, the air cooler, the light dimmer.

“What are you doing? What if he sees?”

Ignoring me, he sets me down onto the ground, looking around and picking up two thin branches languishing on the ground which he snaps every single twig off, running his hands across the bumps left behind as if checking that there are no sharp pieces left.

“Pick one,” he orders, holding them out.

“Pick one? What for?”

“You don’t need to know what for. Pick one, or I’ll pick the one that stings the most.”

“What?!”

“Very well.” He throws the thicker of the two onto the ground. “Now hold onto that tree, bend over and give me your bare ass.”

“You’re kidding, right?!”

“No, Indigo. This is a necessary part of your training.”

“What am I, a horse?”

“No. But you’re untrained and still giving me attitude night and day. You can’t reach the pleasure I want to give you until you learn to obey my orders. Plus, I like the idea of you walking around with my cane lash on your ass.”

“You’re a sadist, you know that?”

His eyes narrow. “And yet you want to obey me, don’t you?”

I inhale sharply, because the truth is... I do.

Dear God in heaven, life’s hard enough. Why do I have to be one of the ones aroused by his strong hand gripping that cane?

My eyes run over his brown boots, up and up his dark-blue jeans which hide long, thick, muscular legs, over the navy sweater which hides a body I still really don’t think should be legal, up his strong neck and onto a moody face, hardened by the dim light and the shadows that cut beneath his bone.

I contemplate lifting my sweater, bending over and letting him whip my ass as I want to.

Instead, I decide to turn this into a test of safety and control. “You once told me that the sub has the control.” He nods his head. “So, with that in mind, you get one lash. No more.”

His face hardens, but his eyes shimmer. “You do realize that by the time I’m done with your training, you’ll be begging me to whip you, Indigo?”

I gulp. “Fine,” I announce with entirely feigned bravado. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“We’ll see,” he replies. “Now bend over and show me that ass. You’ve already given me enough lip today. I’d like to see a pink line across it as your punishment.”

I take my time to breathe before slowly lowering my pants to my mid-thighs. I lift my sweater with one hand, my palm grabbing the rough tree trunk in front of me as I steel myself for the single whipping.

But instead of flinching at the pain, I flinch at the urgent call of his voice booming out from near the house.

“Greyson!”

We both pivot in an instant, seeking out the cry of Grey’s name through the woods, shouted in Stanley’s voice.

Still holding the branch, Grey reaches for my pants, lifting them up before taking hold of my hand, leading me back towards the house.

“What is it?” I ask to no response, unsettled by his suddenly tense energy.

As we reach the back door, he unlocks it and urges me inside. “Lock the door behind you.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. But I want you to lock the door anyway. This door and the door between the mudroom and kitchen. Don’t come out until I come and find you.”

“You’re making me nervous.”

Without speaking, he closes the door, watching me through one of the panes of double-glazed glass of the mudroom until I lock it. He waits as I take off my boots and go inside, closing us off by the wooden kitchen door.

Indigo

My hand reaches up to drift against the spines of the beautifully bound hardcover books in Greyson's library, a room that's bigger than my entire apartment.

Touching them takes the edge off the nerves rattling through me as I wait for him to come back. After I locked the kitchen door, I headed all the way through his manor to his living room at the front of the house, peering through the window as he and Stanley walked towards the gate which is hidden by the trees and the winding path.

I don't know what the hell's going on but every sense in my body including the sixth tells me it's not good.

It doesn't help that I made the stupid mistake of checking my messages and seeing another one from my mother. Or my birth mother, rather, the one who was subjected to my presence so unwillingly until I reached the age of seventeen, as she reminded me every day of my existence.

As I peruse the hardbacks, I try to block out her words, her accusations that she sacrificed her life for me, her promises that I'm going to be a failure in life, her wrath about me not appreciating everything she's done for me. I fought the urge to list the various ways she abused and let her piece of shit second husband abuse me and ask if that's what I'm supposed to appreciate.

Trying to shake out the malaise coiling itself in tight rings around my body and the energy of a woman who still believes I owe her for the privilege of being born and being allowed to live in that house of hers, I walk quickly, past the classic literature section and into the poetry section, reveling in the beautiful covers of the books I pull out.

I never read hardcovers. I don't even have the space for paperbacks apart from a few on yoga. I only read ebooks so my fingers wander around the beautiful images printed inside a book I pull out, an anthology of twentieth-century American poets, spotting a few notes in some of the margins, wondering if Grey wrote them himself or someone else.

I put the book back, spotting two books by Marilla's favorite poet, Robert Frost, way up on a high shelf. I decide not to use the rolling ladder and instead grab a small wooden stool, standing on it and reaching up for the book which I bring to my nose, inhaling the woody scent.

Frost is the only poet by whom I think I've read every published poem, and that's because I usually spend four months of the year in Scotland with Marilla, Orpha and Harry, the latter loving to get drunk on Guinness and read us poetry in the most charmingly animated way.

I flick to the first page, a quote about poetry by Frost.

"A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness."

As I devour the fragrant words, I hear the muted bang of a door somewhere and the scuffle of feet.

I listen out, feeling the vibration of footsteps, maybe on the wooden stairs...

"Grey?"

Silence weighs thickly on the room as I peer through the door of the library, realizing my body is shuddering despite the warmth in his elegant library. Its shelves are floor-to-ceiling and made from solid dark wood. A few intricately woven rugs cover a hardwood floor and there are small wooden tables dotted around, flanked by brown armchairs. The walls are a

deep forest green and the accents copper which gleam like flames in the muted light from large floor lamps.

I distract myself by slowly flicking through the poems, stopping at one Marilla once read to me.

Wind and Window Flower.

I know it already, the words speaking of love unfulfilled.

My eyes dance over the first stanza.

LOVERS, forget your love,

And list to the love of these,

She a window flower,

And he a winter breeze.

Marilla read me this poem the first time I visited her in Scotland. We were sitting by the fire, just the two of us, completely comfortable in each other's company, whether we talked or not, and I remember stupidly bursting into tears to the point that I began to sob once she finished the poem, not fully understanding why.

My tears became a river as I realized that what Marilla and I were doing together was so meaningful, the words falling from us not about what clothes I'm wearing and whether they embarrass her, what facial expression I was pulling that drove her insane, or whether I accidentally dropped a crumb onto the carpet or ate a yogurt in the bedroom, or all the other trite bullshit my biological mother was obsessed with.

What was more astounding to me after years of my birth mother sneering at my every emotion that didn't feature on the limited list of acceptable ones she would tolerate me expressing—sadness not being one of them—was that Marilla comforted me. As a child, my daring to express tears for any reason would either send my birth mother into a rage or lead to her mocking me for my ability to feel.

Instead, Marilla came and sat next to me, putting her arm around me and wiping the tears from my face, something that made me cry as I came to feel safe for the first time in an older person's house.

Not only safe, but wanted, a feeling that was new to me.

Not once in the seventeen years that I'd lived with my birth mother had she ever engaged with me as if she wanted me there, as if I wasn't some tumor that had attached to her and that she had to live with while loathing every minute of it.

With Marilla and Orpha, I felt wanted. It was so palpable. I was their girl, even if neither had given birth to me. I didn't realize that feeling, one I'd ached for my whole life, was even possible.

I close my eyes as I inhale a few deep breaths, thinking of Marilla and Orpha and the Christmas I'll be spending at their place in a remote village near a Loch on the West Coast, and whether by then, Grey will be nothing more than a winter breeze who haunts me.

As I release the breeze I imbibed in a sigh, I pivot a little, the sigh transmuting into a gasp as the shadow filling the doorway suddenly moves.

The book of poems falls from my hand onto the hardwood floor.

"Shit!" I clutch my hand to my chest as Grey walks towards me, the light from earlier siphoned from his face. "You really need to stop walking into rooms in stealth mode before you give me a heart attack."

By the time I go to pick up the book, I see his hand wrapping around the sides of it, picking it up.

He studies the cover. "You like Frost?"

The pain newly written into his face stops me from speaking until he looks at me, his usually vibrant eyes dull, his body stiff as if closing in on himself.

"He's Marilla's favorite poet. Harry likes to read him to us when he's drunk," I say in an attempt to lift the blanket of smog that has rolled into the room.

"I'd like to see that," he responds, attempting a tepid smile. "Almost as much as I'd like to watch you reading his poetry."

“Well, I’m sure that could be arranged... if you ask *very* nicely.”

I utter the words, conscious that I’m actively trying to leaven the ambiance, unsure if it’s possible given his somber countenance.

I try to breathe deeply. “Who... Who was here?” I ask, anxiety beginning to pervade my cells as I observe the life deadening behind his eyes.

Grey’s jaw tightens and he takes so long to speak that I feel the silence pressing into my skin. “My father.”

The vision of that darkly imposing man who would glare at me most uncivilly, his aura black, his mood a storm, blasts through me. The way he stared at me felt... uncivilized. He didn’t attempt a smile. He just watched me like some predator or something.

“Okay... What did he want?”

“He wants...” Grey’s eyes drop to the floor. “So many things, Indie.”

“Like what?”

“He knows about us.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. Someone will have seen us at the bar. Told him. He likes to ask people to keep tabs on me.”

“Not Tom?” I suggest and his brows furrow.

“I hope not.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” I say, wondering what I can do to bring life back into this man.

“I told him what we’re doing is none of his fucking business. He... He wants us to go to dinner with him and my mother.”

“Well, did you tell him we’re just... whatever it is we’re doing here?”

“Yes. He doesn’t seem to believe me. For good reason.”

What does that even mean?

“He wants to see us. He’s insisting on it.”

“Okay. I mean, I can handle him,” I decide. “I already know he’s kind of an asshole.”

“I’m an asshole, Indigo,” sneers Grey. “He’s... something else entirely.”

My gaze falls to his fingers as they clutch the book tensely.

“Well, we don’t have to see him if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that simple.” His teeth grind as he speaks. “He’ll make my life difficult until he meets you. That part I can live with, but... I’m afraid he’ll find some other way to get to you.”

My blood runs like the coldest of streams.

“Get to me?”

“He doesn’t take the word ‘No’ well. He already knew you were here.”

“Jesus,” I shudder, my body prickling with goosebumps. “Who would do that? Who would even know apart from you and Stanley?”

“Someone must have tipped him off as to you being here. Maybe someone who knows him saw us at the bar. They must have done for him to come out here uninvited. He’s not welcome at my house and he knows it.”

“I guess the pink hair is kind of a giveaway.”

He nods.

“Look, just tell him we’re not serious.”

“I did. He’s not buying it. He knows who you are, Indigo. When we met. He knows that the only reason I’d be with you months later is if... I felt something.”

“So, he knows,” I shrug.

“Yes. And despite the fact that I would gladly kill him if he hurt you, it doesn’t change the reality that he’s dangerous.”

My mouth goes dry as my eyes drop to the collar of Grey's navy cashmere sweater before lifting to take in the skin of his neck, and as I do so, I stare at something I saw before, only in this light, it looks more visible—a small round faded scar in the center of his neck at the bottom.

It must have been from a tracheotomy, surely... I mean, it's in that exact place...

“Look, he just thinks he's dangerous. He's used to having power. You're just gonna have to strip that from him.”

He manages a smile. “Any suggestions?”

“Well, you can start by telling him to go fuck himself.”

For the first time since he got back to the house, light seeps into his expression. He takes a few steps back, placing the book onto a grand piano in the center of the room. He returns to pull me into him fast, his fingers beginning to stroke my hair off my face. “Oh, I will be,” he says warmly, and almost as quickly as the warmth appeared, it vanishes and he releases me. “I'm going to make my family understand once and for all that I decide who I spend time with, not them.”

I'm about to comment on how crazy it is that a family would stop a grown man from doing what he wants, but I remember the way my mother berated me endlessly for ending things with Micah, despite his abuse. She still resents me for it, even now that her relentless pressure over the issues is part of the reason I finally found the courage this year to go low contact with her, edging my way to no contact which I know is the only way I'll have a chance of ever healing from my childhood.

My mother raged at me for my decision to end it with Micah, even after I told her he hurt me. Even when I insinuated how. She didn't care. If I didn't know better, I'd say she enjoyed my pain.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Telling her at the age of seventeen that my stepfather had rubbed himself against me, had tried to enter my room while I slept before I threatened to scream, had burst in on me while I was changing

or showering if I forgot to lock the door, had tried to corner me in the basement which is why he came out of there with his head bleeding, led to me being thrown out and sent to some special needs school for disruptive children, something I was not.

She now parades around the city clutching onto her respectable banker as I try to forget the urgent prod of his erection against my skin.

“I’m guessing that would be difficult for them to understand?” I suggest, malaise turning my stomach.

“Yes. They have specific ideas of who I’m supposed to end up with.”

My stomach sinks to the floor as he says it, for I know the loneliness, pain, guilt and isolation of being cut off from your family and that’s not something I can suggest he do on such little information. Not to mention I have a soul family—Marilla, Orpha and Harry—but I’m not sure that Grey would have the same.

As much as I try to breathe through the rejection at the core of his words, they only amplify this thought which taunts me—that my desire for Grey is so unyielding that it’s making me overlook the most obvious thing—that he and I are just so fucking different, our worlds so incompatible beyond a few days of hormone-induced fucking. That no one will make sense of our “relationship”, nor be able to approve of it.

I don’t know how our worlds would even interact. Would he attend the events I do? Would he go hiking at a moment’s notice? Would he help out at the animal sanctuary? Would he visit me in Scotland when I go to stay with Marilla and Harry?

And me, would I fit in with Washington high society and his colleagues? I hate that whole world. I escaped from it for a reason and don’t want to go back.

“And I’m guessing that doesn’t involve some yoga teacher with pink hair?”

“I do suspect you’ll give my mother indigestion with the hair.”

“God, what is it with so many people having a stick up their ass over the tiniest thing these days?” I gripe, realizing I’m breathless, panicked at the idea of them hating me, at another of the mounting obstacles I’m stacking up in my own mind about why our so-called “relationship” is doomed.

I mean, most relationships are, statistically, but there’s something about the way I feel when I look at Grey that makes me feel like my heart might ache for the rest of my life without him.

And that’s not a feeling I’ve ever had with a man before. It feels so dangerous, and I feel so reckless for having put myself in this stupid position.

I don’t know what I’m doing...

“And I’m not sorry for it,” I continue, realizing I’m starting to sound unhinged. “I’m not changing my appearance for anyone. That includes *you* or any member of your stuck-up family.”

“Good. Because another reason I’m even considering you having dinner with them is to see my mother’s face when you walk in the room.”

“Look, I’m not some token thing you can rebel against your uptight emotionally withholding parents with.”

His face hardens. “No, you’re not,” he growls. “I’ve needed their approval for a long time and never got it. I’m done trying to get it. I don’t give a fuck what they think, but... maybe this is good for us,” he suggests.

“Oh yeah, how?”

Noticing me shift my feet, he takes hold of my hand, leading me in that elegant, controlled way of his over to the piano and sitting down on its long, cushioned leather stool. I sit down next to him as he stares at the wooden cover hiding the keys.

“I’ve spent my life hiding in the shadows,” he says. “That’s where I feel safe. Except... I’m not sure I want to do it anymore.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, my mom could probably shake hands with your parents. No disrespect meant, but there’s ample evidence that she was once a hell-crawling succubus vomited up to the Earth’s crust by Satan to cause misery.”

He sees right through my attempt at levity, shifting his body in an instant, turning to look at me. “Marilla?”

I shake my head. “Marilla isn’t... my birth mother. Nor is Orpha.”

His brow creases.

“They kind of... informally adopted me when I was seventeen. We met volunteering at a dog rescue. The volunteer work was part of what I had to do at this camp for... *problem children*. Only I wasn’t a fucking problem. I was just... traumatized after being brought up by my birth mother who had all the maternal instincts of a meat grinder.”

He leans into me closer as if trying to inhale the words.

“They took me under their wing and then, we just got really close. They don’t have children of their own and one day, when I was really upset about another satanic thing my mother had done, they asked if they could adopt me... spiritually. As far as I’m concerned, they’re my parents. They’ve loved me more in six years than my own mother has my whole life.”

He grimaces as I say the words, his solemn eyes roaming all over my face. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. I don’t know how anybody could not love you.”

I gulp. “It’s okay.”

“And your father?”

“He died when I was seven. My mom married my—” I pause as a surge of nausea hits me. “My stepfather about a year after that, but... I don’t see them anymore. Out of choice. I think they’re dangerous people... emotionally... and I don’t subscribe to the theory that if someone shares blood with you, you have to keep them in your life no matter how much they hurt you, like... a prison sentence you didn’t do the crime for.”

I shiver a little as I scour his eyes, bracing myself for the resistance I usually get. Both Micah and Kohl disapproved of me not talking to my mother, especially when they found out how wealthy she is, though neither of them really needed help in the money department... I don't think.

"You need to just keep things civil with her."

"Just talk to her once a week."

"She's your mother. You owe her."

Just a few of the anxiety-laden attempts at advice they'd hit me with when I told them she was too toxic for me to keep in my life. I mean, so toxic that I'd be pacing the room for hours when the allotted time she instructed me to pick up the phone at would approach. I would flinch, my heart stampeding and poison trickling into me when her text messages would come through. I would find myself consumed by dark self-destructive thoughts after spending time with her, and with the husband she so adored, the one I so feared. I can't spend my life like that anymore. No sane adult would ever want to lose their parents. For any child to walk away, something bad had to have happened for a very long time.

But we're not supposed to say that. We're not supposed to rock the boat. It's much more comfortable for everyone if victims just keep taking whatever parental abuse is dished out to us.

And we do. For a long time. Until the point comes when neither your mind nor your body knows how to cope anymore and you finally dare to allow yourself the painful realization that you have a right to a life free of the pain of every barbed interaction with them.

Now as I peer up at Greyson, my heart beats frenetically as I wait for more of the same invalidation and pressure I've always got from men when I dare say the words *My mother abused me*, knowing in my soul that the man I'm supposed to be with one day will never ever do that.

If Grey does, that will make losing him so much easier.

“You’re right,” he responds, lifting his hand to the side of my face and stroking his thumb across my cheek. A mist shrouds his eyes. “You should never have to speak to people who hurt you.”

The words are so simple, spoken soberly, and yet relief rushes through my body as he says them, so much so that my breath begins to shake a little.

I nod, trying to silently convey his own words back at him.

The pain of cutting parents off is isolating and leaves you open to so much invalidation, pressure and misunderstanding, but it’s nothing compared to the pain of letting the people who were put on Earth to protect you keep hurting you over and over again. Yet only he can make a decision so life-altering and which has so much fallout.

I blink fast to stop tears of relief from welling up in my eyes as he watches my face until I finally decide to cut through the tension, angling my gaze towards the keys of the piano. “Do you play?”

He nods.

“Can you play something for me?” I ask.

He manages a weak smile. “How about an exchange?”

“Um, what exactly kind of *exchange*, sir?” I ask, skepticism twisting my voice.

“I play you a piece... and you read me a poem that moves you.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Indigo

Sitting next to him on the wide stool as his fingers stroll along the keys, not pressing down yet, I try to focus on how strong and competent his hands look and ignore the thin, short pink scars sliced into his muscular forearms, relics of that horrible night when that man that I just know Micah sent over stabbed him, albeit shallowly.

They came into focus as he rolled his sleeves up... as did other scars further up, closer to his elbow. Though these are not the ones that that man inflicted upon him. They're much older, paler and way thicker and shinier, as if having been part of him for years. They snake up around the back of his arm, hidden from sight by his sweater.

I saw a few scars on him at the swimming pool, but in the brighter light and with rivulets of water dripping down his muscles, which were frankly already wildly distracting, I didn't realize quite how many he had and in how many places on his body.

The first note he plays makes goosebumps trickle across my skin and sends music into me, music which, the more he plays, his elegance, competence and grace apparent in every bar, moves me more than it should, the incongruous mix of his strength and the frailty of the melody confusing to my senses.

As is the fact that I'm even sitting here in some scene which feels entirely too perfect—this man, this house, the piano in the fucking wall-to-ceiling library.

This can't be real life.

This has to be an illusion.

And while I live in it, I already know it'll dissolve leaving a starkness behind which frightens me.

My body moves a little as he plays, his hands dancing so easily over the keys, his feet pressing the pedals, his body so insanely vital in spite of the scars.

Despite the threat of melancholy that hangs over me as he finishes playing after a few minutes, I exclaim, "That was *so* beautiful."

"Fantaisie-Impromptu. Chopin. My grandfather taught me to play it. My mother's father."

"He left you this house."

"Yes. And everything in it."

"You're so good."

He smiles despite my eyes straying to the fresher scars on his arms.

"Do they hurt?" I ask.

"No. I feel proud to have got them the way I did."

His words make me swallow hard, though I wish he wouldn't say such intoxicating things.

"What?" he asks severely as he contemplates my grave silence.

"Nothing."

He shakes his head slowly in disapproval. "Spit it out, wildflower. I know when you're holding something back."

"Oh, do you, now? You think you know me sooo well."

He shifts his weight towards me. "Indigo, you either use that little mouth of yours to talk to me, or I'll occupy it in

another way.”

“I guess I’ll be shutting up then,” I respond, biting down on my lips to conceal an impish smile.

His eyes glitter as he watches me. “Talk.”

I shake my head. “I have boundary issues.”

“No, you don’t.” His pupils dilate and contract in the feeble glow of the library. “You’re just like me—desperate to unravel every little piece of string to find out what’s underneath. Now talk. That’s an order.”

“You... have other scars...”

His lips part and he edges back a little, as if he were expecting me to say something else.

He seems to forget to breathe for a moment, suspended in the abyss of unbidden memories that wrap around us as I begin to kick myself for asking invasive questions.

Before I can retract the stupid question, he reaches for the bottom of his sweater, pulling it and the white T-shirt beneath off his body, chucking both onto an armchair behind us.

Several turbulent heartbeats later, he turns slowly, his back now to me on the stool, allowing the full horror of the injury to his flesh to emerge like a spider crawling out of its tenebrous cave.

This morning I got a better glimpse of the scars I’d seen at the pool, but in my blurry-eyed half-awake state, and with him already on his feet by then with the curtain closed, I couldn’t discern what I can now.

They are not just scars. It looks like pieces of his muscle are missing, the left side absent of the thick clean curves on the right of his back. The scars are a lot longer than I thought, snaking from the center of his back all the way around his left ribcage and onto his arm, the back, sides, and from what I saw earlier, the front.

There’s a shiny pallid scar about four inches long incised into his vertebrae in the middle of his back, no doubt from some operation and next to it, the skin isn’t just scarred. It’s

mangled, as if chewed up by some wild animal, the muscle either missing or macerated.

What's more, there are several separate sections of what looks like a grid pattern of sorts. Skin grafts maybe. I've heard they're agonizingly painful.

My body withers at the thought, suddenly aching to lie down, put the covers over me and hide, preferably with him, but instead, I speak.

“Can I touch?”

He stiffens visibly, his head lowering. A sound emerges as if through clenched teeth. “Yes.”

The moment that this potent man flinches as my fingers touch his skin almost makes me want to weep for reasons I don't understand. I run the pads of my fingers along scars, some branching out into smaller strings, others raised and ragged lumps of chord. I follow some around his ribs until they disappear out of sight.

And then, I explore the bumps of the grids. You can tell the scars are old, healed as best they could be, but as I search for muscle beneath the scars that isn't there, all I can see before me is blood spurting in cruel bursts from flesh that must have been cleaved open and macerated by something.

Or someone...

Frigid air freezes around me.

“You had skin grafts,” I say, never having noticed where they could have come from.

“Yes. They took the skin from my inner thighs. Once when I was seven. Again when I was ten. Then thirteen. Fifteen. Then eighteen.”

Oh my God.

“Why... in so many stages?”

His head remains bowed as he speaks. “The damaged skin stopped growing when I was seven, but as I grew, it would stretch the skin out until it almost split open, or stop me from

moving properly. I could barely bend left or right at one point. And... the pain.”

Oh my God...

“I’m so sorry.”

I remove my hand from his back but he remains where he is, unmoving. “You were seven when...”

“Yes. It was a car accident. My back took the brunt of it. The skin. The muscles. I broke four ribs and my arm and my pelvis. Two arteries were severed.”

“Oh my God.”

“They’re not exactly sure how I survived that part.”

“I... I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” he says as if to reassure me, though melancholy hangs from his words.

“Your spine. It wasn’t affected?”

“I fractured two vertebrae. I couldn’t use my legs, and I lost bladder and”—he shudders in a frayed breath heavy with despair to the point that I wonder if I should tell him to stop—“bowel function for about four months.”

“Grey,” I whisper, aware that his tone, that of a man destroyed, is out of character for him.

If it were just a car accident, albeit a terrible one, he wouldn’t be turned away like this. There’s something else there...

“But I was one of the lucky ones. My spinal cord wasn’t severed or blocked. It was just bruised. The operation straightened the vertebrae, removed the parts pressing on my spinal cord. With physio, sensation came back. Well, once the worst of the brain injury subsided.”

“Brain injury?”

“Yes. That took the longest to recover from. Over a year.”

“They put a trach in you?”

“Yes. Between the collapsed lung, the spinal cord and brain injury, I couldn’t breathe properly.”

In those moments when words fail you, you don’t know if you should say something that might seem impossibly trite or whether you should remain silent, hoping that the thoughts in your head can somehow be heard energetically by the other person.

But instead of the solace I would hope he would feel by talking about it in a safe place, he says something which makes me shudder. “I’m a monster.”

I tug on his arm fast, forcing him to turn. “What are you talking about?”

His eyes lift to mine as his hand smooths the hair back off his forehead to reveal a jagged scar carved into his scalp where no hair grows. His hair is so thick that you can’t see it and because his hair flops a little over his forehead, it conceals the large scar at the top left of it.

I raise my hand tentatively, watching his eyes before brushing my finger across it gently and then withdrawing it. “The scars are... just part of a survival story. They’re a sign of how... powerful you are. How strong.”

The words make him grimace. “It was my fault. The accident. Well, mine and... someone else’s.”

I shake my head. “You were seven years old. How could it possibly be your fault?” At his deafening silence, I press on. “Who was driving?”

He lowers his eyes. “A family member.”

“A woman,” I say, not knowing why.

“Yes. It was just the two of us that night.”

“What happened?”

The deep low tones of his voice vanish. “A man hit her. He was speeding. In the corner of the back bumper. It flipped the car. Just like a P.I.T. maneuver. That’s why I got so agitated the day that man almost drove into you. It... took me back.”

My fingers dig into his arm, squeezing tightly. “Did they find him?”

His breath staggers as his eyes lock onto mine as if desperate to ground themselves to my face. “Yes.”

“And did he go to prison for it?”

“No. They didn’t even arrest him.”

“What?” I whisper, my hand reaching for my throat. “What happened to the driver?”

“She died.”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what that must —” I stop, exhaling a frail breath. “And I’m sorry but it was *not* your fault. You were basically a baby.”

“I know that too. Or part of me does. The part that doesn’t believe he’s a monster.”

A cold dew mists my skin as he says the word.

“I’ve known monsters,” I respond. “You’re not one of them. Not even close.”

The muscles of his arm tense beneath my fingers. “I want to know the monsters who’ve hurt you, Indigo. I need to know them.”

I nod. “Maybe some other day.”

He turns more, hauling me closer, staring down into my face. “I don’t tell that story a lot. I feel safe with you, Indigo. I’m scared by how safe I feel.”

“Scared for who?”

“For both of us.”

“Well, you know that saying... The only thing to fear is fear itself.”

The light turns up behind his eyes and he lets out the first real sign of a smile since he got back.

“Your turn now,” he says, his timbre shifting out of the shadows.

“What do you mean?”

“I played for you. I want my poem.”

I watch as a wall begins to ascend around him, closing him off once again, his spine straightening, his shoulders unhunching, his eye contact bolder, his countenance more lethal.

“Fine.”

I reach over and grab the book from on top of the lacquered ebony of the piano lid, but he takes it from me swiftly.

“Not like that, Indigo.”

“What?”

“First, you’re going to take off your clothes for me.” My lips open wide as his eyes drop instantly to the tongue inside my mouth. “Then you’re going to go to the wall on the far side.” He tips his head a little towards the darker wall on the far left, the one lined with just two short shelves and some artwork above it. “And take that riding crop off the wall, and bring it to me.”

“What?!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Indie.”

“What the hell does that have to do with poetry?”

“I want you to read your poem to me while riding my cock. And I prefer that to happen with your pert little ass bright pink after a very thorough whipping.”

“What am I, a fucking horse?”

“No, but you’ll get used to feeling like one shortly.”

“You’re out of your mind, Grey. How many weird alphahole kinks do you have anyway?”

He gets to his feet, pulling me up onto mine. “When it comes to you? Too many to count. And they’re increasing in number by the day.”

“Well, tough shit. You didn’t have to do anything degrading before your piano solo.”

“You didn’t ask,” he replies smoothly.

“Well, I wouldn’t have anyway!”

“Nor would I have obliged. I’m your Dom, Indigo. You’re my submissive. I get to enjoy the degrading.”

“Like hell you are!”

It’s really hard to keep your sassypants on when the giant in front of you is shirtless and moody as hell.

I plant a hand on my hip. “Did I sign some contract in my sleep or something? Because I have no recollection of officially signing up for that. Is this request all because we talked about *personal stuff*? Do you have to do something emotionally stunted to recover from opening up, because that’s predictable as hell.”

Dark amusement twists his face as he stalks towards me, making me walk slowly backwards towards that wall. “Well, I was contemplating tying you upside down from the ladder and employing your mouth for a while for my pleasure, but I’m saving that for a different day. Now take off your clothes, Indigo. That’s an order.”

“You know, some people are capable of opening up without needing to go into Dom mode right after.”

“Good for them,” he sneers. “Now, off.”

My gaze eats up the flexing grooves of muscle walking towards me. As unladylike as it is, I can’t help but ogle the hard mass of this man, unable to really comprehend how every ridge, bump and curve can look like it was sculpted, including his pronounced veins and that V that leads down to the cock hiding beneath his sweatpants.

His shoulders are so broad that I can barely wrap my hands around them, his arms dense with muscle. Light bounces off his eight-pack and chest in a way that makes my IQ drop by a few points. He may have scars on his back and around his ribs, but if anything, it only makes his beauty more savage.

“Well, you’re only half-naked,” I announce. “I’ll go half-naked too. Pick a half.”

“You’re really testing my patience again, Indigo.”

“Good,” I reply breezily. “It’s important to develop patience.”

But my sassiness comes to a screeching halt as I realize the wall is now less than three feet behind me. And despite this, he keeps going, placing his palm onto the wall behind me as my back straightens into it. I angle my head to see the riding crop hanging just next to me, meeting his ravenous glare as he leans into me, enclosing me in the space between the hard wall and his even harder body.

“Clothes off, Indigo. *Now*. Let’s not make your first real whipping too painful.”

The longer he eats me with his eyes, the more I’m aware of his energy vortex which is so indecently crackling that if you told me it opened up some portal to another dimension I’d believe you.

My palms hit his chest which is as firm as wood beneath the softest, thinnest layer of skin. My fingers can’t help but stray a little, brushing against the light-brown discs of his nipples, the sensation of them coupled with his brooding invasion of my personal space causing a tingle party between my leggings.

“Um, were you grown in a lab?” My fingertips press into his rigid flesh. “Because at the risk of making your ridiculously overblown ego swell even more, I see no other explanation.”

His voracious gaze twinkles. “You get five more seconds to obey my order, wildflower.”

As offensive to my inner feminist as his degrading orders are, they also feed right into my need to feel safe when submitting, to no longer feel like some damaged victim, to take pleasure in submission once again, especially when he regards me so fiercely, his body tensing in self-restraint.

“Which half?” I ask.

“All your clothes off. Right now.”

“What am I getting in exchange?”

“Pleasure.” I do believe there’s not a man on this Earth who can say that word quite as sinfully as Mr. Everitt. “And the right to be fucked by me.”

“I was feeling warm anyway,” I offer nonchalantly as a blatantly transparent explanation for my compliance, one which I know is amusing him as I reach for the bottom of the oversized sweater of his that I’m wearing.

“The bottom first,” he rasps.

“Why?”

“Because I said so, Indigo.”

His humiliating words do ridiculous things to my pleasure centers...

Knowing his sweater covers to my mid-thighs anyway, I pull my leggings down and throw them onto a chair which I miss before straightening myself up in front of him as he lifts his hand from the wall, standing up and taking a step back.

He exhales deeply as if in relief at my compliance, at me handing the control baton back to him for a moment. “Good girl.”

He really needs to stop saying those words. He’s gonna wear my clit out if he keeps it up.

“Now turn around, lift up your top and show me your ass.”

His pale eyes are fierce, like spheres of flame, their potency so arresting that it’s hard to look away for fear that his beast will pounce. But there’s something different about him when he’s aroused like this—as if he goes into some zone, one dark and seductive, but closed off... and a little frightening.

“Why?” I tease.

“Because I want to see the *before* so that I can appreciate the *after*... when your skin is lit up with beautiful red welts.”

My pussy clenches as he says the deviant words.

Do I want to be whipped like some piece of cattle?

Apparently...

We don't move again until I turn around and slowly slide the back of his sweater up to reveal my ass. I hear some low groan from behind me, the muted growl of a wolf, and before I know it, the touch of a large hand makes me flinch as it gently strays across the round curve of my ass.

His gravelly voice makes my breathing accelerate. "Very nice, Indigo. You take instruction well."

"I'm just amusing myself," I shoot back. "Experimenting."

"Really?"

"Yep."

Each hand of his cups one ass cheek, kneading firmly over and over, spreading my ass cheeks apart. "And what about when I whip your ass raw?" The rough scrape of his day-old stubble rasps against my temple from behind. "Will you be *experimenting* then?"

I can't help but close my eyes as his lips graze the side of my face, my body lit up by a kind of light I haven't felt for so long.

"Absolutely."

"Hmm... Turn around," he whispers. "You're going to offer me the accommodating pussy that now belongs to me."

Feeling myself heat up from the inside, I pivot slowly as he takes another step back, watching me in weighty silence like some animal hiding in wait. I reach for the bottom of his sweater but feel too embarrassed to lift it, instead finding his eyes. He waits patiently, restrained and unmoving, as I blush furiously, finally deciding that I want him to look at me. I've never really had a man just revel in my body quite like this before.

I slowly lift his sweater to just beneath my breasts to expose my pussy, dropping my eyes so I don't have to look at him. His breathing becomes low and raspy as he looks at me, taking a step forwards.

“Look at me.”

My eyes wander a foot upwards as my cheeks turn into a thermonuclear source of energy.

He raises two fingers to beneath my lips. “Spit.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Indigo. Don’t you dare make me repeat myself.”

My mouth suddenly feels like it’s been sucking on the Arizona desert in July.

I don’t know what it is about that order that makes me so shaky, but I muster up some saliva from somewhere, managing to spit some onto his fingers, deciding that might be the least elegant thing I’ve ever done.

“How wet are you?” he asks.

“Do you have to speak so bluntly?”

“You’re inhibited when it comes to sex. I want to remove these blockages from you so that you can better serve me. So that you feel the pleasure you’re designed for.”

My instinct to protest is tempered by the fact that he’s right. I never used to be, but now I’m kind of jumpy about sex, not able to use graphic words to describe it or to feel entirely comfortable being naked in front of a man. I hate the feeling.

I shake my head in exasperation. “Can we limit the truth bombs to when I have all my clothes on, please? It’s harder to give you attitude when my pussy is exposed to the elements like this.”

His expression darkens. “Spread your legs for your man. *Now.*”

I shift them apart a little, only for his face to morph into a painting called Sin as he lifts his fingers to his chin and spits on them, his saliva mixing with mine.

I begin to breathe faster as he lowers them to between my legs, very delicately parting the labia and running them up and down. Our saliva mixes with my own wetness until after a

minute or so of him gliding his fingers around, the flesh between my legs is a tingling, hypersensitive sloppy mess.

When he drops to one knee while ordering me to close my eyes, and spears his tongue into my pussy, pushing apart its tight walls with the strong muscle, my hand presses into the wall at my back as I shiver through his work.

“Holy shit,” I mutter as he begins to lap at my clit while easing one finger inside me, fucking me with it slowly before adding a second. The stretch would normally hurt but the more he licks at my clit with the tip of his tongue, moving in all directions, groaning as he does, the more my pussy relaxes, allowing him to push two thick fingers all the way in.

“Grey,” I breathe.

“Close your eyes. Think of nothing but my tongue on your clit. Feel my fingers pushing inside. Imagine me depositing my cum inside you. I need you to cultivate your need for pleasure.”

Eyes tightly closed, one hand holding my sweater while the other presses into the wall, I concentrate on only him as his talented tongue works so diligently, just as it did on that desk on the island.

As the tip of the strong muscle pushes into my pussy, I find myself gripping his thick brown hair, pulling him into me as the walls of my sex clench and vigor leaks from my legs, leaving them nothing but jelly.

And just as I begin to moan louder and faster, feeling the orgasm as it begins to crest, he cruelly gets to his feet. I open my eyes to find the bottom of his mouth covered in my wetness which he leaves there like some freaking savage, not even wiping it away with his hand.

“Grey,” I mutter again, my body shaking internally as I half-expect him to just lift me up, spread my legs apart and begin to fuck me. “Greyson,” I correct, knowing he wants me to address him that way during sex.

“I might let you come later... if you’re nice and obedient,” he announces before taking hold of the bottom of my sweater

and pulling it off me, throwing it to the side. He reaches behind me and unclasps my bra, removing it from my frame. I peer down at my round tits which fall out of my bra cups, my nipples already sharpened into points. Goosebumps scatter across my skin as I suddenly feel extra small, as if standing opposite a giant.

He eases me away from the wall as my trembling legs come closer together. I contemplate getting onto the floor and asking him to fuck me there, seeing as my bones have definitely dissolved.

“Turn around for me,” he instructs severely. “All the way.”

“I can barely stand, never mind turn.”

“Don’t test me, Indigo,” he growls, impenetrable walls going up the more aroused he becomes. “You can give me attitude when your clothes are on. When they’re off, you become my own personal little doll.” His eyes narrow. “My obedient little sub. That’s why you exist. For my pleasure. And whether you like it or not, you’re going to learn to follow my instructions without question. Now turn around for me. I want to look at you.”

Well, get ready to catch me because my legs no longer work.

I lift a shaky foot and manage to plant it back onto the hardwood floor without faceplanting, and then another, slowly turning whilst recovering from the ghost of withheld pleasure still ripping its way through my body.

As I come to stand back in front of him, he studies the lines of my naked body, his expression suddenly softer. I swear to God, this man has two people inside him.

“You’re insanely beautiful, Indigo.” His fingers brush against my nipples. “Your tits. The way they hang... Your little waist, the way it leads me to that pretty pink pussy. And your hips. Your little feet. You make me want to sit you on my cock and watch you ride me all day long.” His lustful eyes find mine. “You’re perfection.”

His words make me fidget a little, for I still hear the words of my mother in my head, the woman who endlessly picked apart every aspect of my face, my body, my voice, my way of moving, talking, looking.

When I was little, my puppy fat cheeks were too big for her. As I got older, she hated that my tits were developing. My hair was never right, my facial expressions, the fact that I wanted to wear make-up when I hit my teens.

Ever since then I've preferred to avoid thinking about my looks as much as possible, nor do I want whatever's going on between Grey and me to only be about how physically attracted we are to each other.

"Being hot isn't much of an achievement," I retort, aware that I'm being an irritating little brat. "I mean, would you admire someone for winning the lottery?"

"Number one, you're going to learn to accept a compliment about your beauty by the time I'm done training you. And two, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were seeking a correction."

The way he says that word, *correction*, a word which if uttered by anyone else would leave me running for the hills, does stupid things to my insides.

"Well, you always think that," I shoot back.

"Am I wrong?"

He lifts his hand to my face, gently brushing his thumb over my lips which part without resistance. This is the bit where I always give myself away about how desperate I am to suck, to remove the feel of someone else, to have his cum slide across my tongue and down my throat so that his is the last I taste.

His thumb gently slides from side to side, catching a slip of saliva from the inner seam of my mouth. I attempt to resist the urge to suck on it as his eyes study mine, even though I ache to. In fact, I ache to drop to my knees right now.

As I'm on the verge of returning his favor and getting to my knees, his thumb ventures further and my lips wrap around

it and I first lick the underside and then clamp my mouth closed around the digit, sucking hard, imagining the feel of his cock sinking across my tongue and deep into my throat.

As he groans his arousal, my eyes lock onto his as I continue to suck.

“You want to feel my cock down your throat,” he says.

I nod.

“Do you think you’ve done enough to earn it?”

I withdraw. “Do you think you’ve done enough to earn my mouth?”

He loses control, grabbing the side of my face, his breathing erratic as he closes all remaining gap between our bodies. “I don’t usually allow women to speak to me the way you do.”

“Well, if you want to spend time in my company, you’d better get used to it.”

He draws my hair back until it pinches. “Is that so, little girl?”

“Yes,” I reply to the gleam of his eyes.

“Such a naughty girl. So naïve. You know, any trouble you can get yourself into, I guarantee I can think up a punishment to match it.”

I raise a brow. “Really?”

“Really. Now hand your Master the riding crop. *Now.*”

Deciding to forgo the sass and see where he takes me, I unhook the riding crop from the wall. The wooden rod is long and milled from varnished tigerwood, its dark streaks slicing through the light brown wood. At one end is a thin leather strap attached by a metal stud.

At the other, there is a leather tongue, clean, shiny, and black. The entire thing looks pristine and unused.

“Whose is this?” I ask, wondering if that barn out there used to once house horses.

“No more questions for today,” he responds, holding out his hand. “Subs don’t get to ask questions during sex. I ask the questions from now on. Your job is to answer. And to obey. Now hand it to me.”

After a moment, I hand the riding crop to him, placing the thin rod across his large palm.

“Have you ever been whipped before?”

“No,” I reply. “Not every man needs to turn the woman they’re with into a piece of cattle.”

It takes him what feels like half a minute to respond as I begin to regret my effrontery. I can’t help it. I can’t resist the urge to fight his need for dominance. I’m so scared that if I let go, I’ll fall into him so deeply... and he won’t be there to catch me at the end.

Vexation causes his muscles to stiffen, his eyes to blacken and his voice to become rough. “I can only assume that you’re *daring* to mention the inadequate fools you’ve been with before me because you wish to be severely punished today...” I swallow hard at the eruption of wrathful jealousy as he eyeballs me most uncivilly. “I hope you know I’m going to remove the feel of any man who has come before me from every inch of your body, inside and out.

The words, so wrapped in possessive storm, send ribbons of relief through me.

“Good,” I whisper and he takes a slow step back, the very worst of his wrath melting a little.

He lifts the crop, using it to slide my hair back over my shoulders, the sensation of the leather and the wood making my skin tingle. He glides the sturdy leather tongue down the side of my face and onto my lips, his body hard, his breathing fast as he studies the sturdy tongue of the crop as it caresses my lips.

“Lick,” he orders.

“What?”

“It’s never been used. I sanitized it earlier in preparation for what I wanted to do to you. I want to see that little tongue obey my orders. Now lick, Indigo. It will give me pleasure to watch you.”

Deciding to go with it and see what happens, I let my tongue emerge from my mouth, slowly licking the stiff obsidian tab as he watches me, his eyes forming shadowy slits, his throat emitting a thick groan of appreciation at my submission.

He turns the crop over and I lick the other side, ensuring I keep my eyes on his at all times. It does indeed taste a little of alcohol. I mean, how does he even think these things up? Does he spend his days contemplating and planning out the various props he wants to use on me?

“Lick the wood for me,” he instructs. “The entire length of the shaft. It’s clean.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It feels... humiliating.”

“Humiliation is not a kink of mine,” he responds. “That’s not the point of any of this. The point is to teach you the pleasure of submission. To teach you how to take control of that submission, which will, in return, give me the pleasure I need from you to feel satiated.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You can always refuse if you’re not ready. There are no consequences for that.”

I stare down at the thin, shiny wooden rod, wondering why the hell my tongue suddenly wants to taste the fucking thing. I stare up at Grey who watches me with flame-filled eyes, and I wonder for a moment if this is really part of today’s training, or if these little challenges are a way to get me out of his system, as he said he needed to.

Maybe I need to get *him* out of my system too...

I slide my tongue down the metal rod as he grumbles his appreciation, sliding it backwards and forwards until suddenly, I stop, standing up straight, silently letting him know that's all I can do for now.

“Acceptable, Indigo,” he responds and begins to run the tongue of the crop down my cheek, hovering over my chin before drawing a track down my neck. The leather tab tickles my breasts as he toys with my nipples—one and then the other, hardening them into points. I peer down as it gently caresses the teats. My constant expectation that he'll use it more harshly has my body prickling and tingling with goosebumps.

He runs it down my abdomen and over the ridge of my hairless pubis. It grazes my still-throbbing clit quickly before making its way down my thigh.

“Good,” he breathes. “Now turn around. Your ass is about to get whipped. This is part of your training.”

“And what exactly do I have to be punished for?”

“So many things.”

“Such as?”

“Well, if you must know, I'm still feeling murderous towards the man who dared take you on a date last night.”

“Still?”

“Yes,” he growls. “*Still.*”

“Well, that sounds like a *you* problem.”

Dark mirth mixes with ire to form a lethal concoction. “It's an *us* problem,” he clarifies. “And seeing as I very sadly can't dismember him as I'd like to, your ass is going to offer up another apology to me for you daring to let another man think he had a chance of touching you.”

“I already apologized for that last night,” I counter. “I need a better explanation as to why I deserve punishing today.”

“You distracting me day and night is a reason.”

“Is being distracted a bad thing?”

“For a man like me, *yes*. As is your inability to take instruction without subjecting me to your impertinent little questions. I’m overlooking it because I haven’t trained you yet, but I will not be tolerating it forever. Now turn around and offer me that pert little ass of yours. And make it quick.”

“And what if I don’t?”

His eyes form tight slits as his tall body stiffens into stone.

“You’re very lucky I’m settling on the riding crop today. Because what I *really* want to do is fasten a collar around your neck and lead you around the house on all fours by a leash before tying you to a chair, mounting that naked ass of yours and riding you until your arms and legs give way beneath you.”

My body seizes as he says it, both from arousal and because some strangely familiar feeling makes me shiver—as if I don’t fully understand who’s standing opposite me.

A chill billows through me as Grey suddenly morphs into the specter of a man who was once so gentle only to turn into a monster.

He must see a flurry of trepidation cross my face for his glare weakens, just a little.

“We need a safe word,” he announces.

“If you insist,” I say, never having been with a man who gave me one before.

“I do,” he growls. “How about... *I’m an insolent little brat who needs frequent correction.*”

I contemplate the idea with a sigh just to annoy him. “Mmm, it’s a bit wordy.” His eyes glisten mysteriously. “How about ‘*You’re a repressed asshole*’?” I suggest.

His mouth widens into a quick smile. “More succinct,” he replies. “And accurate. Though in fairness, I wouldn’t be sure whether you were using it as a safe word or as commentary.”

I can’t help but dissolve into a smirk, a much-needed one which uncoils some of the tension I feel as I learn about the proclivities of this mysterious man who I’m finding less and

less readable with each hour I spend with him, but whom I'm desperate to know. Every piece. Every secret. Every thing that makes him think he's a monster.

"Good point," I decide, my voice perky. "It could easily be either."

"Indeed. So, what do you suggest, wildflower?"

"How about... *wolfman*," I respond, the idea feeding itself to me in a snap as I find myself suspended in the smoke-filled blast of predatory gray eyes, eyes which make me feel like I'm being hunted.

"Why?"

I swallow thickly. "Because... you're kind of... like a wolf... at times."

"How?"

I suddenly ache to tell him how insanely beautiful he is, how majestically he owns space, how strong and powerful he feels under my skin, how magical it feels to be with him. I also want to tell him how dangerous he feels sometimes, how threatening, how unpredictable, how wild, and how heightened reality feels when he's near... and how I can barely take my eyes off him for fear that he's going to pounce on me.

But instead, a riddle emerges, one I don't fully understand myself.

"You know how... Don't you?"

He inhales deeply, observing me with such intent that I feel like my legs could give way just from the sheer visceral force of it and the endless verbal foreplay which I've never experienced before. My exes would get hard and then rub themselves on me and minutes later, we'd be doing it.

But Grey, he draws out the anticipation, whipping us, literally and otherwise, into some frenzied storm fizzing with electricity, the charge between our bodies crackling, our skin hot, our tongues thirsty for each other. My pussy is now so wet, I'm amazed I'm not dripping my arousal down my own thigh for him to see.

“*Wolfman* it is,” he responds. “And you may use it whenever you need to... without consequences. Now turn around, place your hands on the wall, bend over and present that tight ass of yours to be disciplined. Don’t make me ask you again.”

I manage to remember to breathe as the muscles of his arm flex and his grip on the riding crop tightens.

I want to tell him that I’m turning around to assuage my own curiosity about his brand of disciplining, but he knows full well that I’m aroused by his dominance, his pleasure.

I turn, placing my hands on the wall sheathed in deep forest-green wallpaper with copper flecks dotted through it.

“Lower, Indigo,” he orders and I walk my feet back a step, bending until I’m almost at a ninety-degree angle.

“Spread your legs for me. Nice and wide.”

No sooner have I done it than the first whip of the crop strikes my ass, causing me to welp in shock, my eyes watering, tears dropping onto the dark hardwood below. I was expecting it to sting but no more than last night’s belt. How can that tiny leather tongue hurt so much?

“Shit,” I yelp as the second lash has my back curling, but the sharp burn is mixed with release. Getting disciplined, as he’d call it, by a man I feel physically safe with is a new experience altogether.

I flinch as Grey’s fingers find my ass, tracing the welts he must have left behind. I’m alerted to his arousal by his hoarse moan.

“You mark so nicely,” he whispers. “Can you take a third for me?”

“Is it gonna be as puny as the first two?” I ask facetiously.

Barely a heartbeat later, I’m lifted off my feet by an arm which wraps around my waist. His other hand finds my throat as he begins to breathe ragged breaths into the side of my face.

“What did you say to me?” he snarls, but I detect the wisps of amusement clinging to his words.

“I just thought a whipping should actually hurt,” I reply, lying through my teeth, as he well knows, just to show him I’m tougher than he thinks. And if he expects to fast-track this submission thing, he’s got another thing coming.

“You really are the naughtiest, most insolent fucking brat I’ve ever known.”

“Please don’t evoke the low-standard simpletons you’ve been with before me,” I snap. “I mean, you don’t like it when I do that, do you?”

“No, I do not,” he snarls, his lips teasing the side of my cheek. “Did I not whip you hard enough for your taste, wildflower?”

This is the point at which I take a time-out and ask God why I keep getting back on the sassy horse when all it does is keep biting me in the ass.

But I can’t back down now.

“I guess I was kinda disappointed,” I sing, still smarting from the throbbing sting made worse by his freaking steel baton of a cock rubbing against my ass.

“Is that so?” he whispers, still holding me around the waist so that my tiny feet are dangling off the floor and making me feel like some little wood elf the local giant has dragged back to his cave. “I highly doubt it somehow, especially since I saw one of your tears fall to the ground, did I not?”

Busted. Dammit.

I remain mute, closing my eyes to the flare of his hot breath on my temple.

“But I’ll make sure to make up for it with it the third... unless you’d like to offer your apologies for the slight and request that I stop here, Indigo?”

Dear God, please teach me the wisdom of buttoning my mouth up from time to time.

“Nope,” I announce, already wincing preemptively from the pain. “Let’s see if you can actually administer one that I can feel this time.”

I feel his lips widen into a smile against my cheek. “You have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy taming you, wildflower.”

“Well, good luck. Maybe start by working on your whipping game.”

A breath of amusement huffs from his nose. “Very well.”

He places me back down onto the floor.

“Same as before, Indigo. Hands on the wall. Bend over for me.”

Oh crap. Is it too late to back out?

Whack!

All breath leaves my body.

Okay... So now I think I know what it’s like to be bitten on the ass by a highly organized army of enraged fire ants.

But despite the now ice-cold sting of my flesh, I know he didn’t use his full force. In fact, I know from the sound of the crop breaking through the air and the strength and speed with which he hit me, that he took pity on me compared to the first two.

I close my eyes but not quickly enough to stop a traitorous tear from falling to the floor.

Grey reaches under me, lifting my torso back upright as I breathe through pain mixed with pleasure that feels new, that feels like a door opening... not to submission, but to safety, a concept I can’t even fully explain to myself.

He forces my chin up and I blink fast to stop any more tears from giving me away.

He inspects my flushed face, leaning in to study it further. Before I know it, his hand is threaded into the back of my loose hair and his tongue is licking a single errant tear from just under my eye.

“You took your punishment very bravely.”

“Thank you, but I refuse to call it a punishment, seeing as I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“How about we call it part of your training, instead?”

“My training to be your submissive?”

“How about,” he suggests, “we call it part of *our* training? Training how to... be together.”

I search his eyes.

“Okay.”

“Stay here.”

He returns a few minutes later, carrying some new clothes which he places on a table nearby and a bottle of something. He pours what looks like some lotion into his hand and makes me turn around so that he can very gently apply it to my ass. It cools and soothes as it touches the skin and I revel as the worst of the sting subsides beneath his careful caress.

“So beautiful,” he whispers.

It takes him several minutes to finish and put the cap back on the clear plastic bottle.

“Better?” he asks.

“Better.” My mouth opens as if to speak.

“What?” he asks when I hold myself back.

“I could feel how hard you were. Don’t you...”

“Want to fuck you?” he finishes and I nod. “Yes, I do, Indigo. All day long as it happens. But I want to learn more about you so that fucking feels more powerful. And I want to learn to control myself around you because all I want to do when you’re near me is to let myself turn into an animal who ties you up and ravages you over and over and over again.”

“Okay... That’s pretty clear.”

“Good. Now, are you hungry?” he asks and I nod.

He picks up the clothes he brought downstairs and hands them to me before picking me up, and carrying me out of the room in silence.

Indigo

I stare at the paper on the desk in the guest room, divided into three columns, reeling both from the words and from the way Grey watched me as I put on the clothes he'd had brought over for me before tying my hands behind my back with a piece of rope. I did resist, of course, but my resistance was dampened by the fact that I wanted to feel the rope around my wrists.

After much attitude, I finally acquiesced, allowing him to cover my front with a tea towel and feed me lunch which he had made himself. Apparently, it was “part of my training”, learning to be comfortable with my hands bound... and I was, remarkably so, a fact I can barely comprehend.

I glance over at the neatly folded piles of brand-new clothes on the table on the other side of the guestroom Grey has given me to allow me some personal space if I need it. Grey's secretary, Janet, bought them for me which I have to say is a new life experience for me.

Deciding to stop distracting myself, I plop my cheek onto my palm and stare at the words before me, written in Grey's hand.

“I really can’t believe he wants me to fill this thing out,” I gripe to Fran who is on speakerphone, although the truth is, it may be the most enticing piece of paper I’ve ever set eyes on.

“Well, you don’t have to,” she responds, chuckling to herself.

The phone is propped up on a box of tissues on the desk and she’s watching me with amusement as I work myself into a pretzel over the document Grey presented to me after lunch.

“Seriously, is this normal? Like, is this what men are doing now?”

“I’ve never heard of it,” she replies. “I mean, he’s obviously taking your sex life seriously.”

“Yeah, whatever happened to good old conversation? Why do I have to write it down, for fuck’s sake?”

“Well, A, you don’t have to. And B, maybe he wants you to have time to think about it.”

“What do I even write?”

“I don’t know, babe,” she sniggers as my eyes wander to the book of Robert Frost poems Grey made me bring up with me. “I mean, what are your kinks?”

“My kinks? Coming out of sex without needing to see a therapist?”

“Ouch. That got dark,” she says, spooning some yogurt into her mouth. “I mean, maybe write that down.”

“I don’t think that’s what he had in mind when he wrote the word *Kink* down,” I reply flatly.

“Did he write it in his own handwriting?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck,” she groans.

“What?”

“I mean, that’s kind of hot.” I shake my head at her and her lips widen into a naughty grin. “Well, it is. That man is one hot piece of ass.”

“Honestly, I feel like what we’ve done so far only scratches the surface of what that man likes. Oh and, you better not repeat the kink list to anyone.”

“I’ll be repeating it to the next man I date. I can already tell he’s gonna disappoint me after hearing about Grey’s ways.”

“Stop,” I chuckle, fidgeting in my seat, grateful for the extra soft cushion Grey placed on it to spare my behind after the whipping it took which still burns a little despite him putting more of that soothing cream on it after lunch.

“Write it down,” Fran instructs. “The bit about trauma-free sex.”

“I can’t. He’ll think I’m a freaking basket case.”

Plus, I don’t want to bring the energy of Micah into this, especially because I know that a small part of the reason I’m so desperately drawn to Grey is because I pray he can reset my body, erase things that imprinted on me, things I don’t want to feel ever again. I want all that energy gone. For good.

“Look, we’re all fucked up, Indie. All of us. Him included. Actually, especially him.”

“What do you mean?” I laugh.

“I don’t know. He’s got that repressed emotionally unavailable Alpha energy about him.”

“I’ll have to give you that one,” I concede, knowing full well that behind the man, something’s hiding. As ridiculous as it sounds, I see a wolf peering out of the shadows when I think of him.

“Look, you’re both damaged. Maybe this is his way of not adding to that. You can let him know clearly what you do and don’t like, and what will never be on the menu.”

“What does it mean, exactly?” I ask. “*Soft limit.*”

“It means... you’re dubious about something but open to exploring it.”

“Like stuff you secretly want but are afraid to ask for?”

“Yeah. You must have some of those? We all do.”

“I do, but writing it down on paper, for fuck’s sake...”

“He’s not asking you to put your name on it or sign it, is he?”

“No. But it’s... You should have seen the assertive way he handed it to me and the way he was watching my face as I saw the words. I honestly thought I was gonna melt into the floorboards.”

“Let’s see this as a positive thing. He wants to know what to avoid to make you uncomfortable. Half the men I’ve been with didn’t give a shit, so how about you start with the hard limits? What’s definitely off the table?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh out. “Anal? I guess...” My only experience of that was with Micah... and it was not a...

I drop my head, suddenly feeling winded at the memory. And cold. Cold as ice. I keep trying to block this stuff out, and it works, for the most, but the sudden waves of malaise that come over me when flashes of that day come back, making me feel like I’m back at square one.

“You okay?”

Breathe...

I lift my head. “Yeah. I’m good. You know, maybe I do want to try that...”

Or maybe I want Grey to replace the feel of that man.

“Okaayyy.” She takes a sip of something from a mug. “Maybe it’s a soft limit? Like, you’d be open to trying it.”

“Yeah, but I can’t write that word down. It’s embarrassing.”

“He really doesn’t seem like the type that would be judgmental,” Fran jests.

“Oh, fuck it.”

I write the word quickly before I lose my nerve.

Soft limit

Anal

“Okay, what else?” Fran says with a smile.

“I don’t want him to ever... not respect the safe word... or deliberately make it impossible for me to say it.”

“Okay. So that’s a hard limit.”

“Right.”

Hard limit

Not respecting the safe word or preventing me from saying it.

“Done,” I groan.

“Any other hard limits?”

“I guess I... don’t want to ever feel... dehumanized. Or humiliated. Like I no longer matter as a person.”

“Okay, write it down.”

“He’ll think I need therapy.”

“No, he won’t,” she laughs. “Write it down, wildflower.”

Hard limit

Not feeling human.

Feeling degraded.

“Do you think he’d feel insulted by me writing that?” I ask.

“No. I mean, has he ever made you feel like that?” she asks.

“No. Never.”

“Exactly. Look, this is about *your* comfort, not his. He’s the one with the ten-inch dick that wants to brutalize your insides. If he has a problem with anything you write, then he can fuck *right* off.”

I glance behind me, checking that the door is closed for the fifth time in ten minutes.

“Good point,” I decide, taking a mouthful of lukewarm mint tea that Grey made for me. “I’ll treat this as a test. If he has a problem with *any* of it, then it’s fucking *bye* and I’m getting the hell out of here.”

“Exactly.”

Blood pumps riotously through my veins as I say it, even though I know just based on the energy and the little pep talk he gave me when he handed me the paper about me being free to write anything I like, no consequences, no judgment, that he wouldn’t object to me expressing myself.

And if he does, well, he’s already helped me a lot more than he knows. At least I now feel the touch and scent of him on my body. I can live with that.

“So... kinks,” she drawls, wiggling her eyebrows naughtily.

“Stop,” I smirk, feeling my cheeks warm. “I can’t write them down, for fuck’s sake.”

“Well, he wants you to. He’ll probably get off on it.”

“You think?”

“Oh, for sure. He’ll be slapping the salami to that list on the nights he’s not with you.

“Stopp.”

“Plus, he’s asking what you like, right? That means he wants to accommodate. Do you know how fucking lucky you are, woman? You basically have your own personal sex God at

your disposal. You'd better make the fucking most of it, girl, or I'll fucking come over there and spank you myself."

I dissolve into giggles which loosen the ball of anxiety knotting in my stomach.

"Now, kinks," she grins.

"Kinks... Well, I guess I like the way he restrains me... as long as I'm allowed to say stop."

"Okay. Write that down."

"God, I'm gonna die of shame before he can fuck me again," I moan.

Kinks

Being restrained

"Am I supposed to specify?" I ask.

"I imagine the man will have some ideas."

I doubt she's wrong there...

"What else?" she asks.

"Well, I really want to... suck his cock."

Her spine snaps up straight in her chair. "You haven't yet?"

"No. I mean, just the head, but I was kind of a mess that day. You know, after that guy showed up."

"Oh yeah," she sighs. I told her and Rami the story the next morning as they had a right to know. It was part of the reason they reluctantly agreed when Greyson insisted we all leave that day for our safety. He even had a security guard drive them home while he took me home in the same car as Gideon. "So he's withholding his cock from you, hey?"

"He keeps talking like I haven't earned the privilege yet."

"Fuck, that's hot."

"It's fucking *dickprevation*, that's what it is."

She chortles. “He’s just enjoying working you into a frenzy.”

“Well, it’s working. Is fellatio even a kink, or just a normal part of sex?”

“Just write it down. It’s not like he’ll object to knowing you want it.”

I scribble fast before I lose my nerve, my handwriting messy compared to the perfect elegance of his.

Kinks

I want to suck your cock

I drop my forehead to my palm, groaning internally at the words only to hear a vague chopping sound coming from outside.

I grab my phone and head to the bedroom window overlooking his huge back garden and the field and forest beyond. Panning my gaze down to the patio below, I see Grey, dressed only in his black sweatpants, heavy-duty boots and a white T-shirt. He’s wielding an axe in his hand, chopping big wedges of wood into little ones.

“Holy shit, Grey’s chopping wood. With an axe.”

My body warms at the sight of the thick, lean flexing muscles of his arms which raise the axe over his head and chop down into a fat wedge of wood placed on a huge log standing vertically on the gorgeous stone slabs of his back patio. As the axe makes it through the air and into the wedge, it splits into two, both pieces falling to the ground. He grabs the larger piece and places it back onto the sawn-through log.

“Liar,” Fran spits out.

“I swear to fucking God. It must be for his log fire.” I lift the phone to the window and turn it, angling it down so that she can see.

“Can you see?”

“No.”

I try again, shifting the angle as the axe goes through another piece, wielded most deftly by this giant of a man.

“Holy shit,” says Fran. “New kink... Put on lumberjack shirt, take me out into the forest carrying that axe, and fuck me against one of your trees.”

“Stop,” I smirk only to gasp audibly when I remove the phone from the window to find Grey staring up at me, a sinful smile spreading across his face.

I bring the phone to my ear. “Fuck! We’re busted!”

“What?” She rattles out a breath, as if trying not to laugh.

“Shit!”

Grey plants the axe in the log, grabs a few pieces of wood and turns back in the direction of the house, peering up at me behind the window, that same smile on his face.

“Oh fuck, he saw me ogling him... and showing him off on my phone. Oh God, where’s a sinkhole when you need it?”

I hear the vague thud of the back door downstairs as my heart rate begins to spike.

“Look, I have to go.”

“Don’t forget to finish off your kink list,” Fran chortles. “He’s offering his services. You’d better take him up on it.”

I roll my eyes at her playfully and hang up, sitting back down at the desk as my fingers grab for the pencil he left me, my feet nervously drumming the floor until I fold my legs under me to stop them.

I jump in my chair at the knock on the door.

Fuck.

“Um, come in.”

He opens the door, closing it behind him.

“I wasn’t spying on you,” I blurt out. “I just wanted to know what the noise was.”

“I like you spying on me,” he returns smoothly. “It makes me feel less of a lunatic about my never-ending urge to stalk you.”

“Stop,” I smirk only for his eyes to head to the piece of paper on the desk.

As he approaches, I turn it over, looking back up at him to find his features illuminated by amusement.

Before I can speak, he lifts me from the chair with ease, sitting down on it and pulling me into the gap between his thighs. My socked feet find the seat as I angle my body to look at him.

“Look, I don’t think I’m cut out for all this *plan your pleasure out* stuff.”

“Can I see?” he asks as I find myself sitting neatly within the bulky frame of his body.

“No. It’s embarrassing.”

“I want to understand how you get pleasure, Indigo. I want to know how to best service you.” My jaw unhinges, and frankly, so does my pussy.

“Service me? I’m not a Ford Focus.”

“How would you rather I put it?”

“I don’t know. What happened to good old-fashioned ‘*fuck*’?”

I feel the muscles of his arms contract. “I like it when you say that word.”

“I suppose ‘*make love*’ is out of the question?”

“I don’t think it does what I want to do to you justice.”

Oh, shit...

This man knows how to siphon blood away from my brain and redirect it to my clit.

I turn back to look at the paper.

“I can’t force you to show me.” His voice comes in thick and urgent next to my ear. “But I want to know how to give you the kind of pleasure that will rock your universe, and to do that, I need to know your limits. I’m not here to cause you trauma.”

I turn swiftly as he says the word, inspecting his face. His expression softens as he studies me back, his perfectly carved lips hovering inches from mine, his eyes deep wells of ice.

I pivot, grabbing the piece of paper, shuddering in a breath before turning it over and placing it face up on the desk. I groan and dip my head, closing my eyes and leaning my back into his chest as he studies the page.

Finally daring to open them, I let the words pummel me, hating every one of them.

As I spin to look at him, my cheeks feeling like they’ve just been blowtorched, he smiles in that particular manner of his—kind of warm, but with something dark hidden around the edges.

“It’s a good start,” he says.

“Start? I think that’s all I can cope with today. I hope you’re not expecting me to write an encyclopedia on every aspect of my sexual preferences.”

A breath of mirth leaves his lips before his face grows more somber as his eyes roam to the list of hard limits on the right.

Not respecting the safe word or preventing me from saying it.

Not feeling human.

Feeling degraded.

He tips my head so I’m forced to look up at him.

“None of these could ever happen with me,” he says. “I need you to understand that.”

I nod, locked into him until he finally lets me go, sliding his hands down my arms. His gaze returns to the page.

“Soft limit. Anal.”

I close my eyes as he says the word, opening them to find him studying me warmly. “Have you tried it before?”

The memory chills me still despite the warmth of his body blanketing me. “I... I didn’t like it.”

“We don’t have to do it. But if you want to turn it into something that feels good, I can help with that.”

“You’re sounding like that sex therapist again.”

“I’m not being altruistic here, Indigo. I want you to feel pleasure in safety because that pleases me. It’s also what will allow me to obtain the level of submission I need from you to feel pleasure. You being safe is vital to that.”

His words leave me exhaling a breath I feel like I’ve been holding in all day. I reach for his dick on instinct, but before I can touch it, his fingers entwine my wrist, stopping my advance.

He shakes his head slowly. “You don’t get to touch unless I say so, Indigo. You know that. First, we finish this list.”

I always know when he’s serious and in Dom mode, because he starts calling me by my full name.

I scoot around to face the desk. “Fine. What more do you want?”

“Kinks,” he reads. “*Being tied up. I want to suck your cock.*”

“God, do you have to read them out loud?”

“It seems that these two would go well together...”

The image of my hands tied behind my back as I suck his cock blasts through my mind as his mouth lowers to my ear, scraping the shell. “Would you like that, Indigo?”

“Yes,” I finally breathe.

“Noted.”

I pivot, twisting my face to look at him. “I only want to do things if you like them too. I don’t want you doing me any favors here.”

His expression grows stern. “I’ve been dreaming about seeing you tied up, mouth open, choking on my cock, since the very first day I met you.”

“The first day?”

“The first few minutes, I believe,” he replies, his eyes flaring.

“Wow, that’s fast.”

“Well, I knew within minutes that you were a very badly behaved little woman who needed correction. And I wasn’t wrong.”

“Okaayy, then,” I sigh, turning back around after a moment. “What else do you need from me?”

He reaches over for the pen, grabbing a blank sheet of paper from a neat stack nearby and begins to write swiftly, his impeccable handwriting doing nothing to stop me reeling from the words which emerge so fast.

Praise

Bondage

Breath play

Edging

Impact play

Sensory deprivation

Voyeurism

Consensual non-consent

“We’ll start with a few very basic kinks. I want to know your thoughts, Indigo.”

Holy shit on a stick.

That’s my primary thought right now.

“Praise,” I whisper.

He tilts my head. “It’s very simple. Do you like it when I tell you when you’re being a good and obedient girl, and other variations of that?”

“I still think I prefer to be bad,” I suggest, biting my lip. “But... I like it,” I admit, recalling the effect those words had on me.

“Good,” he replies. “Bondage. I believe we’ve covered that one. I intend to use various devices to restrain you so that you can no longer move while I fuck you. Do you object to that?”

“No,” I reply, my face now so hot you could fry an egg on it.

“Good girl.” He ticks both words. “Now, breathplay...”

I figuratively scratch my brain. To me, breathplay is what we do during breathwork meditation. “You mean... we breathe on each other?” I ask, fairly certain that isn’t it.

His eyes sparkle. “No, Indigo. It means that I close off your airway while I fuck you.”

My lips separate enough for his gaze to drop quickly to my mouth and the tongue inside. Despite my arousal, an unwanted memory tremors through me, and I make a concerted effort to focus on his eyes in order to relieve the breathlessness that plagues me these days. “How does it work exactly?”

“Turn around fully and face me,” he instructs.

I brace myself against his arms and pivot my ass around until I’m facing him, knees bent in front of his chest. He runs his hands under my ass and lifts me until I’m sat on his cock, feeding my feet to each side of his back.

“God,” I mumble as I take in the hard thick length of him, wondering for a second if he brought a small log from outside and shoved it down his pants.

“Now rub that naughty little clit against my cock.”

I do as I’m told, slowly stimulating myself as he watches me until his hands raise to my throat and I stop moving. He

begins to squeeze and my hands propel to his, pulling on instinct.

He lets go. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Easy for you to say,” I snap. “Believe it or not, I enjoy the ability to inhale oxygen.”

“It’s not meant to deprive you of oxygen for more than just a few seconds.”

“It... turns you on?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

“The fear,” he responds, eyes falling into shadow. “The panic. The doubt. The control. It requires a level of trust and submission which will allow me to fuck you the way you deserve to be fucked.”

“Doesn’t that make you a sadist or something?”

“It makes me a man who gets pleasure from absolute control. But in reality, it’s you who has the control, Indigo, not me. It’s you who gets to decide what I can and can’t do to you. So, the more important question is”—he tentatively begins to squeeze my neck again, causing my body to seize—“do you enjoy giving me the right to do it? Giving me this type of control over your breath?”—he squeezes further—“Giving me your body to do with as I will?”

He studies me closely as my windpipe tightens and my eyes widen, panic making me wriggle a little... until he releases me again.

“Now this time, rub your clit on my cock as I cut off your air supply.”

After a pause, I do as instructed, trying not to drown in the silvery waters of his eyes as he stifles my breath with his hands, releasing them moments later.

“Do you want to play like this?” he asks, tightening his grip once again, watching me intently as I attempt to handle the sensation.

When he lets go, putting his hands down, mine finds my neck, rubbing the skin.

“Yes,” I reply. “I want to... but... I don’t ever want to pass out. That’s a hard limit.”

He bows his head, reaching over me. I turn my neck to watch him writing next to the word *Breathplay*.

Hard limit

Pass out

He studies the paper most seriously. “Edging we don’t have to go into. That *will* be happening.”

“What does that even mean?” I ask.

“Orgasm denial. Building up pleasure and depriving you of the climax. And seeing as you’re already much more disobedient today than I would have hoped for, that will be one of your punishments.”

“Do I get a say in that matter?”

“There’s no danger to you other than frustration... so no, you do not. Next... impact play. Look at me.” I oblige. “I will use my open hand, whips, paddles and riding crops to discipline you. None of these tools are harsh. They’re designed to break you in gently.”

“Okay... I don’t want my skin to open, or the bruises to be dark.”

He nods, leaning over, writing that down.

“That won’t happen. Now... sensory deprivation. I intend to blindfold you, put you in dark rooms, make it hard for you to hear. I want to block out everything other than my body, my pleasure, and your pleasure.”

I breathe through the dangerously intoxicating promise of feeling nothing but him, aware that I’m beginning to walk

perilously close to the edge of some cliff from which a plummet would be into cruel, cold waters.

I nod. “Okay.”

“Voyeurism. I’d like to fuck you in places we could be caught.”

“And what if someone catches us?”

“They won’t. I know how to be careful. And if they do, I have enough money to pay them off.”

“Fine,” I breathe out, looking at the final words on the list, the ones which made my stomach lurch when I first saw them.

“Consensual non-consent,” I whisper.

He angles me to face him. “Do you understand what that means?”

“I... I’m not totally sure.”

“It’s like a role-play. I punish you by fucking you. And you fight me while I do it. You can scream *Stop* as loud as you want, the word is meaningless. You can beg me to stop and I won’t.”

“But you’d stop at the safe word?”

His features harshen as his eyes search mine. I assume the question irritates him, but instead, I see something else—concern, maybe.

His lips move as if he means to speak, but stops himself.

“Indie... There will be a time, in anything we do, that I won’t stop at that word. *Never*.”

A lump forms in my throat and I realize I’m shivering inside, my eyes now misting stupidly. I blink quickly only for his expression to darken as if a storm cloud has rolled in.

“Indie... I once asked you if your ex hurt you... in that specific way. You said no. Is that true?”

I forget to breathe for a moment as my fingers find the muscles of his arm. I suddenly want to vanish into thin air. I want to tell him everything... and nothing.

I just don't want him to think of me as some problem case he has to solve. I want to feel like me for once.

"No," I lie and he exhales slowly.

"And... anyone else?"

I shake my head, lying again.

His hand finds the side of my face as he pulls me into him, inspecting my eyes so fiercely that I almost have to look away. "We can stop the list for today," he says.

"No," I announce urgently, desperate to try to heal myself. If my past holds me back, I'll get stuck in the darkness again. I want to get out of it for good. And Grey, the only man who ever asked about my limits, makes me feel safe enough to think I can do that. "I want to do it. Consensual non-consent."

His eyes caress my lips. "We'll start gently... and build up."

I nod, my fingers pressing into the dense carvings of his arms, sliding along them, kneading them unconsciously as I work my way up, arousal replacing the momentary static of trauma.

Without warning, he hauls me against his frame, inhaling thunderous breaths as he breathes in my neck, my hair, my temple, his lips stroking my skin as his arms enfold around my back, practically covering the thing as my lips find the skin between his neck and shoulder. I rub myself against his erection, moaning a little as I taste his delicious skin with my lips, my tongue. I feel ravenous for him as I inhale his woody, citrusy scent, half-wishing I could bite and imbibe his blood.

He groans as I slide my pussy along his shaft, separated by only the fabric of the loose and soft mauve pants I picked out from the clothes left for me and his black sweatpants.

He pulls me down onto his cock and I whimper his name as he draws undefined kisses over my neck, his tongue venturing out to taste my flesh at times.

"Indigo," he whispers and I clutch onto him harder, only for him to stiffen a little, his lips leaving my skin and his spine

straightening.

I collect myself as well, realizing that I'm close to allowing my desire for him to erode the multiple walls that Marilla warned me to keep up around him if I see him again.

While she tolerates him because of how he helped me to deal with Micah, she's too smart and wise to not spot the numerous red flags that my raging arousal for him is leaving me colorblind to.

I sit up, my legs still wrapped around him, his scent dizzying me as our gazes collide, both of us breathless, both of us locked into a tentative dance, not knowing where the point of no-return is and both trying to avoid it... because beyond that point, the risks get higher. And the pain will be unbearable.

"I have something for you," he announces.

Indigo

“**W**hat is it?”

He lifts me, holding me until my feet find the floor before leaving the room.

A few minutes later, he returns carrying a wooden tray, the objects lying on it voiding my ability to produce words.

My eyes widen about as much as my lips.

Holy shit...

On the tray are placed a variety of items, some more disturbing-looking than others. On the tamer side lie three collars—each different styles, materials and colors.

The one on the left is a gold choker, half an inch thick, made of thin chains weaved together to create an elegant necklace with a lobster clasp. In the center is a thick strip of matte gold from which hangs a beautiful circular cord of twisted gold, just large enough to be able to thread a leash through...

I glance up at Grey who is studying my face most intently.

The one next to it is still beautiful but a little thicker, less elegant, the clasp looking more finicky. It's made of silver with diamond studs dotted throughout and instead of the ring lying beneath it, a circle of silver lies in the middle of the thick chain collar.

The thing is much less discreet-looking than the gold one but is still a masterclass in subtlety compared to the final collar to the right. This one is at least two inches thick and made of black leather dotted with silver studs. Between each stud lies a silver hoop—one at the front and one at each side, three in total.

My eyes stagger up to his again and my dumbstruck expression must amuse him for his smile is sinful while his eyes dance with interest.

He places the tray on the desk and I come to stand diagonally opposite him, watching as his hands, which look giant in contrast to the collars, pick up the first gold one.

“The ring can be removed,” he says, unclasping the hoop of the gold choker. “You’ll wear this one when we’re out in public, meeting friends... but not family.”

Oh, will I now...

“The silver one you’ll wear when it’s just the two of us—out at dinner, at the theatre, or any other public place where we’re unlikely to run into anyone. You’ll also wear it around the house if I request it of you. We’ll keep the first two in your room.”

Well, fuck me...

“And the final one”—he picks up the imposing black instrument of restraint and submission—“you’ll wear when I fuck you in my bedroom. That’s where it will stay. Sometimes I’ll put it on you myself, if your hands are out of commission, and sometimes I’ll request that you get on your knees and put it on in front of me.”

He turns it slowly over and my jaw nearly slams into the floor as I take in the words embossed on the inside.

GreysonIndigo

The exact same words I see snaking around the little drop-shaped silver object lying on the right-hand side of the lined tray next to what looks like a full bottle of clear lube.

And I also see the words engraved into the leather of the thick handcuffs sitting in the center of the tray, attached by a short gold chain.

“The handcuffs you’ll wear when I order you to your room. I’ll do that when you’ve been insubordinate beyond what I can overlook. You’ll first put on the silver choker, and attach this leash to it.” He signals to the thick long silver chain lying across the tray, folded several times. “Then you’ll kneel down and put the handcuffs on you.” He demonstrates how the handcuffs close—with a clasp that you feed a metal tab. “You will be able to put them on yourself easily with a little practice. Once I’ve ordered you to your room, you’ll wait for me to arrive so that I can administer your disciplining. When I enter the room, you’ll greet me by saying, ‘*I’m ready to be disciplined, sir.*’ Then you’ll open your mouth for me.”

You have got to be kidding me...

Still rendered mute, I keep wondering why I’m not admonishing him for his presumptuous transformation of me into his little sex slave. It might be because I’m trying to distract myself from the fact that my body is vibrating internally with pleasure... and with anticipation.

I want to put that fucking choker on. I want to get to my knees and open my mouth for him, handcuffs on. I’m so relieved to be turned on by his dominance that if I were alone right now, I may well break out into an ecstatic dance.

“I’m not saying those words,” I decide just to see what he does, reveling in the fact that for once in my life, I feel safe enough to push a man’s buttons a bit, a smoking hot and ridiculously moody Alpha-Dom’s, no less.

“Yes, you will. I’m a patient man. I know you’ll submit with reverence once you’re trained properly.”

If you say so...

The final object on the tray taunts me, but... I kind of want to try it too. As if reading my mind, he lifts the small silver butt plug, handing it to me.

“This is the smallest they make in solid Sterling silver.”

Solid? The man wants me to insert over a thousand dollars worth of silver into my ass...

“You’ll use the lube and insert it every day when you’re alone. For the first week, you’ll do ten minutes a day, the second twenty and the third half an hour with a slightly larger one which I’ll supply you with next week. I want you to practise stretching while wearing it. In a few weeks’ time, your ass may be ready for me to gently sodomize you... if you want that.”

Don’t pass out, Indie... Just stay upright a bit longer...

The bright twinkle laced through the shadow of his eyes somehow helps my voice to relocate back to this galaxy and into my throat.

“Um...” I place the butt plug, engraved with our fucking names on it no less, back down onto the tray, my fingers wandering to the gold choker. I turn it over to see our names engraved in the metal strips that house the clasp. And see the same in the silver one, the leather one, the handcuffs.

When did he even have time to get that done?

“Um...”

Make words, Indie, for fuck’s sake...

Just words that vaguely resemble the English language.

With the heat from my red cheeks surely now a viable alternative fuel source for the province of Maryland, I attempt to string a sentence together.

“Um... When did you get all this?”

“Four months ago. The same day I ordered them to be engraved.”

My look of incredulity makes him smile. “That’s impossible,” I say, wracking my brain. “That’s when I was

living at Carrie and Tom's... and working for you. We barely knew each other."

"I knew enough to know that I had to have you. In fact, I knew that from the minute I saw you. These are the only items of this sort I've ordered in the last four months."

When I frown in disbelief, he pulls out his phone, tapping some buttons and scrolling for a while. He hands it to me and I see emails to Johnson's Jewelry Design.

Connor,

They're perfect. I'll have someone pick them up tomorrow. I'll need a discreet box.

Please send me a bill for the balance.

Best regards,

Greyson Everitt.

I click on the pictures to see all the items now lying on the tray, and as I zoom in, our names, engraved... and then the date—four months ago.

I was his temporary assistant then.

I scroll through the long feed of messages back and forth between Grey and the jeweler—instructing him on design, on the objects he wanted, choosing fonts for the engraving, requesting alterations to design, to color, to shape.

The first email goes back to a Monday at the end of May. I remember that day because it's Orpha's birthday. It was also the very first day I went to work for him, the day he pissed me off by ordering me to make a group of men tea, which, in retrospect may have been an acceptable instruction seeing I was paid to be his assistant.

Strength drips from me as I realize he had it designed on the evening of that first day, a day I was mad as hell at finding out that what I believed to be an arrogant prick was going to be my boss for the next two weeks.

I can't quite work out if the timing redefines creepy or redefines hot.

“You had this designed on the first day I worked for you!”

“Yes,” he replies, not a not of shame in his voice.

“Well... What the hell?”

“When you glared at me while wearing that tight little skirt, outraged that I’d asked you to do your fucking job—”

I inhale sharply, readying myself to reexplain for the fifth time that it was his insufferably superior tone that set me off that day. Instead, my moxie is arrested by the depth of his voice, and the thick rumbling of longing in his timbre.

“I knew I would be driven mad until I saw you on your knees, with your hands tied behind your back... and my collar around your throat.”

I try to ignore the throbbing between my legs and use my energy to glare instead. “And how, may I ask, did you know you wouldn’t be wasting your money?”

“Because my cock demanded that it taste you, Indigo.” *Holy cockles.* “And because I could see in your eyes that I made you wet, even when you gave me attitude. Or... was I wrong?”

He takes a step towards me, pulling me closer with one hand as the other wanders down the front of my abdomen, his fingers, slipping under the waistband of my leggings, under which I’m wearing nothing.

I stop his hand’s descent, grabbing his wrist with my left hand, not wanting him to feel that I’m so wet because of his little toys and the way he’s glaring at me that I could probably rehydrate the Sahara Desert.

“You’re such an... arrogant... presumptuous... asshole,” I stammer.

His hand slides further despite my attempts to stop it.

“An arrogant asshole who makes you very wet, and who turns you into a greedy little slut, if I’m not mistaken. That’s what you’re trying to hide from me, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” I shrug. “Maybe not.”

I place his phone back onto the desk, my other hand still attempting to grapple with his superior strength. The man is standing perfectly still, barely having to flex his muscle to overpower me.

“The jeweler could see your name,” I say. “He knew these were for you.”

“I don’t give a fuck whether he knew,” Grey affirms starkly, his fingertips delving over my pubis. “He’s been in business for over twenty years. He has a lot of wealthy clients and he’s discreet. And he knows better than to fuck with me.”

“Well, there aren’t many women called Indigo around these parts,” I snap. “Believe it or not, I don’t want to be known for being another one of your little playthings.”

“I’m not in the habit of engraving women’s names into my... toys,” he snarls. “Even if he knew who you were, I doubt he’d believe you were just a plaything if I’d go to that kind of trouble.”

“But... you ordered all this when we barely knew each other. It feels kind of... stalkerish.”

“I am your stalker, Indigo.”

His words steal my breath with the same speed as the fingers of his other hand crawl into my hair at the back, cranking my neck back and narrowing the gap between us so that I’m forced to peer up at him.

“Or rather,” he continues, “I’m your *new* stalker, one who’s going to replace the memories of anyone who hurt you before.”

“I’m sure in your emotionally unavailable way you’re going for *romantic*, but to me, that sounds kind of... *scary*.”

His lips scrape the side of my face which he tilts using my hair. “Good,” he whispers. “I very much enjoy you a little scared.”

I really do try but I can’t help but whimper as his strong hand overpowers the last of my resistance, his fingers wandering into the dripping wet velvet of my outer sex.

“Fuck,” he groans, his respiration hoarse as he confirms what he already knew. “What a naughty little sub you are, wildflower.” He pushes his finger low until it teases the entrance to me. “So very needy... hungry... desperate to be filled up... or am I wrong?”

I don't answer, my body stiffening as he rubs my clit up and down with his thumb as another finger begins to push into the tight hole with a tilt of his wrist.

“Greyson,” I gasp.

“My cock is going to enjoy this thirsty little pussy so very much.”

He slides in further, making me moan as his lips caress my temple.

“You're always so nice and tight for me,” he whispers, pulling his finger out and continuing to use my own copious wetness to massage my clit with. “What made you so wet, Indigo? Was it the collar? The cuffs? The plug? Or the thought of me defiling you while you were wearing them?”

I don't answer, dumbstruck both from the slow and deliberate way the pad of his finger is running circles and crosses over my clit, and from his knowledge of how aroused he makes me.

Withdrawing his hand from my leggings, he says, “Take off your clothes. All of them. I want to fuck you.”

There's something about the way he growls such sexual orders, his body language poised but betrayed by desire that has me wanting to rip them off myself and bend over.

But I don't.

“You forgot to say *Please*,” I taunt.

“I don't say *Please* to my sub, Indigo.”

“Well, I never officially agreed to that role.”

“*Off*,” he snarls. “Before I escalate your disciplining.”

“I don't see why I should agree when I still haven't been allowed to suck your cock.”

“That’s coming as soon as I see some vague sign that you intend to be a good little girl and obey every single one of my orders. In the meantime, I have some frustration to get out over your impertinent attitude. Now take off your clothes before I whip your ass so hard it’ll burn when you sit down for a week.”

“No, you won’t.” I throw him my naughtiest smile.

“Half a week,” he corrects wryly.

Aching to be fucked, I start with my sweater, then my T-shirt, then my bra, then my socks trying to pretend I’m not blushing as he watches me. I then pull my pants down, folding them over the back of the desk chair to stand butt-ass naked before this fully clothed man.

He eats my body with his eyes as if he hasn’t consumed food for a week. “Turn around and show me that little ass of yours. I want to see if the marks I left earlier are still there... or if I need to whip you harder next time.”

I do as I’m told, wiggling it slowly from side to side just to annoy him. “Well?” I ask.

“By all means, get yourself in more trouble, wildflower,” he rasps as I glance behind me, curling my lips together to conceal my smile. “Those marks aren’t nearly pink enough.”

I smile at the viciously hot way he’s staring at my ass.

“Spread your legs for me.”

I do as I’m told, watching over my shoulder as he removes first his expensive-looking cashmere sweater, then the white T-shirt beneath and finally his black sweatpants, leaving himself completely naked and fully erect.

My moxie finally gets the wind knocked out of it as I absorb his girthy cock, the head pointed to the ceiling.

Oh, shit...

Grey turns around, taking something from the tray on the table and walking towards me. My head straightens on my neck as I feel him snake it around my throat and fasten it at the back.

Without warning, he picks me up, carrying me across the room and placing me down in front of the wall-to-ceiling mirrored door of the guestroom closet.

I take a step back on instinct. I don't really think I've properly looked at myself naked for a long time. A high-pitched note edges from my throat as Grey's arms envelop my frame which frankly looks like that of an elf compared to his mammoth frame.

His chin meets the side of my temple as he watches me through the all-too-confronting reality of the mirror, his fingers exploring the gold collar around my neck.

His collar... with his name now pressing against my skin next to mine.

"See... when I put it on, you drop the attitude."

"Oh, do I?"

"You'll learn to," he whispers into my ear, not taking his eyes off mine as he does it.

He spreads his feet a little. "Open your legs," he whispers. "Place your feet on the inside of mine."

"Then you'll realize how tiny they are," I moan.

"I like your size," he retorts, his smile a whole chapter on sin. "It makes it easier to fling you over my shoulder when you've been bad and carry you into the room of my choice. It also makes it easier to tie you up and pin your body down. *Now, do it.*"

I spread my legs a little, placing my feet inside his which, I'm not kidding, look twice the size of mine.

"Such a good girl," he whispers and I can't help but inhale the compliment, biting my lip.

He draws his index and middle fingers to my mouth. "Suck, please. As if you're giving me head."

"How would I know what that's like when I've never been allowed to properly?" asks my inner brat with a smile designed purely to provoke.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve imagined it... Or am I wrong, Indigo?”

I remain mute, for we both know I’ve spent weeks picturing being down on my knees, opening my mouth and licking and sucking with reverence until I finally manage to milk him of his cum.

In taciturn concession, I part my lips and he pushes his fingers inside. My lips envelop them in an instant as my tongue relishes his skin. Our eyes remained fixed to each other through the mirror as he curls his fingers deep into my mouth, pulling them out and then back in again... over and over.

Watching myself in a mirror, my mouth occupied, is not something I’ve ever experienced... but then, I feel that way about so many of the things I live through with the mysterious Mr. Everitt.

After a couple of minutes of simulated fellatio with his fingers, he withdraws them, dropping them to my clit.

“Look at what my hand is doing,” he whispers, and I begin to take in the sight of his fingers running up and down the open pink slit.

“Shit,” I mutter as he pinches my clit, smoothing the flesh upwards so that I can see it, then downwards, finding the opening to my pussy, curling his fingers and invading.

There is no sound but the squelch of his invasion as he penetrates me, over and over, before tending to my clit so deftly that I’m starting to think he has a detailed blueprint of the ten thousand little nerve fibers nestled within the ridge of pleasure.

“Do you like that?” he asks as my legs tremble a little.

“Yes.”

“Yes what, Indigo?”

“Yes, sir,” I respond, amazed that I actually want to say the word.

“My good girl. Now I’m going to put a leash on you.”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t want it. Not today.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m not ready to feel like I should be in a kennel yet.”

“Indigo, with time, you’ll be crawling on your hands and knees behind me on that leash... and feeling more pleasure than you thought possible.”

“Maybe,” I concede. “But... not today.”

“Very well. Stay exactly as you are. Don’t move. I’m going to fuck you as you watch. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

Even in the mirror, I can see how fast I’m breathing by the way my chest is rising and falling, my breasts moving with my ribcage, my light-brown nipples pebbled into points. As I pan down, my taut belly moves in a wave too as I inhale short sharp blasts of air, quivering as he bends my knee and raises my thigh way up, shifting his body a little.

I watch the surreal sight of him positioning the engorged tip of his greedy dick right at the dripping opening to me.

“Are you ready to take my cock?”

The moment I nod, his full hard girth invades me as he contracts his leg muscles and pushes up, spearing me from underneath, winding one hand around my waist as another reaches for my throat.

We’re only three feet from the mirror and I catch sight of my flushing face as his fingers contract around my throat, pressing the stunning gold collar into my skin as he drives his erection deep into me until my cervix pinches and I gasp from the sensation.

“You’re insanely beautiful with my collar around your neck,” he whispers against the side of my forehead as I

observe his beautiful full lips move in the mirror. “I may need to buy you a whole collection.”

I can't help but whimper as he begins to squeeze my neck.

“I'm going to close off your air supply”—he pulses his cock a few times inside the tight wet tunnel—“just for a few seconds. You're going to take it like a good girl for my pleasure, Indigo. You won't pass out. You can say the safe word whenever you need to. Understood?”

“Yes,” I whisper as his other hand clasps around my neck and he begins to squeeze with both.

I zero in on my face, reddening by the second and then his, his eyes ablaze with deviant lust as he fucks me harder and faster, releasing my throat and watching me gasp for air. He does it again, grunting this time, the panic I'm fighting driving him wild. Upon the final choking, he withdraws his hands, observing me as I catch my breath.

“Okay?” he asks.

I nod.

“Good. You were very brave.”

Before I can respond, he pulls his cock out of me and helps lower my foot to the floor. He places his palms underneath the backs of my legs, forcing my knees to bend as he tilts me, and in one utterly expected swoop, he lifts me into the air, letting the backs of my knees fall into the crooks of his elbows.

“Stop,” I plead as he approaches the mirror, carrying me in front of it in such a manner that I can't move.

My imploring gaze rises to his.

“I want you to lick your fingers and play with your clit... for my pleasure.”

Knowing full well at this point that resistance is futile, I take a moment before running my hand down my body, tentatively placing my fingertips onto my clit. I've never ever seen my pussy up close in the mirror like this... and I can barely cope with the mortification, especially as it's a deep

pink and clearly engorged... and glistening all around in my own arousal.

He groans as he watches through the mirror as I use my own wetness to slide side to side and up and down. Despite my feet now being three feet off the floor, and my body held up by just his arms and the support of his chest, he carries me as if I weigh nothing.

“Push two fingers inside you,” he orders. It takes me a moment but I do, bending them and inserting them a couple of inches, as far as I can go.

“Very good, Indigo. You take instruction well. Now remove your fingers and instead, feed my cock into your pussy.”

“Grey—”

“That’s an order.”

Holy shit.

I reach down, finding his cock, lining the head up with my pussy, and then holding him in place at the root. He tilts forwards, dropping me down until his dick is buried deep inside me.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, as that deviant dick of his disappears inside me.

“Now watch very carefully how my cock impales you.”

What follows next may be the most sinful porn I’ve ever witnessed in my life, and it consists of nothing other than watching in silence but for gasped breaths as his meaty cock, thick and snaked with veins and ridges, slowly slides into and out of my wet pussy.

I watch as it pushes the walls apart way more than seems anatomically possible, as it disappears all the way inside me to the root until I see nothing of him but his swollen sack. He suspends me in the air deftly, my legs caught in the crook of his elbows as he tilts and rocks his hips to drive into and out of me, the growls emerging from his throat positively bestial.

I’ve never seen anything that looks this sinful.

“Look at me,” he orders and my gaze staggers up the mirror to find his expression a mix of lust and pure dark male satisfaction over his victory and his reward—my impalement.

“I want you to be able to see exactly what’s happening to your little body when I fuck you,” he utters. I glance down as his cock forces itself in deep, my flesh pink and swollen by the repeated invasion. “I want to be inside you. This is exactly what I want to do to you, Indigo.” His lips caress my temple. “To your body. To your mind. To your soul. To your heart.”

I refrain from quipping about whether he wants to fuck all these things royally up and instead, close my eyes when he says the last word, reminding myself to block out words like that and focus on his supernatural dick and what it can do for me, so that I don’t end up in some ungodly emotional quagmire a month from now.

As the very thought hits me and my eyes dart down to the cock sliding into my pussy, stretching me open, leaving me dangling on his dick like a doll, my body seizes once again, the sight of his invasion pulling me backwards, reminding me of a day that my scream was muffled by the constriction of my throat and the weight of a man on my back.

I close my eyes, barely realizing I’m doing it, aware of the internal tremor gripping me.

By the time I open them, his hands have pulled back and my legs are extended until I’m tilted onto the floor, his cock sliding out of me. Despite my closed eyes, my feet find the thick carpet beneath them and little by little, I open my eyes, trailing them up the mirror until I find his face.

Only the dark deviance drawn into it has disappeared, and instead, I find some tenebrous portrait of unease and concern.

He watches me, unspeaking as I try to stay the trembling in my body.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he says.

“No,” I reply, aware of my unexpected descent into basket-case territory. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be haunted nor to have him think I’m too fragile to fuck properly. I’m not. Or

rather, I never used to be. And I don't want these vestiges of that shitty relationship to redirect whatever course Grey and I are on, no matter how short. "I want you to come."

"I don't need to come each time," he replies. "In fact, it's good to practise for me to learn self-control around you. Resisting you is not an easy feat for me."

I spin around swiftly, coming to face him. "I froze. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry for that. Ever."

"Okay, but... I don't want to stop because of it. That won't feel good to me. It'll make me feel like... a freak. Please."

He peers down at my face for what feels like forever before he finally speaks. "Do you remember how I wanted my poem delivered?"

"With me riding your cock?"

He nods. "Can you do that?"

"Yes."

Several suspended heartbeats later, he walks over to the desk, taking the book of poems from it, and leading me to a black armchair in the corner of the room. He places a gray throw on the seat before sitting down and pulling me onto him so that my legs are bent and straddling his thighs. Despite me being on top of his legs, he's so tall that he looks down at me.

He doesn't move and instead, it's me who reaches down for his cock, angling the head of it to stand against my wet slit. Our eyes lock as I slide down onto him, already soothed by his very special and cleansing brand of dick therapy. I exhale in relief as he fills me up, lifting and lowering myself onto him as he takes in my face.

"Read for me."

I swear to God, sometimes this man feels like an alien species.

He cups my ass, raising it so that all I have to do is clench my leg muscles and lower myself back down into the hard

dick impaling my insides.

“Do you think Frost would have approved?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m sure he would,” he groans thickly. “Now read for me. A poem that means something to you.”

My body does its little dance almost unconsciously, my hips rolling, my thighs contracting so that I can pleasure him with my insides as I place the book in the gap between my bouncing breasts and his hard chest.

As I flick through the pages, the poem I saw earlier jumps out, the one Marilla read to me that day, the day I felt like I belonged somewhere for the first time.

Wind and Window Flower

I don’t want to read it, but I suddenly can’t resist the words of love unfulfilled, wanting to speak these fears about the fleetingness of... whatever it is we’re sharing right now.

This unfamiliar hunger...

My voice quivers a little as the first sorrowful words about the winter wind visiting a flower behind a pane of glass float from my throat as I slowly ride him with his help, pausing for a few seconds at a time to allow my leg muscles to recover.

*LOVERS, forget your love,
And list to the love of these,
She a window flower,
And he a winter breeze.*

His hands slide up my back as I compose myself to read the next melancholic stanza.

*When the frosty window veil
Was melted down at noon,
And the caged yellow bird
Hung over her in tune,*

My eyes lift from the page to his face as I slowly descend onto him, never ceasing to ache for the feel of him inside me. I

shudder as he fills me up again, the pain of the stretch blasted into space by the relief of the invasion. He slides his hands around my ass, helping me to move as I fight the urge to drop the book to the floor, hold onto his shoulders, close my eyes and do nothing but savor the strong, protective feel of him.

“Keep reading for me,” he presses as if reading my mind.

“You like it?”

He nods and I glance back down at the sepia-colored page and the elegant serif letters drifting across it so painfully.

I try to focus my eyes and block out his raspy groan of pleasure as I begin to read for him.

*He marked her through the pane,
He could not help but mark,
And only passed her by,
To come again at dark.*

As I feel Frost’s painting of a fleeting kiss of a breeze upon a flower, I seek solace in the spiced memory of Marilla reading this poem to me as I curled up in front of a fire at her farmhouse, completely comfortable with her, wondering what magic had brought me to the house of a woman who loved me like her own, who allowed me to feel what having a mother was like for the first time, a feeling I assumed I’d never experience.

I speak, but in my head, it’s her deep raspy voice I hear mixed with my softer one.

*He was a winter wind,
Concerned with ice and snow,
Dead weeds and unmated birds,
And little of love could know.*

*But he sighed upon the sill,
He gave the sash a shake,*

*As witness all within
Who lay that night awake.*

I glance up at Grey over the book, his face suddenly sober despite the arousal needed to sustain an erection as hard as his. I take care to tend to his cock while reading as best I can, my eyes straying to him every time the words become too much.

*Perchance he half prevailed
To win her for the flight
From the firelit looking-glass
And warm stove-window light.*

I stop reading in an instant, feeling his gaze on my face as I recall breaking down as Marilla finished the poem, for unlike the cruel winter wind that caressed the flower, never to meet her again, I felt for the first time that the love of Marilla and Orpha and Harris would not blow away.

I steel myself to read the last stanza.

*But the flower leaned aside
And thought of naught to say,
And morning found the breeze
A hundred miles away.*

As the poem comes to an end, the love evoked dissipating into the ether as the wind and the window flower lose each other forever, I can't help but close the book, dropping my head, feeling the words and remembering how it felt to hear them all those years ago.

The thought of the way Marilla loved me, a feeling so new to me, makes embarrassing tears tumble stupidly from my eyes. I watch as they fall onto my naked breasts and my belly below.

God, I feel so stupid...

Without a word, Grey takes the book from me, placing it aside, and stands up, still inside me, carrying me over to the bed and gently lowering me down. He pulls out of me as my

back hits the mattress, his eyes studying the trajectory of my tears as he lays his body down next to me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, feeling a lump knotting in my throat. “You must think I’m a mess.”

Tears veil my eyes as I peer up into his as he leans over me.

“No,” he responds solemnly. “I like the way you are. I like the way you feel. It’s... new to me. Or... I haven’t been near someone like you for a long time.”

“What, a basket case?”

“You’re no more a basket case than me, Indie. Seeing you like this... makes me feel sane. And that’s not a feeling I experience often.”

I can’t tell if it’s the sheathe of tears over my eyes, but his suddenly look like they’re covered in morning frost.

“And I’m sorry,” he continues. “I go too far sometimes. I know that.”

“It’s not you,” I reply.

“What is it?”

I shake my head slowly as more embarrassing tears spill from me. “I don’t know.”

But it’s not true.

I can’t shake this feeling that our love is like that of the winter wind and the window flower, that soon enough, it will drift away, never to be seen again.

Not to mention that I feel so much trauma from things I never talk about, trauma which bubbles to the surface at the least convenient times. About my mother. My father. My stepfather. My ex.

And as little as I want to subject him to these stories, he feels like a conduit somehow, someone who blasts away everything on the surface, blasts away the walls I put up around me, leaving behind something essential that forces the truth to simmer to the surface.

“Do you feel trauma?” I ask as a diversion.

He grimaces, sliding his leg onto mine, the weight of his body so inexplicably soothing. He makes me feel like I can break down, that he’ll catch me if I do, and yet I know that hope is so treacherous. “Yes,” he finally replies.

“About things you don’t talk about?”

“Yes.”

Under the weight of his penetrating glare, I consider leaning into him, kissing him on the mouth, something I know he’s not comfortable with. And so I don’t.

But in a flash, he climbs onto me, placing one hand under my head as my legs part wide for him.

A word of longing drops from my lips, “Please,” and he reaches down, grabbing hold of his cock which he gently feeds inside me.

He begins to fuck me slowly, only this time, he’s not the Dom. Our tongues begin to dance against each other, slowly at first and then quickening, our breaths mixing to form a heady perfume.

I gasp into his mouth as the cadence of his thrusts increases, and moan as he licks my neck, whimper as he ravenously breathes me in, grabbing his ass and pulling him into me so that he can fuck me deeper as our mouths collide, our lips brushing against each other, our tongues tasting, our hands pulling each other in.

At some point, his lips are nestled near my ear, whispering seductive words which I try to not let burrow deep, throwing up whatever frail inner walls I can erect.

“Do you even know what you do to me?” he whispers, causing my eyes to close as I melt into the powerlessness that comes from being pinned down by this man fucking me. A powerlessness that I know feels treacherously safe.

By the time he comes, I feel tears leaking from under my closed eyelids, and open them to find him peering down at me as he pulses his cum deep inside.

And as we lie there silently afterwards, our slippery bodies intertwined, I see nothing but his eyes as they burrow into me.

Indigo

Marilla's drag on her cigarette could rival that of an industrial-strength vacuum cleaner.

She eyes me severely as she exhales the smoke in the direction of the open window of the very homely cottage she shares with Orpha when they're in the US. It's on the outskirts of Prince Frederick, a village nestled in a rural area to the east of DC not that far from the coast.

"Well, he's basically a one-man walking red flag," she drawls in that gravelly voice of hers.

"I'll second that," adds Rami, sitting opposite Orpha and me as we occupy a thick mauve rug on the floor. Both of us are fervent proponents of the joys of sitting on the floor, another thing my birth mother positively loathed about me.

Rami and Marilla bonded the second they met when I introduced them a few years ago, both sharing the same no-nonsense and somewhat jaded attitude to human beings. Not to mention that they both love the same rock bands which we spent half an hour discussing before Marilla decided she wanted an update on Grey. Seeing as Rami has a challenging relationship with her old-school family, I think she's always felt comfort being around these open-minded ladies.

"Are we forgetting that the man nearly got himself stabbed to death for me?"

“Well, that was *his* decision,” snipes Rami, eliciting a smile from both me and Orpha just for sure mercilessness.

“He’s getting a few points for that,” replies Marilla flatly. “That and his work on Micah’s case are the only reason I’m not telling you to run away screaming.”

“Have you two talked about where this is going?” asks Orpha, picking a piece of something out of my ever-disheveled hair.

“No,” I reply. “We’re just dating. He has suggested I meet his parents though. Kind of nip any resistance in the bud early.”

Marilla stops all movement, her dark eyes boring into me from behind the dancing smoke of her cigarette. “Didn’t you say the father made you uneasy?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply. “That man is quite the asshole.”

“Well, it looks like the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” responds Marilla to my shake of the head.

“He’s not an ass—”

At Rami’s look of skepticism, I stop. I mean, I guess he kind of is, but then, he doesn’t hide the fact that he’s dominant and disagreeable at times.

“Well, as far as assholes go,” I qualify. “I’ve had *far* worse. Plus, I haven’t felt safe like this with a man for a long time.”

“Sweetie,” says Marilla sternly. “You should never feel safe with a man who isn’t sure if he can even offer you anything.”

“I know,” I sigh, realizing how the walls I attempted to keep up around me erode further with every second I find myself locked into his possessive glare. Even the way he sends Stanley to drive me home, making me call him the second I get in to make sure I’m safe soothes me.

It’s all so seductive... and so dangerous. I know that and yet, the pull of this tide reaches deep inside me, its current so strong that I can’t swim away.

“If he really cared about you,” continues Marilla, “he wouldn’t be doing things to make you even more attached.”

“I don’t think he’s doing them to hurt me,” I respond as Rami reaches for some nuts on the large wooden coffee table. “He’s just protective, I guess. He wants me moving into this empty apartment he owns in the city. Says my place isn’t safe.”

Marilla shakes her head, throwing a pointed glance at Orpha. Orpha’s the gentler more easy-going of the two but even she looks concerned as I say it and Rami has already made her feelings on the matter very clear.

“I’m obviously *not* gonna do it,” I respond.

“Good,” replies Marilla quickly. “Because what if a month from now, you split up, and you get thrown out on the street?”

“I know,” I say.

In truth, I can’t deny that I’m tempted. The basement suite is kind of cold in winter which is approaching, even with a portable heater plugged in. It’s small, which is fine, but the thing that I hate about it the most is how exposed it is. Basically, anyone off the street can wander down the path to the house, open the rickety old gate and head to the side where my front door is.

There’s a window at the top, narrow but large enough to get through and frankly, the lock on that door has seen better days. Plus, the landlord had a bike stolen from his garden a few months ago and some tools from a shed a few weeks later, none of which settled my nerves.

At night, shadows wander across my walls and ceilings—animals, no doubt, but they make me jump each time, as I do every time one knocks something over outside. What’s worse is the cheapskate I pay rent to refuses to have cameras installed around the house even though it’ll probably only cost him a couple of thousand dollars, which I’ve paid for ten times over in the two years I’ve lived there. I would do it myself just outside my front door, but they have to be hardwired in and the landlord is perpetually dragging his feet whenever he has

to actually provide the slightest improvement to his cash cow apartment.

I hate that a thin pane of glass is all that separates me from the outside world. Living in an apartment paid for by Grey would make me feel so much safer, but what kind of power would I have left? Now, at least, this space is all mine. I decide who comes in and decide when I need to be alone... and that's good enough for me.

"No way in hell am I taking him up on the offer," I add. "We nearly got into a fight about it."

"That's because those types of men need control," counters Marilla. "I saw it from ten paces away."

"Well, he's not getting it with me," I snipe. "He'll just have to resort to one of the low-standard bubbleheads that throw themselves at him if he wants that."

I grin creeps onto Rami's tanned face as I out my jealous tendencies when it comes to him.

Well, at least my jealousy isn't as bad as his, I think to myself, recalling the message he sent me when I told him I was spending the night at Marilla's with Rami.

Just remember, Indigo. You flirt with another man and I'll nail his ears to a wall so that he can watch me defile you before grinding him up and turning him into pâté.

I giggled for a while before responding:

I'm spending the night with three women, so I won't be doing any flirting tonight.

Only to be met with:

Tonight? You won't be flirting with anyone but me ever again. Do I need to make that any clearer?

My next message was designed simply to provoke, to allow that growly man who likes to discipline me to erupt from the civilized outer shell he displays to society:

Maybe.

He took a few minutes to respond.

I see you haven't been punished enough recently. I'll be correcting that tomorrow.

Marilla interrupts my rêverie about the endless sexually charged banter that goes on between Grey and me. "I'll remind you you said that if I feel you're losing control."

"I won't," I reply, wishing I believed it. "Although..."

Marilla cocks a suspicious brow, stubbing out her cigarette in a glass ashtray before closing the window behind her. "What?"

"He's having the door to my place replaced."

"What?!"

"He says it's too flimsy. I mean, he's got a point."

"And what does that have to do with *him*?"

"Look, I fought him on it, okay? He forced me to give him the landlord's number and then before I knew it, he was arranging to have this heavy-duty black door put onto the apartment, paid for by him."

"And the landlord agreed?" asks Orpha.

"Well, it's a free upgrade on the basement suite, so yeah, he jumped at the offer. They're installing it in a couple of days. It's gonna have a really good lock on it apparently."

"This had better not mean he thinks he's getting a key to your place?" growls Marilla.

"Nooo. I told him he wasn't and he said that was fine."

She lets out a rough sigh. "Look, I'm all for making my girl safe, but I'm just concerned that you're letting your guard down too fast."

"I know. I'm worried too. But, honestly being with him helps me. It kind of erases the energy of—"

"Don't say that man's name," snarls Marilla in full-on mama bear mode. "I'm already stabby enough as it is tonight."

I chuckle, reaching for my glass of white wine and taking a long sip as the melancholic notes of Landslide by Fleetwood

Mac drift from the speakers.

My eyes float over a home-made sign that Marilla painted on a piece of wood hanging above the old upright piano in the corner.

IN THIS HOUSE, WE'RE UNAPOLOGETICALLY
OURSELVES

If you don't like it, piss off.

The words that I've seen a hundred times still make me smile.

"When are you meeting the parents?" asks Orpha, smiling at Marilla's overprotective ways.

"I don't know if it's even happening. Grey's torn about it."

"Why does he even want to introduce you so early?"

"I don't know. He thinks that if we hide away now, we'll be hiding forever or something. Not that we're even really an item. I mean, that's what I keep telling myself, but he keeps acting like we are."

"How very irresponsible of him," snipes Marilla, forcing me to smile warmly just to reassure her that I still have some guards up.

"His family are pretty twisted, but at least I have experience with that," I say, evoking my mother who Orpha and Marilla have both had the displeasure of meeting, enraged as she was by two women daring to love me the way she should have done. I twist a lock of my still-very-pink hair between my fingers. "Apparently, the mom's gonna hate the hair."

"Oh, she's one of those types, is she?" says Marilla. "Send her around to me. I'll sort the bitch out."

Even Rami smiles this time.

"I'm gonna tie it in a bun," I add.

Marilla's spine bolts straight upright. "No, you fucking well will not. I'm not having my girl hide who she is for some stuck-up trophy wife."

“Stop,” I chuckle.

“Honey, if she’s like that,” adds Orpha, “nothing you can do will please her. You have experience in that.”

“Oh, yeah, I do,” I sigh.

After a while, I’m relieved when the conversation meanders to Rami’s work and then to Orpha’s mom, although I sense Marilla’s keen eyes on me all night long, even when I get a text from Kohl out of the blue, one that makes my heart race in trepidation until I reach his conciliatory words.

Indie, I don’t want to bother you.

I just want to tell I’m sorry for how things ended. I know the jealousy got too much. I shouldn’t have got so intense. I just didn’t expect to like you as much as I did.

I know I shouldn’t have pushed you to talk to your mom. That’s your decision and no one else’s.

I’ve been in therapy and it’s made me wish I could do things over, but I know I can’t, and that’s fine.

I just want you to know I’m sorry if I hurt you.

I hope one day we can be friends.

For my part, I’ll always be here if you need me. Kohl.

I sigh out, realizing he got caught up in trauma that had nothing to do with him.

I take a moment before responding.

There’s nothing to be sorry for.

And I’m sorry if I hurt you too.

Thanks so much for your message.

I hope we can be friends one day as well.

Take care.

Indie.

Greyson

My finger pushes in the black bell of my parents' house as I try to ignore the surges of adrenaline flaring through my system as I ready myself for the upcoming onslaught of questions, none of which they will attempt to deliver with any degree of decency.

I take a moment to remind myself that my long-suffering fantasy of beating my father to a pulp in front of his wife is something I'd rather avoid for the sake of Indigo if no one else.

I have no doubt that chief on the list of their preoccupations will be this farce of an engagement to which they want me to commit, to a woman I feel nothing for, no less.

While once the fact that Gabriella submitted to my needs made her a tolerable candidate for marriage to a man as fucked-up as me, I certainly couldn't go back to an arrangement so heinous after tasting Indigo's skin on my tongue.

It's only been a day since I dropped her back off at her place and my body has been restless ever since, certain I've left something behind somewhere. My need to protect has never been this acute. I thought I'd left that behind long ago,

but apparently, she's reignited that urge... and I can't say it's the most comfortable of feelings.

And despite the fact that I still feel this girl on my body, still taste her in my mouth, still see the color of her eyes everywhere I look, I am tormented by the thought that I am designed to hurt her; that I should not subject a woman as sensitive as her to a man hiding so many secrets, and concealing so much trauma that he barely knows who he even is some days.

A man who spends half his life feeling like a monster. Who hides the monster away from everybody but a select few...

I glance behind me at the black Bugatti in my father's driveway before my attention is caught by the clicking of a lock, and the front door being opened by my parents' long-suffering housekeeper.

"Hello, young man," she sings, though I can tell she's deliberately muting her tone so as not to attract my parents' attention. You'd have thought that after working for them for almost ten years, they'd allow her to make a bit of noise, express her warm personality more freely.

Instead, she speaks to me in hushed tones when they're around, as if she's afraid of being heard at all, something I know full well that Indigo would not approve of if I do decide to introduce her. By rights, I shouldn't, but my parents want her hidden away and that is not acceptable to me, even though I'm aware that I have no idea down which path I'm taking her.

All I do know is that every cell in my body now hungers for her to the point of minute-by-minute distraction, a fact that riddles me with fear.

"Hey, Dorothy," I smile, giving her a hug before she reaches up for me, grabbing hold of my lapel.

"Coat off," she orders, her weathered skin crinkling around her eyes from years of hearty laughter.

"Yes, ma'am."

The thousand-ton silence from the living room nearby informs me that I'm expected and after removing my shoes, I steel myself for a frigid welcome, only to stop dead in my tracks in the doorway of the vast living room, its tones murky, its furniture cold and modern, the place the diametric opposite to the explosion of color and mismatched patterns of Indigo's home.

As I breach the doorway, a man I had not expected to see slides into view.

Vitaly Bakhtin

Gabriella's father.

Fuck.

I catch sight of myself in the huge silver-framed mirror above the marble mantelpiece opposite before greeting my mother, Sandra, kneeling down to kiss her on the cheek. She's sitting in a dark-brown leather armchair to the left opposite two men—Vitaly and my father, Landon, standing next to him near a squat table in black wood bearing a silver ashtray and some glasses of bourbon.

My mother's frame stiffens as I kiss her as I've been trained to do to avoid the consequences of not greeting her warmly enough. She doesn't answer me. Instead, her gaze seeks out my father, her pale blue eyes meeting his thunderous glare.

Reading the thwart tension zigzagging its way through the room, I contemplate not shaking the men's hands, but being the asshole I am, decide to anyway, eyeballing Vitaly as I stroll up to him, stretching out my hand. His piercing brown eyes, the same color and shape as his daughter's, bore into me but he shakes my hand nonetheless, his grip strong.

Aware of my father's glare, I don't offer him the same courtesy but instead bow my head. "Father."

He says not a word as I turn to sit down, scanning the room, the exits, their pockets, their bodies, the objects lying around them, including the engraved knife lying on a table nearby.

Vitaly's lined navy three-piece suit does little to hide his muscular physique—one on par with my father's... and with mine.

“Would you like a drink, Greyson?” asks Dorothy from behind.

“Just water please,” I reply.

“My wife will get it,” interrupts Landon. “Leave us. *Now.*”

My fingers curl around the edges of the armchair as I breathe through the disdain he has always shown his staff.

To my father, like all parents of the narcissistic variety, a therapist once informed me, hierarchy is everything, a fact that has stained every aspect of his relationship with me. I am inherently lesser than him by virtue of the fact that I'm his child. In his eyes, I owe him, no matter what he has taken from me, and the rage that consumes him when I don't offer him the reverence he believes he deserves permeates our every interaction, as does the secret that hangs between us, poisoning the air, corroding me every time I inhale it.

My mother, already drunk I'd guess based on her gait and the fact that she's taken everything off but a slip of a dress, which usually happens when she's had too much to drink, heads over to the bar, pouring water from a bottle into a glass, managing to spill some along the way.

I watch a rivulet of water eke down the side of the tumbler as she places it onto the glass coffee table before me.

“Thank you.”

She scoffs, sitting back down, grabbing a cigarette from a packet and lighting it with shaky hands adorned with multiple gold rings.

“So,” I begin, if for no other reason than to attempt to shatter the tension befouling the room. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You know full well what.” My father's gritted teeth make the words emerge like gravel spit out by spinning tires. “I've informed Vitaly of recent events.”

“And what events would those be, Father?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” he growls, the cruel sound reverberating through the room. His fingers clutch the glass of whiskey on the mantelpiece so firmly that I feel sure it’s about to shatter. “We know why we’re here. We’re here to discuss your engagement... as well as the whore you’ve most ill-advisedly taken.”

I try to conceal the shudder rattling my body as my glare roughens as I absorb the insult. Luckily for both of us, I’ve spent my life listening to my father call women *sluts*, *whores*, *cunts*, and other less palatable words, so I’m just about able to mitigate my rancor at the word.

“So, who is the whore you’re insulting my daughter with?” asks Vitaly as he fills a seat on the chair to my right, the pale dregs of his faded Bulgarian accent still infiltrating certain words.

“She’s none of your business, Vitaly.”

His shoulders rise as his breathing quickens and he rubs one hand with the sturdy fingers of another. “Like hell, she isn’t. You’re supposed to be engaged to my *fucking* daughter.”

I shake my head. “We both know I was never asked for consent before being signed up to that arrangement.”

“This isn’t about consent,” he gnarls. “This is about *family. Responsibility*. Your father has been responsible for you his whole life.” The words light murderous fires inside me.

You have no fucking idea...

Or do you?

Would you even care, Vitaly?

“*You owe him*. It’s time you returned the favor. I’m going to make sure you repay your debt to your father.”

“By marrying a woman I feel nothing for? Is that what you want for her?”

“She’ll do as she’s fucking well told, for the good of both families.”

My eyes narrow as he says it. The Bakhtin family is much wealthier than even mine. They don't need our family for money. Maybe my father and he know too much about each other's crimes.

Or maybe Vitaly Bakhtin is just like my father—he needs control and will wield it in whatever way grants him the power over others that he craves.

“There are other powerful families in the city you can marry her off to if you care so little about her right to choose.”

Vitaly's body stiffens. “See, that's the difference between you and her. *She* understands what family means.”

What Vitaly really means is that his daughter is just like him. She's the walking opposite of Indigo—shrewd, calculated, organized, ambitious, ruthless—and no amount of attempting to reason with her has dampened her desire to marry me. Even when I told her it would cause me damage to be forced into such a situation, I got no hint that she gave a shit.

“Greyson, do you realize how difficult you're making all of this?!” exclaims Sandra, getting to her feet, pacing backwards and forwards like a leopard trapped in a cage, her fingers shakily drawing a second cigarette to her lips. “We haven't asked you for much! We're asking you to do your duty as a son! For us!”

“Or risk your fucking inheritance,” snarls Landon, always so keen to dangle my inheritance over my head.

I shake my head. “I don't need your money, Father. As you well know.”

The fact that I inherited an estate from my maternal grandparents has long been a source of fury and rancor for my father, especially when he discovered that the trust they put it into until I turned twenty-one was watertight and he could never get his hands on it without my authority, despite multiple legal attempts to.

The financial independence that my grandparents granted me was the only tiny piece of justice they got to ensure, and

even then, it only came with their own death. I like to think that that knowledge gave them some semblance of peace despite what was taken from them.

Vitaly's calloused voice splinters the room, turning my blood to ice. "Who is she?"

"That's none of your fucking business," I repeat, aware of the lengths to which this man will go to ensure he gets what he wants.

"That's where you're *wrong*."

My blood riots through my veins at the thought of him even knowing about her. I ache to grab him by his thick, ruddy throat and launch my fist into his face, beating him to a pulp for the mere ghost of a threat hanging in the air.

But if I do that, he'll know...

And it will mean that the bloodthirst I've felt since I met Indigo will have consumed me—the rage born of my unbidden protectiveness over her, and the rage over things that the candor of her vibrant gaze make difficult to keep burying.

Aware of the intransigence of the positions of these dangerous men, I decide to attempt something which leaves me hollow.

"I'm dating a woman. That's all. Perhaps if you all left me the fuck alone, I'd get her out of my system and we wouldn't have to waste our time having conversations like these."

My mother turns to me swiftly, eyes wild, her bleached blond bob messy as if having been dragged around the room by it—not something that would be new to her based on what I know of my father's proclivities.

"Is that what you're doing here?" she asks, the desperation in her voice unsettling, as if she knows she'll bear some part of the consequences for me daring to defy my father.

In truth, that was once the plan—to get her out of my system. Part of me still holds onto the hope that I can do it, and that I can also free her of the binds holding her to me. And

yet every day, I fall deeper into her, until all I want to do is let go and allow this warm current to take me wherever it will.

But right now, I can't ignore the menacing glint in Vitaly's eyes, nor the thought that he or my father could do something to hurt or threaten her. It's unlikely, but the fury in my father's eyes is not something anyone but a fool could ignore.

"Yes," I lie, hoping time may be all they need to accept that this ungodly arrangement they fantasize over would leave me in hell. The reality that I'm not sure either care makes me feel like I'm standing on the edge of the abyss.

I practically hear the room breathe as I say the word, with Vitaly and my father glancing at each other as my mother brings a drink to her lips, the ice cubes rattling as she downs what's left of it.

"So, are we done?" I ask.

Vitaly watches me a while longer. "Seeing as you're clearly thinking with your dick right now, we'll give you some time to get this... *woman* out of your system. I hope you manage it fast. For *everyone's* sake."

I absorb the undercurrent of menace, not addressing him as he says goodbye to my parents and leaves, taking some of the blackness with him.

As the front door slams shut, my father takes his place on the chair to my right. He doesn't talk for a while, his body a livewire of unstable current, luckily one matched by the instability of mine.

When he does finally speak, his booming voice resounds through my chest.

"Indigo must be proud of herself," Landon seethes. "Went to work as a ten-a-penny fucking temp, grabbed herself the wealthy boss. Not bad for three days' work."

"That's not what this is," I snarl. "She's been running from me since the first day we met."

"I guess she knows the game. Some women are conniving. They know how to drive men insane, and then get a shock

when we lose our fucking minds and make them pay for it.”

My ability to remain seated and unspeaking despite the unspoken horror of an event from long ago that we share astounds even me.

It’s Sandra’s shrill slur that snakes through the silence as her tall, lithe frame stumbles in my direction. “Your father has told me about her. She’s short.” She spits the word out as if it were some heinous insult. “Pink hair? A fucking yoga teacher who lives in a shithole? Her friends all trash?” She squares her unsteady body at me. “And *Indigo*? What a fucking stupid name. Do you know how embarrassing it would be to introduce someone like that at family functions? Do you know how fucking *ridiculous* you’d look together? You’re one of the most eligible bachelors in the city. Not a day goes by when people don’t ask us about you, and you’d walk in with some cheap castoff instead of marrying a decent woman like Gabriella. Our friends would think you’ve lost your fucking mind. You’d be degrading the entire family with her presence.”

“Is that all you care about, mother? What the neighbors think? You know full well what we do for a living. Which means you know full well that most of the people whose opinions are so important to you are criminals and hypocrites.”

She shakes her head, reaching for the half-empty bottle of whiskey that she’d placed on the side table, messily pouring some more of the amber liquor into her glass before downing half the glass.

“So much contempt for the people who’ve allowed us all of our wealth... Are we supposed to sit by and let you humiliate this family? Or bring someone into it who weakens it?”

“*Weakens* it? This girl is one of the warmest, most caring, most amusing humans I’ve ever been privileged enough to meet, *mother*.”

I don’t want to call her that, but after years of punishment when I tried to call her by her first name, Sandra, I gave up that fight. The same with my father. When I would call him

Landon, I would pay for it, often unable to sit down without pain for days.

Sandra's make-up-laden face twists in outrage as I dare evoke a creature so anathema to the kind of humans these vampires frequent. "How exactly do you think a woman so loving would weaken the family?"

She places the glass on the side table, dropping to her knees in front of me, her expression wild and desperate. The woman looks so distressed you'd have thought someone had just told her whole family is dying.

My eyes slip to her tapered red acrylic nails as she winds her hand around my wrist, her touch nothing but poison.

"Isn't it because of her that you have these awful ugly scars on your hand?" The brush of her fingers across the thin, faded scars left behind from the day on the island seers into me, making me pull my hand slowly back.

"No," I respond. "It most certainly wasn't her fault." My gaze slides to my father. "And they're certainly not the worst scars I have."

My father's face twists into a heinous grimace as I throw the accusation his way—one that even his wife will not fully understand.

"She's no good for you," continues Sandra. "Gabriella and you... you look perfect together. She's tall, beautiful, elegant, from a respected family. That union will make our family *stronger*. This joke of a so-called relationship with this cheap fucking hippy will make us a laughing stock. I already know you'll look ridiculous walking into any room with her. She's ruining everything!"

She shudders before me, glowering at me as if she wished to erase me.

"I know we sound harsh, Greyson," she continues, "but it's only because we *love* you. We do. We want the best for you. And you're too blind to see what that is. I've never met her but from everything I've been told, this girl and you don't fit."

“We don’t fit? And yet I’ve never felt so good standing next to another soul.”

The slap across my face comes before I can stop it, messy and weak but one that neatly sums up my relationship with this woman. My eyes lock onto hers as she shakes before getting to her feet and beginning to pace, tears streaming down her face, leaving small rivers of kohl make-up in their wake.

“How have we ended up with a son this ungrateful for everything we’ve done for him?!” she exclaims.

“Get out,” snarls my father in her direction. “Go upstairs and wait for me in bed. And don’t you dare pick up the phone to anyone.”

My father has never made it a secret how he keeps Sandra in line, no doubt angry that I don’t share his penchant for public humiliation.

She glares at me before staggering out of the room, closing the door behind us to leave me and my father amidst the mass of tension swathing us.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” he says slowly. “I want you to bring... Indigo... to the house.” He speaks her name as if it repulses him to utter it.

“Why? So that you can pick her to pieces? Scare her off? Is that the plan?”

“You clearly feel something for her. It’s only right we meet the woman who has fucked up what we’ve been planning for years.”

“*You’ve* been planning,” I counter. “I’ve wanted nothing to do with it since I was twenty-five years old. I’ve spent half a decade trying to make you understand... to no avail.”

“That’s because you only think of your fucking self,” he snarls.

“Is that so? Believe it or not, most sons are not pressured into marriage in this day and age. If refusing to be part of your sick game means being called *selfish*, then so be it.”

“We all have fucking responsibilities. Mine were to you. I brought you up, not expecting this lack of fucking respect in return.”

“Did it ever occur to you that this chaos we’re now dealing with is caused by you refusing to respect my fucking wishes? I don’t love Gabriella. I don’t even like the fucking woman.”

“This isn’t about *love*,” he snarls. “You don’t need to be in *love*. Nor faithful for that matter. You can keep that little plaything on the side once you’re married. This is about securing your family’s future prosperity. Our protection. Or don’t you care about your parents? Your siblings? We’re arranging marriages for them and neither is complaining like you.”

“They haven’t had the same life experiences as me, Father. As you well know.”

The tension, already thick, becomes smog in the room. He and I have not spoken about that day since I was seven years old and forced kicking and screaming back into a car for him to drive me to his home in, but it is constantly rebirthed in the shadows around us, silently polluting the air, causing cold wrath to seep into my lungs.

“You’re full of excuses,” he finally growls. “Let me make it clear to you. You bring her to meet us or I’ll dig out the PIs and have them investigate her themselves. And I’ll make sure it gets messy.”

My fingers curl around the arm of the chair as I restrain myself from getting to my feet and choking the life from him, but I can’t allow him to see how much I do care. I suspect that he already knows. He could always see inside me. He always knew what I was thinking... and what would hurt me the most.

“Why would I invite someone you wish us to be rid of?”

His pale brown eyes narrow. “She’s clearly important enough to you to fuck up everything we’ve been working for.”

“It’s not her that’s fucked up anything. I’ve told you for years I want nothing to do with this sham marriage. Do you even care how it would make me feel? Do you even care about

how much distress it leaves me in that you continue to pressure me to do something after I've asked you so many times to stop? Do you even know what that does to me? Or is that the point?"

I kick myself as the words emerge. I know full well that he takes pleasure from my pain because my pain is usually a sign of my capitulation to him—either to his demands or to his disdain.

Why, when I know what he is, do I still hold onto the hope that if I explain my hurt *one final time*, something will shift? That this heavy blackness I hold inside me at never being seen or understood will dissipate? That one day, he'll see me as human and not an extension of him?

"Life is pain," he responds, his voice treacherously soft. "No one escapes that."

"And do we have a responsibility to ensure we don't add to other people's?"

His jaw tightens as he contemplates my question. "I want her brought here. I want to understand why she means so much to you that you would defy your father's wishes."

"I won't bring her around people who will hurt her."

"That's a shame. I was hoping not to have to speak to Indigo myself."

I propel myself to my feet faster than I can stop it, finding myself standing over him, my hands fisting as I attempt to discharge the wrath pummeling my body.

"Go anywhere near her—"

He gets to his feet, slowly walking towards me until we're a foot away from each other, so close that I see every pale gray fleck in his brown eyes. "I don't want to have to."

"You go near that girl—"

"As I said. I don't want to do that. Which is why I want you bringing her here. It will be less messy."

“You’ve never insisted on meeting any of the other women I’ve been with. In fact, you have always made it clear I am to keep them hiding in the shadows.”

His eyes flare as he watches me. “That’s because I knew by your demeanor that you felt nothing for them. This feels different,” he hisses. “Let me make it clear. You introduce us to her... or I will find other means to get to know her better.”

I shake my head, fury making me tremble.

“Are you going to pretend you wouldn’t like that, Greyson? Are you going to pretend I’m the only monster around here?”

The knowledge that she thinks she's free pulses through my veins, as does the anticipation of her finding out that she isn't.

That everything will not be going back to normal as she believes it will.

I enjoy her hope so much.

The purity of it.

The naivety.

It's so fucking good.

Almost as delicious as the fear still clinging to her.

The fear merely caresses her now.

Wisps of it cling to her as she moves.

As she tries to breathe.

Soon she'll be swathed in it. She'll bathe in it until it colors her every breath, her every thought, her every word.

Her torment moves me like nothing else.. other than hiding in the shadows, waiting to offer my aid.

I so enjoy watching her navigate her new life, her fingertips desperately

holding on to the hope that she's free.

That the big bad man has had his fill of hurting her.

That he no longer pleasures himself to the thought of her pain, to the sight of her tears, to the gasps of horror that rip through her little throat that I haven't used to its full potential.

I can make myself come just picturing her face as she learns to laugh again, to sing again, to build a life again. None of this would be as much fun if she were in fear all the time. I want her to think she's free. To begin to enjoy the illusion of her new life.

It will make the reality she comes to face so much more pleasurable.

I like pleasuring myself to the thought of her little face as doubt begins to creep in like a spider; to those moments when she begins to question what's happening—whether she's paranoid... or whether there really is a big bad monster still after her.

Some beast more savage than she could ever have imagined.

One she was not able to identify while staring him in the face.

Arousal at her distress lights up my body, the flames extinguishing the darkness in which I live.

The hidden cave that no one sees but me and one other.

I hunger to be able to see her eyes close up as they well up with tears so delectable.

To watch them slowly roll down that pale, silken skin of hers and onto the curve of her lips, lips I so need to taste again.

I do so enjoy the taste of her body when it's wracked with fear. It makes her taste different. It's sweet and pure.

And it makes her more vulnerable, more compliant.

It's almost impossible to resist pulling the curtain back.

The pleasure I anticipate as she realizes it's over makes me throb, ache, desperate for satiation... desperate to be there to rescue her. She'll need it. And she'll never know who is saving her.

I've tried to resist bringing about the moment she realizes it's not over. Nor will it ever be.

The hunt is just so good.

Dragging it out improves the quality of her fear.

It improves the bite of her pain.

But I can't wait any longer.

The torment has become too strong.

It's funny how some people think they can taste the darkness and not go back...

It's some amusement to them.

This place they can visit for a while whilst the rest of us are forced to live in it.

No light. No respite. No peace.

The privilege of these people, believing they have a right to hope, to peace, when others of us scream and bite in the darkness.

They think they can come and go. Feel smug about being different to the rest of us-not plagued by the misery of our existence.

I feel that it's my duty to educate those who dare feel hope as to what pain really is.

That's the only thing that feels sane to me.

I lie back, closing my eyes as I pleasure myself to the thought of her face.

And bring myself to ecstasy as I replay the words of a message I was gifted earlier today:

Don't forget. We want the bitch to suffer for her crimes. I'm counting on you to deliver pain. Our little secret. It's only fair that our wildflower learn that the world is full of monsters.

Indigo

I stare at the missed calls. Seven in the last twenty-four hours. All from the same private number.

No messages. No voicemails to go with them.

It's probably nothing but it doesn't stop my throat from feeling like it's closing up.

"I still can't believe I agreed to get driven home like this," gripes Rami sitting next to me as Stanley drives us back home from Marilla's after picking us up half an hour ago. "What kind of controlling shit is this?"

"Ignore her!" I shout at Stanley who chuckles good-naturedly.

"I'm on the payroll, ladies, and was bored out of my mind. It's nice to take a drive sometimes."

"However did you survive without him?" Rami scoffs, rolling her eyes and making both Stanley and me laugh.

"Ignore her," I repeat. "She was dunked in eau de cynicism at birth."

"I bet it was just an excuse for your stalker to get Marilla's address," deadpans Rami.

"Stop," I giggle.

“Mr. Everitt is in the information business,” replies Stanley cheerily. “If he’d wanted to get the address, it would have taken him all of fifteen minutes.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” retorts Rami flatly as Stanley’s eyes crinkle up in amusement through the mirror.

“I happen to know Greyson’s been lonely without you this week,” says Stan as he drives us into our district.

It was actually Grey who wanted to pick us up and drive us home, but I know full well that if he comes to my place, he won’t leave for several days and I do actually have to work to pay my rent. In fact, I have two back-to-back yoga classes I’m giving at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning. “I know Greyson has missed you.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s survived,” I say with a smile to Rami’s eyeroll. “Do you visit him at his apartment?” I ask Stanley as he turns left onto a street not far from mine.

“From time to time,” he replies. “But I’m not cut out for the city. Besides, there’s lots to do at the house, even if it is empty during the week.”

“Were you there when the barn was last used?” I ask.

“I was indeed.”

“There were horses once, right?”

“That’s mainly what the barn was used for. His grandfather loved them. Do you ride?”

“A little,” I reply. “I do volunteer work for this organization that tries to rehome wild horses who have been put into these God-awful pens by the government to keep them from roaming free.”

“And you’re thinking that his home could be a good place for—”

“God, that sounds terrible, doesn’t it?” I groan as Rami grins at my ways. “Dated him less than a month and I’m portioning out his house.”

“It’s good to have vision,” he responds with a smile. “The place could do with a woman’s eye. It will be the first time since... Well, for a long time.”

I wonder for a second why his grandparents left the house and land to him and not his mother, but I think that would be too invasive a question for even me.

“He really hasn’t brought women there before?” I ask, aware that I’m being very cheeky by asking for private information.

“You know I can’t give away Greyson’s secrets, Miss Indigo,” he says, a playful reproach hanging from his lips, “but seeing as Greyson clearly already told you, no, I’ve not seen another woman there.”

He eyes me through the rearview mirror, grinning as I blush with embarrassment at asking such a needy question. I shake my head, smiling back at him.

“Any other questions now that Greyson isn’t with us?” asks Stanley.

“Well...”

I want to ask about the fact that between the empty barn, the pristine garden, and the rooms without a hair out of place, it’s almost like a ghost lives there. If I didn’t know better, I’d have assumed it hadn’t been lived in for years.

But honestly, I don’t know if I want the answer to that.

“No. Nothing,” I say as Stanley pulls up in front of my house, his expression suddenly sterner as he undoes his seatbelt and turns to face me.

“Here we are, Miss Indigo. Do you want me to see you to your door before I drop your friend off?”

“I’m getting out here too,” says Rami.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yeah. Fran’s at home and I’ve done enough peopling in the last twenty-four hours to last me a month. I’m gonna walk

for a bit so I don't end up stabbing the fruit bowl to pieces like last week."

"Okay," I chuckle. "Thanks for driving us, Stanley."

"My pleasure. I'll let Greyson know you've arrived."

I nod, feeling the possessive reach of Grey even from across the city.

Rami and I get out, closing the car door behind us.

"Do you wanna cup of tea?" I ask, gesturing towards the house as Stanley drives off.

"Nah, I've been civilized enough for one day."

As we say our goodbyes and give each other the usual bear hugs, I open the gate and head along the weathered concrete slabs that lead around the side of the house.

Indigo...

At the sound of my name uttered by some ghost in my head, I stop in my tracks, my mouth suddenly dry.

I take a step, and then another, turning the corner only to come to a halt at the sight of something on the slab in front of me.

A black stain.

A footprint, and then another, and more, all leading back towards the gate.

No.

My legs begin to shake as my gaze pans forwards, tracking each step until I see my door, the concrete around it covered in black.

Indigo...

I spin on my heels, glancing all around, through the hedge, at the driveway, over at the windows of the houses nearby.

Nothing.

My breathing grows ragged as I take a step off the path onto the weed-strewn grass, my unwilling legs tentatively

walking me towards the door to the stampede of my heart and the whoosh of blood through my ears.

“A crow,” I mutter, realizing that I said the word aloud as I take in the mangled, macerated carcass of a bird nestled in the black paint on the step of my door, the thing looking as if it was chewed up by some wild animal.

Upon a further step, my legs turn to nothing at the sight of the large boot print stamped onto the paint, matte in part, glistening in others, that must have been thrown onto the door, leaving a thin jagged fissure down the center of the wood.

The sound of a message beeping on my phone has my shuddering hand reaching into my purse.

Grey...

Only it's not him.

It's a private number.

The words sear themselves into me, turning everything to black.

Welcome back, wildflower.

I spin, almost screaming at the sound of a crow cawing nearby and the fear that I'm being watched. I peer all around as my trembling hand reaches for the phone in my purse, my fingers by some miracle finding the call button.

“Miss me already?”

“Rami...”

I know by the gravity of her tone that she knows in an instant something is wrong. “What is it?”

“Can you come back here? I need help.”

Indigo

“They’ve just left,” I say to Hunter, the assistant district attorney who asked me to call him once the police had finally arrived, over two hours after we called them.

“What did they say?”

“Not much. Just took some pictures, looked at that text message he sent me. Told me to get some cameras installed. And basically said it’s petty vandalism and to not expect much by the way of follow-up.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he sighs. “We’ve had two murders today, Indie. Over a hundred assaults, a few shootings, dozens of break-ins. The police are—”

“Overworked. I get it,” I interrupt. “But... the message?”

Welcome back, wildflower...

“You know the answer, unfortunately. There’s no budget to look into something like that. No one would ever sign off on it. Even if we could trace the number, that message isn’t incriminating despite the timing. I mean, if a judge saw that, it’d be the weakest of circumstantial evidence.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Who knows that nickname of yours?”

“Um, pretty much everyone close to me. My extended family. Marilla, Orpha, Harry. Micah. Kohl. Greyson. All my friends.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down much.”

“No.”

“Can you get a new door arranged?”

“It’s funny, Greyson had arranged for a new sturdier one to arrive tomorrow.”

“Good timing,” he muses. “And the one you have now?”

“The wood didn’t actually split, just left a crack in it. We’ve hammered some planks over it until the door gets replaced.”

“Well, you might want to spend the night elsewhere just to be safe.”

Rami brings a cup to her lips, watching me from the purple beanbag chair near the bed against which I’m leaning.

“Did you, um, tell Greyson?”

“He told you we’re seeing each other again?” I respond.

“Yes. He did mention it.”

“No. He doesn’t know, and... I’m not sure I’m gonna tell him.”

“Why?”

“Because... I don’t want our relationship to be about fixing this problem. I don’t want to be a problem case. I don’t want to have our every conversation polluted by this. I—”

“I get it, Indie. This isn’t my first time dealing with these situations. A lot of people are afraid that if they open up, it will consume their whole lives.”

“Yep,” I sigh, dread pervading me as I wonder what it will take to be free, and whether Micah would risk more jail time for the thrill of scaring me.

Even by his unhinged standards, that’s a big risk to take.

I shake off the eerie feeling, wondering what it is that feels different about this.

“Thanks for helping get the police round,” I say to Hunter.

“You’re welcome. I still want you to come in and see me next week, okay?”

“I will do. I’ll text you the day before.”

“Sounds good. Bye, Indigo. Try not to worry too much.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

As I hang up, Rami gestures towards the chamomile tea she placed beside me at the start of my call to settle my nerves.

I watch her over the brim of the cup as I take a sip, my hand still quivering a little.

“Fuck, I feel like I’ve wasted your day,” I sigh in frustration as I place the cup back down onto the scratched wood of the floor.

“Never a waste when I’m with you, babe,” says Rami warmly, though I sense the concern concealed in her cadence.

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t have subjected you to all this crap again.”

“Shut the fuck up,” she replies, flashing me a smile. “I’m a freaking marine who can’t marine anymore. I come alive under chaos. I’m wasted on civilian life.”

Her eyes brighten as I smile in appreciation for her attempt to lift the atmosphere out of the shadows.

“I don’t wanna tell Fran for now. I don’t wanna make her worry again unless it’s really something.”

“Not a word,” she replies.

“It’s so weird the timing of that message. It’s like they knew exactly when I was dropped off. You don’t think...?”

“They were watching you?”

I shudder as goosebumps trail across my skin.

“Either that,” Rami continues, “or the message was just a coincidence?”

I lean my back against the frame of the bed, fidgeting with the hem of my woolly cardigan. “Do you really think it’s Micah?” I ask.

“Yeah. I know that fucker too well. He’ll be jerking off to this from the jail cell.”

“How do I make him stop?”

“I told you what we need to do, Indie. Go round to his family’s house and tell them what he’s up to.”

“As if they give a shit. They hate me.”

“They’ll hate you more if you go public with your abuse claims. We go round there, show them the pictures, and tell them that if it happens one more fucking time, you and three other women are gonna out their precious son for the abusive piece of shit he is.”

“I don’t know, Rami.”

“Well, I do. I’ve dealt with these types way more than you. Grew up with them. Playing nice doesn’t cut it, Indie. Not anymore. We’re gonna face this head-on.”

“And if it’s not him?” I say, making her tanned face suddenly look pale.

I don’t know why I even asked the question. It has to be Micah. I mean, who else?

Lately, I haven’t been able to shake off this feeling that I’m being watched, and that has to be because of my experiences with him...

Rami inhales deeply, studying my distress most intently. “Let’s just hope that it is.”

Greyson

“Look, we don’t have to go,” she says. “I mean, what’s the point if we don’t even know what we’re doing here?”

“We *do* know what we’re doing.” I’m aware of the growl in my own voice, one I can’t seem to be able to conceal around her. “We’re working this out. And I intend to make this work, Indigo. As uncomfortable as that makes me.”

“Do you have to always qualify it with a statement like that?”

“This is my attempt to warn you that it’s going to be a bit messy at times.”

“You mean, you’re going to withdraw when I least expect it in that emotionally stunted way of yours?”

I would chuckle in amusement but for the wisp of fear hidden in her jovial voice. In reality, withdrawing from her is not the only thing she has to worry about.

“No. I don’t want to do that. I’m going to start therapy next week. So are you.”

“And do I—?”

“No,” I snarl. “You do not get a choice.” My breathing is heavy as my heated desire for her ripples through my body. “You’re going to do as you’re told... for once.”

“I’m not good at that.”

“I’ve noticed. Which is why I’ll be stepping up your training very shortly.”

“My training... How romantic.”

I emit gentle laughter at her mischievous tone. “The pleasure you feel will be romantic, Indigo.”

“More romantic than dinner with your parents, I hope.”

Her words make my pulse kick in my neck. “We don’t have to attend,” I respond.

“I mean, is there really a point if they clearly aren’t gonna like me?”

“They want us hidden in the shadows. If we start out by hiding, we’ll never get out. It will just feel too comfortable there. Safe. It’s not tolerable to me to make you hide the way I’ve hidden myself. Plus...” I close my eyes, aware of the naivety of my hope. “I can’t give up hope that once he sees us together, that something will shift in that man. That he’ll see me as... human.”

And that maybe I’ll see myself as human, and not some half-human half-monster hybrid. A wolf afraid of the full moon.

“*Us* as human,” I qualify. “My friends all tell me the same thing—that they feel the heat between us from a hundred paces. I want him to feel it.”

“Well, just don’t get your hopes up,” Indie replies. “He seems to get off on being—”

“An asshole.”

“That’s being kind. Believe me, I know the type. They can literally orgasm just by withholding affection.”

I imbibe the frail sorrow dissimulated in her upbeat timber. She understands too much.

“Your mother?” I ask.

“Yep. And frankly, she could probably turn your father to stone with one strategically directed glare.”

“Have you heard from her recently?”

She sighs. “Unfortunately.”

“She called?”

“Yeah, but I never take her calls. She just texted her bile as usual.”

“Do you still have the message?”

“Yeah. I just archive them as soon as they come in so that I can pretend they’re not there.”

“Read it to me.”

“What? *No*. I do enough thinking about that satanic succubus.”

“I don’t care, Indigo. I want to know. We need to share these things with each other, get it out. There are not many people who understand.”

“It’s painful,” she replies softly and the word arouses me against my will.

“Read it to me.”

“I can’t. I can’t say the words.”

“Send me the message.”

“Grey, don’t. Please. I can’t just share my trauma on demand.”

My cells bristle with the need to know every piece of this girl. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I know you can’t. I just want to understand every piece of pain you’ve ever felt. I want to know how people have hurt you. I want to know how they did it, and what it did to you... And how to undo it. How to protect you. It drives me insane when I think of your pain.”

But she doesn’t reply and instead I hear a short vibration on my phone, looking down at it to see a message come through... from her.

My respiration accelerates as I steel myself to see whether the words her mother speaks to her rival the poison of my father.

What follows leaves my mouth hungry for the relief of her, desperate to replace the words with pleasure.

Still ignoring your own mother?

What a disgrace.

You don't even see that it's you who ruined everything, do you?

You had every fucking thing a girl could ask for.

You ruined it all, you ungrateful bitch.

I knew I hated you from the minute I saw you.

I was right.

You're so spoiled. You had everything.

Whore.

You took my best years and now you've fucked off.

You took my best years from me.

Your entire life has been a waste of mine.

And I'll never forgive you for that.

I wish I'd never had you.

I pray every day that one day you suffer the way you've made me suffer.

It takes me a while to speak, stunned as I am by the venom, and by how similar the sentiments expressed by her mother are to the manner in which my father speaks, although frankly, even he restrains himself from uttering this particular brand of base poison.

"I'm sorry," I finally say. "Her words are heinous."

“I know.” Her voice, usually so vibrant, suddenly sounds so small, its fragility making my cock throb. In reality, her voice has sounded frail since she first picked up, as if she can’t take a full breath. “I don’t want to talk about it so much right now.”

“Why?”

“It hurts,” she reponds.

“I want to know your pain, Indigo. I have to know it.”

“Well, let’s call that an introduction.”

“Very well.”

I listen intently to her fast breathing, aware that sending that message will have riddled her with anxiety and humiliation.

It’s she who finally speaks. “Is your mom nicer than your dad?”

The hope in her voice would comfort me if it wasn’t so futile.

“It’s not hard to be nicer than him,” I respond. “So yes, she’s more palatable, more loving in some ways. But she cares about appearance and status above all else. She doesn’t see humans, or at least, not in my case. She sees forms. She sees patterns, tropes, systems, stereotypes, outwards appearances, most of which she finds disagreeable.”

“God, I bet she’d get on with mine.”

“It sounds like it,” I respond solemnly.

“You know maybe we should go to see them. Show them that they don’t have as much power as they think they do. That we don’t care whether they have the emotional quotient of a dehydrated monk fruit.”

My lips manage to form a smile at her blind optimism. “If I were as enthusiastic about your mother behaving, what would you say to me?”

“I know, but, well, screw them. It’s not our fault they have the emotional range of a baked potato. Let’s just go there and

laugh internally at their asshole ways. And then have deviant sex in the car after we leave.”

“After dinner with those two, I’m just wondering whether we’ll make it to the car.”

“Stop,” she breathes. “Look, let’s get it over with. Didn’t your mom suggest tomorrow?”

“You want to do it that fast?”

“Yeah, I want it done. I’m dealing with enough anxiety this week.”

Her words make my eyes widen as I stare at the large silver-framed mirror hung on the graphite-gray wall of my bedroom opposite me, picturing the moment I’ll get to fuck her, bound and gagged, in front of it.

“Anxiety due to what?” I ask, still tempted to drive over there so that I can work it out of her body most mercilessly.

“Oh, nothing. It just comes in waves sometimes. I’ll feel better tomorrow.”

My eyes narrow as I contemplate her evasive tone... and why she would hide from me.

“Tomorrow?” I suggest about the dinner.

“If it’s still okay with your mom,” she replies.

I should say no. That would be sensible, but I know full well the means my father has at his disposal to make our lives impossible to navigate. And I’m quite sure she’s experienced sufficient pain of late.

“I know Marilla will kill me for capitulating, but I’ll wear something respectable.” She pauses for a moment. “Come to think of it, I may need to go shopping.”

“I’ll have some clothes sent over for you. You can pick out the outfit you like.”

“Like hell, you will!” she retorts. “I’m not being dressed up by you like some little doll. I’ll be picking out my own clothes.”

“But I like you being my little doll, Indigo. My little fuck doll, in particular. I like dangling you from my hard dick. And I like dressing you up for my amusement almost as much as I like undressing you.”

“Stop it,” she chuckles.

“What are you wearing?”

“That line’s older than you are,” she teases.

“You know, I will drive over there, Miss Nilsson, and tend to that impertinent mouth of yours in person.”

“Mmm... is that a promise?”

“It’ll only take me twenty minutes.”

“What, the driving or tending to my mouth? If it’s the latter, that seems a bit stingy.”

I smile, picturing the taunting expression she pulls when she’s pushing my buttons—the way she bites her lip, the way she peers up at me sheepishly to see what I’ll do, as if afraid I’ll pounce—something I constantly restrain myself from doing. How I haven’t fucked her fifty times over in every hole yet is a mystery to me.

Or maybe not...

While I’ve never felt such a desperate urge to defile someone until she’s a quivering wreck, barely able to move nor speak, I also battle the all-consuming yearning to keep her safe.

Part of that means proving to myself that I’m capable of protecting her despite my urge to see her vulnerable and desperate for safety; my urge to keep her tied up for hours in such a way that I can pleasure myself with her all day long; to sink my teeth into her neck.

The thought of thoroughly and deeply defiling that mouth of hers for the first time has my cock lying hard against my abdomen, it’s lines and curves illumined by the waxing moon.

I glance over at the clock. Just past eleven p.m. There’d be no traffic. “If I drive very fast, I could probably get over there

in fifteen minutes.”

“No,” she giggles. “We need to spend some nights apart. It’ll do us good. Those were *your* words! Besides I’m hoping we’ll be spending the night together after we see your parents? I think I’ll need the stress relief.”

“Oh, I already have plans for that,” I reply. “And props ready to accomplish it.”

The ghost of a moan floats upon her sigh, the sweet noise making me harden further.

“Well, I think the thought of those *props* should make dinner with your parents more bearable— *Fuck.*”

I sit up instantly, the panic in her hoarse exclamation raging through my system like a stampede of wild horses. Every cell in my body lights up when she is truly afraid. I can’t stop it. It incites something primal inside me that no amount of rational thought can suppress.

“What is it?”

I hear nothing but heavy breathing, twisting my torso so that my legs are off the bed, ready to take me to her place. “Indigo.”

“Shit... sorry,” she mutters breathlessly.

“What is it?”

“There was a bang outside, and then... I saw a shadow cross my curtains.”

“I’m on my way,” I reply urgently.

“What?! No! It’s nothing.”

“Indie,” I warn.

“It’s nothing. I just peeked out. There’s no one there. It must have been a possum or a raccoon or something.” The fear in her voice pulses through my veins.

“An animal big enough to cause a shadow on your curtains?”

There's a street lamp nearby. It's the only light we get here at night. If it walked along the fence, it'd cause a shadow. Sorry, I'm jumpy. Just ignore me."

"That's it," I growl. "You're moving out of that fucking apartment. You'll be staying with me from now on. You can take a guest room for all your stuff."

"Can we just relax for a minute?"

"Didn't you tell me that's where your ex used to stalk you? And that you had to climb over your neighbor's fence once just to get away from him?"

"Yeah, well, that's... that's over with."

"Indie..."

"It is, okay?" she says as if trying to catch her breath. "Let's change the subject."

"I want you moving in with me."

"That's ridiculous. We've been dating less than a month."

"Fine. You can stay in that empty apartment I own downtown. It has security."

"I'm not moving," she insists, the words making me simmer with frustration. "Look, I can't live in fear like I used to. I... I like it here. I spoke to the landlord today. He's agreed to get a camera installed."

"I'll be calling him tomorrow. Once the door is changed, I'll pay to have the cameras and lights installed."

"What?! No! Jesus, you have to let me vent without trying to fix everything for me."

"I need to fix things for you, Indigo. It's part of my job as your Dom. That's not something you can ask me to control."

"Yeah, well, how about we ease into the whole Dom-sub thing, okay? Because it freaks me out sometimes."

"But you like it," I say firmly to a sharp inhale on the other line. "Don't you, Indigo?"

I wait until she finally says the words. "Yes. I like it."

“That means you feel safe with me,” I suggest, wondering whether she really is at all.

“Yes. I do.”

“Good. Now answer my question and no more attitude. What are you wearing?”

“Purple cotton pajama pants,” she responds, her delicious voice still small, “and a turquoise top.”

“Long sleeves or short?”

“Mid-length.”

“Bra or not.”

“I don’t sleep in my bra. You know that.”

“Good. Now, take it all off.”

“What?”

“You heard me, wildflower. All your clothes off. Now.”

“It’s cold,” she gripes and I make a mental note to buy her a radiator.

“When you’re a sub, you have to tolerate discomfort, Indigo.”

“Is that gonna be your go-to argument for everything?”

“Off!” I bark to a high-pitched breath on the other line. I lie back down on the bed, the sound of her fear from earlier making my body simmer with energy, arousing me as much as it enrages me. My muscles contract as I picture her obeying my instructions. “Tell me what you’re doing.”

“I’m... taking off my pants. And... now my top. It’s off.”

“Good.”

“What about you?”

“I ask the questions, Indigo. But seeing as you’re still in training, I’ll let it pass. I’m lying naked on my bed. My hand is wrapped around my cock.” Her moan arouses me further. “Listening to your little voice, to your reactions, has made me hard. Very hard. Very hungry for you.”

I grip firmly, slowly sliding my hand up and down the engorged shaft as pleasure drowns out all other sensation.

“Have you been inserting the plug I got you?”

“Yes,” she replies timidly. “Ten minutes a day.”

“And today?”

“No, not yet.”

“Are you able to do it now? I’d like to listen to that.”

She takes a moment to speak. “You’d feel pleasure if I did that?”

“Immense pleasure,” I respond.

“Mmm... Just a minute.”

I hear shuffling, the scrape of wood and a click. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“Pouring some lubricant on it.”

“Good. As much as you can. I want you to tell me when you’re inserting it.”

“Oh, believe me, you’ll know,” she replies and a moment later, she begins to pant and whimper, exhaling fast high-pitched breaths which cause blood to rush to my dick.

“Fuck,” I groan as she curses through the pain.

“Okay... It’s in.”

I close my eyes for a second, picturing the silver plug inserted into her, imagining my cock sliding into her pussy as she wears it for me.

“Good girl. Do you like the sensation?”

“I... I love it... and hate it.”

“When it’s my cock sliding into your ass, you’ll only love it.”

“I hope so,” she breathes.

“You know what I want from you, Indigo. Pleasure yourself. And describe it to me. Thoroughly.”

“I... I’m not good at this stuff.”

“You’ll learn. In the meantime, you’ll do it because I said so.”

“You’re such a dominant prick. You do at least know that, right?”

I can’t help but smile at the hesitation in her voice. “Lick your fingers first. And I want to hear that.”

A groan escapes me as she allows me to hear her tongue lubricating her fingers.

“Now play with your clit. I want you to moan for my pleasure.”

“I don’t know how to make noises on demand.”

“You’re going to learn. At times, I’ll want you vocal. At others, I’ll want you mute. You have to learn to accommodate that.”

“You make me sound like a TV set.”

“Do it,” I snarl. “That’s an order, little brat. Every display of disobedience from here on out will be noted by me... and you will be punished for it.”

I’m aware of her faint moan as I say the words. It’s tentative, but it makes me throb to hear her take pleasure in my dominance. And I intend to give her as much of that as she can handle.

I tend to my cock as her moans increase in pitch and cadence, the sounds so sweet, the notes a breeze brushing through flowers.

“Now push your fingers inside you, Indigo.”

At her whimper a few moments later, I know she’s acquiesced to my wishes.

“How does it feel?”

“Like... I wish it were your cock inside me instead.”

“My cock fucking you...”

“Yes.”

I tighten my grip on my rigid shaft as my balls contract, desperate for the kind of complete release that only she can give me.

“What else do you wish?”

“I wish you’d... let me suck on your cock,” she whispers, making it about the fifth time she’s made the request.

“I’m a demanding man, Indigo. Do you think you’re up for the challenge?”

“Yes.”

“I will only allow it if your hands are tied behind your back so that I can fuck your face at my leisure. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I may allow you to suck tomorrow... if you’re a good girl that is. Are you going to be a good little girl for me?”

“Yes, but only because I want your cock so much,” she shoots back and amusement strays through me at her attempt to give me attitude.

“I love how much trouble you keep getting yourself into,” I respond as cum leaks from the tip of my cock. “Do you know that I fantasize about the various ways I intend to punish you?”

We stay quiet for a while but for increasingly ragged breaths.

“Describe how that delinquent mouth of yours is going to pleasure me. And make it graphic or I’ll make you scream it the next time I defile you.”

“I want to... feel you driving deep into my throat.”

“You’ll have to relax your throat to let me all the way in.”

“You can teach me,” she responds, making me pump my shaft faster.

“You want me to come down your throat?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *what?*”

“Yes, please.”

“Good. And what will you do, Indigo?”

“I’ll... swallow?” she replies, almost as if asking a question.

“You’ll swallow. And then you’ll show me your tongue. And then you’ll say ‘*Thank you for coming down my throat, Sir.*’”

“I’ll need more training before that’s an acceptable sentence for me to utter,” she giggles.

“Oh, you’ll be getting it. But... I know part of you wants to say those words to me, doesn’t it? Part of you wants to tend to the wolf inside me, doesn’t it, Indigo?”

I wait for her answer, placing my phone on my chest and cupping my balls with my other as I work the upper half of my rock-hard dick, picturing her throat full of my greedy cock and saliva dripping down her chin as she chokes on it.

“Yes,” she replies softly. “I want to... Though...”

“Though *what?*”

“We’ll have to see if the mood takes me.”

I can’t help but smile at her audacity. “Once you taste my cum on your tongue, it will, Indigo. I promise you that.”

Her exhalation of pleasure has me thinking about her pussy and whether her fingers are rubbing her clit or sliding down to the little hole reserved for my pleasure.

“Now,” I continue. “I want you to put the phone on your tummy, just above your pubis, tilt your pelvis up and fuck yourself with at least two fingers so that I can hear it.”

“What?”

“If you make me repeat myself—”

“I can’t do that.”

“It’s not optional, Indigo. You do it, or I’ll be round there faster than you can hang up on me.”

“The things you ask me to do...”

“Let me hear it.”

I remain completely silent, listening out for sound, until suddenly I hear it. The squelch of her fingers pushing inside her, the slip of her tight walls opening as she fucks herself.

I close my eyes and picture her pussy wrapped around my cock, working my shaft faster and faster, the orgasm building until... I stop.

Before I come, I remove my hand from my cock, breathing deeply until the worst of the ache of frustration subsides and my cock stops throbbing.

I need to be disciplined around her. All I want to do is expose her to the savage inside me. I need to break her in gently.

“That’s enough for today.”

I hear the crackle of movement. “What?”

“No more touching, Indigo. You don’t get to come today. We’ll take care of that tomorrow. I want you aching with frustration when you see me. You’ll need to be for the uncivilized things I have planned for you.”

“Fuck,” she moans, shuddering out frustration. “This is cruelty to women. And do you always plan sex out?”

“Not this carefully. The things I want to do to you, you need to be prepared for. And if I find out that BOB has helped you to come tonight, the next time I see you, I’ll insert him into your pussy as I slowly sodomize you.” Her gasp fills the space between us. “Is that understood?”

“I can never really tell if your threats are punishments or rewards.”

“Clever girl. I think you know they’re designed to be both.”

“You’re so deviant,” she whispers.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, Indigo.”

As we say our goodbyes, I give a final instruction.

“While you’re falling asleep, think of my mouth. Think about how I’m going to kiss you the next time I see you.”

“I always do,” she whispers.

Indigo

“I’m so fucking nervous,” I mutter into the phone as the cab driver eyes me from the rearview mirror as we drive into Garrett Park, one of the most exclusive of DC’s suburbs and not a place that I visit often.

The streets are lined with tall metal gates flanked by even taller hedges of dark green. As I glance through the bars of one of them, a humongous chateau-like mansion hidden in the gloom behind the gate looms forth, vanishing like a ghost as we drive by it.

“Fuck, I suddenly wish I smoked,” I groan as the driver watches me some more.

“You’ll be fine,” reassures Fran. “Moms love you. They get all protective over you.”

“Yeah, well, apparently his mom is quite the bitch. He already told me she’s gonna hate the hair.”

“God, is she one of those?” Fran groans. “Why does he even want you to meet them?”

“I don’t know. The guy acts like he’s feeling his way through a relationship for the first time and trying to figure out what to do. Apparently, he wants them to know we’re together, or otherwise, we’ll be hiding forever or something. It all sounds a bit dramatic.”

“Greyson really doesn’t strike me as being the melodramatic type. Maybe he knows something you don’t.”

“I guess so,” I sigh.

My heart hammers against my ribcage as we turn into a quiet street, which from the map that I checked out earlier, is only a few streets away from the Everitt house. I just hope the thing isn’t a mansion like Grey’s place.

Despite my gung-ho attitude about this dinner on the phone, reality has now sunken in like a lead balloon and I’m currently so nervous that I could still probably float away into the clouds from all the butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

The thought of that paint thrown on the door certainly hasn’t helped my anxiety. Through serendipitous timing, they installed the new heavy-duty door this afternoon. Grey wanted to come and oversee it but I told him not to. I know I should tell him about what happened, but if I do, our entire relationship will be about this and I don’t want that. I’ve already lost enough time. Plus, the police told me there’d been a spate of vandalisms in the street these past few weeks. Maybe it was just some piece of shit wanting to cause trouble...

“Well, it’s a good thing that he wants to introduce you,” she suggests.

“Yeah, I guess so. He’s usually so in control, but when it comes to his parents, it’s like he loses himself. He becomes this different person almost—closed off and secretive. I can literally see the walls coming down around him. I honestly feel like this whole thing is some test of whether he can feel like a human around them.”

“Well, you know what he’s like. He’s basically a very hot caveman in a suit. He’s probably not used to introducing women to his family.”

“He told me he’d never done it before, other than that woman they wanted him to marry, but they knew her since she was a child, apparently.”

“Well, just don’t let them walk all over you.”

“I won’t. Though I warned Grey I might have to get drunk.”

Fran sniggers. “Girl, I’ve been there. Getting drunk won’t help you. It’ll only make the nerves worse.”

“The dead fucking crow didn’t help with that.”

Fuck.

“What?” she exclaims. “What crow?”

I have no idea why I said that. Rami and I agreed not to get Fran all worried again. I guess the very tall glass of wine I had before leaving has left me saying too much.

“Just this dead crow that was lying outside my door yesterday.”

“What happened to it?” she asks.

“I don’t know, babe. I didn’t have time to do the autopsy.”

She chuckles at my inanity.

“I guess it flew into a window, or just died of natural causes or something. I grabbed a spade from the garden and put it under a bush.”

“Jesus,” she groans, half-laughing. “Talk about a fucking omen.”

“You can say that again.” I inhale a tremoring breath. “I feel like that dead crow sums up my chances of surviving tonight without needing therapy.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m in a cab that he called. I’m like two minutes away. Oh God, we’re slowing down. I’m gonna get so fucking hammered tonight.”

“Well, just try to do it once the night is over,” she suggests.

“Fat fucking chance,” I moan to her chuckle of amusement.

“I’m with you, girl, okay?”

“Oh, shit. We’re there.”

“Good luck. You can always storm out and come to my place if it all goes tits up.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Text me later to tell me how it went.”

“If I don’t, it’s because I got so shitfaced that I can’t type.”

“Bye,” she chuckles. “Love you.”

As the car rolls to a stop, I see Greyson’s black Bentley parked on the other side of the gated driveway of what I can already see is one of those colossal multi-million dollar houses I was afraid of having to walk into.

As the engine quietens, Grey emerges from his car looking like God in a suit, slamming his door shut.

“Thanks,” I say to the driver. “How much?”

“It’s taken care of, Miss,” he replies as I grab the bunch of white lilies I bought for the mom as a *Please-like-me* bribe. I was considering buying them a bottle of wine, but I suspect that the delicious and sweet twenty-dollar-a-bottle Prosecco I usually bring when I come to people’s places for dinner would be used to scrub out the toilet with at their place.

“Okay, thank you.”

As I get out, Grey walks towards me, draped in black, from the jacket to the pants. In the eerie light on this street, he looks positively ominous.

“I told you I was gonna pay,” I moan, only for him to stand still, inspecting me in that ever-poised way of his as I approach.

He shakes his head slowly as I feel my cheeks widening into a grin. As I make it to within a foot of him, he leans down to kiss me on the cheek, the touch of his lips leaving tingles quaking on my skin. I inhale his singular scent as his thick brown hair brushes against my cheek.

“What’s with the flowers?”

“Oh, just my attempt at a bribe.”

“It may earn you five minutes of civility,” he warns with a smile.

“A full *five* minutes?! I’ll take it!”

As my face tilts a little and his lips come into view, I fight back the hunger to taste them for fear that his family may be watching from an upstairs window or something, only for him to lose control, his breathing unsteady as he begins to inhale my skin, pulling me into him with such strength that all I can do is submit.

“What if they’re watching?” I whisper as the cab drives away and I move my hand to the side so that my pathetic little bunch of flowers doesn’t get squished by my giant of a date.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he rasps, running his lips up and down my cheek. He exhales the deepest of breaths, as if relief is flooding his body. “Mmm...” His lips and nose find my neck and I can’t help but try to pull away as his tongue licks the skin there in one long stroke.

A second later, he pulls me into him firmly and his tongue pries my lips apart, pushing inside, kissing and then veritably fucking my mouth, the movements of the strong muscle very slow, very deliberate, very sinful. My attempt to withdraw from his grasp is futile, not to mention that the deviance of his invasion soothes the jitters plaguing me.

By the time he withdraws his very talented undulating tongue from my mouth, my lips feel like a wet, swollen mess.

“It’s a good job I only put lip balm on,” I whisper as his eyes gleam lasciviously. “They might be watching, you know?”

“Good,” he replies, staring down at me, the beauty of his face, the lines of his cheekbones undercut by the light from above, stunning me. He peers all around. “I’m half-tempted to fuck you against the side wall of their house just to piss them off.”

Despite my amusement, I can’t help but push against the firm wall of his chest. “Okay, let’s calm down. You wanting to

stick it to your parents isn't worth the public indecency charge."

"I mainly want to stick it to you, Indigo," he whispers, arousal making his voice grate as pleasure replaces the worse of my nerves.

"Okay, I can't believe I'm saying this, but one of us needs to engage their brain here. And for once, that'll be me."

He stands back up straight, bright eyes aglitter until a frown casts shadows beneath them. "What's with the hair?"

My hand reaches for the neat bun it took me over ten minutes to try to get right earlier. "Well, I thought we could break them in gently given your mom's tastes and all."

His eyes form tight slits. "Turn around."

"No! I want to keep my hair up tonight."

"Turn around, Indigo. I'm making the decisions regarding your hair tonight."

"God, my inner feminist hates some of the stuff you say."

"Good. She's supposed to despise me."

I turn and feel his hands on my bun, pulling bobby pins out and threading my hair out of its elastic band until I feel it loosen, finally falling down my back. I glance down. In the ethereal light of the ornate-looking street lamps on this lane, it looks pinker than ever.

"Oh God," I moan, turning back around and lifting the tips of my hair up with my free hand. "Your mom's gonna love this."

"She'll survive," he responds, handing me the hair accessories he removed so that I can drop them into a side pocket of my purse.

"Well"—I glance down at my coat—"I'm wearing this God-awful body-shrouding navy dress underneath this, so hopefully she'll approve of that. I feel like a freaking nun under here."

“A very naughty nun, Indigo. I’ll make sure to rip it off you later so that you don’t have to wear it ever again.”

As he conjures up the words about what he’s going to do to me tonight, I can’t help the sheepish smile that comes over me, one that brightens his stunning, strong features.

His fingers weave into my hair as he leans down, eyes tunneling into mine. My lips part as his nestle close to my ear, allowing him to inhale my scent.

“Did you think of me?” he asks breathlessly.

“What do you think?”

“Answer the fucking question.”

“I suppose I spared you a thought or two today.”

In reality, my every minute felt like it was hijacked by thoughts of him—the words he’s spoken to me, the feel of his strong body on mine, the taste of his tongue, the way he listens to me when I speak, not interrupting or offering stale solutions.

When anxiety would overtake me, it was to him that my thoughts wandered and to how safe I feel with him despite that fact scaring me.

A breath of amusement huffs against my temple. “Just one or two? Because I’ve been driven to the point of distraction by thoughts of you, Indigo.”

“Mmm... Well, maybe more like three or four,” I concede.

“I’ll have to make myself more memorable, then.”

I inhale a breath of pleasure at his unholy insinuation. “I’m sure you’re up to the task.”

His fingers reach for mine as he stands back up straight. “Do you still want to do this? We don’t have to. I don’t give a fuck about their approval.”

He says the words boldly but I know they’re not entirely true. I can tell part of him is still caught in the loop that I was in for so long—thinking that if I just tried to explain my hurt to my mother, if I just acted a certain way, if I just

accomplished something, that she could finally be proud of me, or at least, see me as being my own self and not this walking talking representative of her.

I know one day he'll break free of this prison made of fool's gold, but I can still feel his hope that one day his father will see him as human, as his own man, and it's not up to me to tell him that that hope is futile. That's something we can only discover and come to terms with on our own.

"Let's do it," I respond, flashing him a smile which he doesn't reciprocate.

"In case I hadn't hammered the point home enough, they're snide pricks. Both of them. They'll make this as uncomfortable and unpleasant as possible."

"I know."

He takes a step towards me, pulling me into him from behind. "They're going to say things to get under your skin, and by extension, my skin. They're going to make unpalatable insinuations. Say degrading things—things I'm going to want to rip their throats out for. They both enjoy seeing the reactions they cause. It's like a drug to them. And what they particularly get off on is the gaslighting afterwards. They'll spark a reaction and call you oversensitive if you react, in order to deflect from their shitty behavior and make you question whether you're losing your sanity."

He lifts his hand to my face, stroking the wind-chilled skin before tensing and releasing it, putting his hand down.

"If I remain silent, it's not because I don't want to throw them into the ocean. I just don't want to give them what they want. I don't want them to see quite how... much you... mean... to me."

I swallow thickly as he says it, the words emerging haltingly as if against his will.

"Not yet anyway," he continues. "They'll understand that with time. For now, they want to see you hurt and me exploding with rage as a result. They want us to storm out.

They want me hiding you away from the rest of my family, from the circles we move in. That's unacceptable to me."

"Then, let's not give them the satisfaction. Honestly, screw them. We'll just breathe through their devolved crap and..." I raise my brows hopefully. "Have *very very very* hot sex afterwards as therapy."

My non-sequitur makes his stern expression dissolve a little, his piercing eyes dropping to my lips as he pulls my hair back, breathing his minty breath onto my face.

"Don't worry," he says with the utmost conviction. "Tonight I'll be fucking the memory of these two assholes right out of your tight little body. Is that understood?"

"I think I'm gonna try to focus on your dick while your mom's disapproving of me. Sort of... dick therapy."

His thumbs roll across my temples. "I'm gonna make you suck my cock tonight until all the tension is gone from your body."

God, I so need that right now. Looking into those luminous silver-flecked eyes of his and withholding what happened when I was dropped back off from Marilla's is taking all my self-restraint.

"You'd better not be teasing me because that would just be cruel," I whisper, trying not to wilt at the forthright way he utters these deviant promises. "I've experienced enough dickpravation in that department."

"You'll have forgotten they exist by the time I'm through with you. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I reply, fighting the urge to reach for his cock.

"Yes, *what?*"

"Yes, Greyson," I respond, refusing to say *Sir*. "I've decided I'm withholding all other terms of reverence until my mouth gets to milk your cock."

I feel my blood warming in my cheeks, barely able to believe I feel safe and bold enough to speak so sexually to a

man. Each time I dare say these sexual words, it feels like taking back little pieces of power.

“Just for that,” he growls as I fight the urge to tell him his parents will come out looking for us behind this hedge if we don’t get in there fast. “I’m going to make you say it before you get to taste me.”

“Okay, we really need to stop now before all the blood leaves my brain and I lose the ability to speak.”

The glow in his pale eyes feels like liquid honey. “Let’s make a game,” he says. “The more intolerable they are, the more we laugh... not out loud, but inside. To each other.”

“Okay.”

“And the harder I’ll fuck you later.”

I curse in pleasure as he groans the last word, transforming from the civilized and respectable man in his designer suit to the wolfman that hides inside him.

“I’ll definitely be reminding myself that you said that as we’re eating.” He pulls me towards the gate and I stop him. “Will anyone else be there?”

“My brother and sister may make an appearance towards the end of the night, apparently.”

“How old are they again?”

“Tyrion’s twenty-five, a couple of years older than you. Elise is twenty-seven.”

“So, two years younger than you?”

He nods, staring at my lips as if he wants to devour them.

“Do your parents act the same way with them as they do to you?”

He pauses for a moment, the mauve around his eyes darkening. “No. They don’t.”

“Because you’re the eldest?”

“There are lots of reasons. I’m quite different from my siblings. I... suspect they’d rather I wasn’t.”

“Why do—?” I stop, drawing in a stiff breath as I remind myself not to pressure him.

I know the hell I go through being estranged from my abusive mother. As much as it’s the only path that can ever lead to me healing, respecting myself or even thinking I’m worth something, the path is still littered with self-doubt, guilt and loneliness, and the demon that whispers to you on lonely nights when you can’t sleep, telling you it wasn’t all that bad and she’s still your mother, when deep down you know she was the person who has hurt you more than any other in your life.

“You’re wondering why I still see them, aren’t you?” His face is sober, the skin pallid.

I shake my head quickly, but before I can speak, he does. “They’re... the only vague remnants of a family I have left. I... I don’t know how to walk away. Not yet, anyway.”

I reach for the underside of his hand. “Stop. You don’t have to explain. We’re all doing things on our own timeline.”

“I’ve never been asked by a woman how I feel about my family before.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head, his brown hair flopping over his golden forehead, hiding the deep scar etched into it. “I want to be asked these questions. I feel... safe with you, Indigo.”

His words render me mute for a moment. I haven’t felt safe with myself for so long. Even sitting still with my own thoughts is hard some days. Memories of things I’ve experienced bubble up and I find myself distracted and unable to focus, needing to turn on a movie or listen to a podcast to escape from the ghosts haunting me. Yoga is the only respite I get and even then, there are days when the silent focus of it feels like torture.

I need to feel safe with myself. For him. For me.

“I feel safe with you too... when your alphahole isn’t out of control.”

His stunning almond-shaped eyes taper up at the corners.
“Ready?”

“No, but let’s do it anyway.”

He takes hold of my hand, interlocking his fingers and walking me in that possessive way of his which feels like I’m being carried along by a powerful ocean current.

As we make it to the black metal gate in front of their house, he keys in a code and a side door clicks open.

As we go inside, closing the door behind us, I take in the huge house. The façade is made of brick and the windows are surrounded by ornate white frames and ledges, with charcoal-gray shutters open on the outside.

Ivy streaks up the front wall of the house and as my gaze follows it up, I stop in my tracks, gasping loudly at the sight of a figure in the window—a woman, standing in an unlit room, staring down at us, her features obscured.

Grey stops as I do, seeing what I see. I can’t see her clearly, but she’s not smiling or waving, but just standing there like some freaking ghost.

His grip on my hand tightens as he begins to walk again, leading me towards the front door.

“God, that was fucking creepy,” I mutter, clutching my flowers tightly. “Was that... your mom?”

“Yes. She’s not known for her social skills. Or at least, not around family. Her life consists of impressing strangers, not those that matter.”

“God.”

As we mount the front step, Grey presses the doorbell and I grab his arm causing him to pivot.

“Promise me you won’t punch anyone? Even if they’re assholes?”

“I’ll try not to.”

Indigo

Despite having met the swirling mass of rancor that is Grey's father, after spotting her watching us in the window like some kind of spectral painting, I kind of thought it would be the mom I'd be more scared of, but she's been surprisingly chatty, if not a little catty with it.

The father, Landon Everitt, sits opposite me, his wild eyes tunneling into me in a way that is neither socially appropriate nor allows me to take a breath.

His eyes depart from my face for brief moments which allow me to exhale, but only to pick up his glass of red wine, one that apparently Grey had delivered earlier today, or to eat a mouthful of food from his gold-rimmed porcelain plate, or to throw a glance at his son who reaches for my leg beneath the table every few minutes as if trying to tell me he's still there.

When I get nervous, I usually chatter away inanely, and I was doing for the first forty-five minutes of awkwardness, asking questions, giggling stupidly against my will, complimenting our hosts on their house, their food, their wine, ignoring them giving frigid instructions to the man in the suit serving us food in the large dining room, its furniture ostentatious and borderline gawdy, so incongruous with the understated elegance I saw at Grey's place.

I glance at the half-full glass of wine they served me earlier, feeling Landon's eyes still boring into me, sucking the air from the room.

What's worse is I did that thing where you keep checking if someone is looking at you just to make sure they're not, so I've caught his eyes at least twenty times in the last half hour. The last time our gazes collided, his was borderline indecent—some unholy mixture of rage and deviance.

The man looks just like Grey—tall, muscular, stupidly handsome with pronounced angles and masculine features, and even the same dimples in his cheeks and strong chin.

The only difference is the eyes. Grey's are basically swirling spheres of pale smoke, glistening beautifully as if droplets of rainwater are suspended in them.

Landon's are darker, muddier, like spheres of varnished wood that are charred around the edges, with flares of flame bursting up from beneath the coal. I guess you'd have to see them to really get what I was talking about.

What's more, while Greyson has his own mercurial glare that's hard to look away from, it's usually tempered by glimmers of amusement and moments when his eyes soften as he studies my face. As much of a prick as he can be at times, he has some vague semblance of self-awareness when it comes to his arresting presence and bold eye contact.

In the case of his father, introspection is lacking and he evidently doesn't give one shit that glaring at a woman in close proximity may make her feel uncomfortable.

Or maybe that's the entire point...

What's worse is that Grey is clearly acutely aware of his father's conduct. When I look up at him, I see him staring at his father between intermittent mouthfuls of food, the tension between them crackling with errant electricity.

My eyes drift to his mom Sandra's leopard-print top, an outfit I did not expect to see on a street as exclusive as this one, and over her uber-tanned skin and onto pale blue eyes, eyes whose light color I guess Grey inherited from her.

She's doing that thing where you're saying one thing, but your eyes are conveying another. They're like little balls of ice and fixate on me in a way that would make me uneasy if I wasn't already dealing with the pyroclastic flare of Landon's glare.

I mean, I knew they were pricks, but this feels just plain creepy, especially during the moments when we're served more food or drinks by the waiter and only Grey and I say thank you before he disappears out of the room again, to then be called back when Grey's mom rings a bell with a lack of self-awareness which makes me feel like getting to my feet and helping out the butler guy.

I glance down at my plate, readying myself to stab a fork into an expertly glazed and roasted carrot. The food is delicious and I'm no wine connoisseur like Grey, but I suspect the bottle we're currently drinking would cover a month of my rent, but there are only fleeting moments when I can really enjoy it, for the second I swallow it down, I'm plunged back into the murky swath of invisible smog blanketing the room.

"So, what exactly is it that you do, Indigo?" asks Sandra, as the waiter who she just called in serves her a tall glass of red.

"I teach yoga," I reply. "And I'm training to be a breathwork facilitator."

"A *what* now?"

"Breathwork is... using the power of your breath to essentially calm your nervous system. It's a form of meditation." I glance at Grey with a slow blink, remembering what his version of breath play was. "I'm no expert, but... I'm in training."

I catch his father's gaze after I say it and watch as his unrelenting glare makes it from my eyes to my lips.

"And I run my own Kirtan classes twice a week."

"Kir—what?"

"Kirtan. It's..." I pause, realizing that Grey barely got the concept even though I gave him a live show of it. "It's

basically call-and-response chanting in Sanskrit. It's really uplifting. I have over thirty people turn up to my classes now."

"How very bizarre," smirks the mother.

"She's very talented," says Grey to her obvious scorn.

"I guess we learn something new every day, don't we, darling?" she adds, addressing her husband.

"Indeed," he replies, his voice as deep as the first cracks of thunder.

"And all these things you scrape together pay the rent?"

Out of my peripheral vision, Grey's frame stiffens as his hand squeezes mine under the table so strongly that it almost hurts. I can't tell if it's because he wants to reassure me that he's there and that he's hearing her disdainful questions or whether he's trying to stop himself from upending the walnut dining table.

"I..." I lift my chin in a rare moment of defiance which I decide to latch onto before it disappears as quickly as the wine I can't seem to drink enough of. "I'm also in the process of bringing out my own skincare products—all with natural organic ingredients, like sugar and oils and essential oils... and herbs. I've found a commercial kitchen I can rent to make them in and submitted the forms so I'm just waiting for them to get back to me," I add, realizing I'm now adding unnecessary facts as I babble away like a freight-train out of control. "I've got the packaging all done. And I already sell a lot to family and friends and stuff."

"Is that legal?" she asks, tipping her head to the side, her dangling ruby earring tipping along with her.

"I... I guess not, technically. It's just... a few people close to me, so..."

"Hmm."

"And I volunteer a lot. Me and some friends work with agencies to rehome rescue animals and wild horses who've been placed into captivity. It's not for profit but it's... very fulfilling."

This time, she doesn't dissimulate the contempt, sniggering under her breath.

"Is that what the hair's about?" she asks as I contemplate telling Grey that if he squeezes my hand any tighter, it will go numb, my flesh will die and gangrene will start setting in. "Is that the obligatory cherry on the cake of your social justice warrior uniform?"

Grey dips his head a little, his chest expanding and contracting as if he's trying to control his breathing.

I contemplate saying the safe word, *Wolfman*, to let him know I want to leave, but apart from the fact that I have no idea how I'd fit it in without sounding like I needed to be checked over by a psychiatrist, if I storm out now, that'll be giving them what they want.

And then what? I'll be his dirty little secret? His little fling with some impoverished hippy with her head in the clouds? A woman not good enough to be around his family...

I decide to stick it out, resisting the urge to tell her that if I were wearing that deep-fried brassy blond bird's nest on my heavily-tanned head, I wouldn't have the nerve to judge other people's salon choices.

"Of course not," I reply, trying to relocate my voice. "I'm not a... *social justice warrior*, whatever that even means. I just like dying my hair sometimes. It's good therapy," I add, trying to sound upbeat. "You just wake up one day and need a change of energy and bam, you get it. And the great thing is, in a few months, the color has more or less gone. You can redye it change color or—"

"It's such a pity you've developed this bad habit, Indigo," bitch mom interrupts. "You are indeed a very arresting woman. *Physically*, that is." She almost spits the compliment out. "The pink is a distraction. It dilutes your beauty instead of enhancing it. And it's certainly not something we see in the circles that we or our son"—her glacial eyes jump to his—"frequent. I suspect it would not go down well at the kind of events our family attend. Though I doubt you'd have much knowledge of families of our standing."

“Oh, I think Indigo knows a lot more about these types of events than you think.” The boom of Landon’s elegant voice sucks the air from the room. I sweep my gaze over to him to find him leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on me alone. “From what I’ve learned, you come from quite a prestigious family yourself, Indigo.”

His words stun me, rendering me mute and dissolving my body as suddenly the resolve I had to just grin and bear their assholery vanishes into the ether. I haven’t even told Grey about my mom and stepfather—well, at least not about their wealth.

I glance up at Grey who frowns in confusion. “He didn’t hear that from me,” he growls, searching my eyes as if wondering if what his father said is true.

“No.” Landon’s voice pulls me back to him. “He didn’t. But I think it’s only right that I learn more about the woman who seems to have stolen my son’s ability to conjure up rational thoughts, especially when my own son refuses to tell me the slightest thing about her. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind that, would you, Louise? Sorry, *Indigo*? That’s the name you’re going by now, right?”

By some miracle, my brain and mouth manage to connect back up just enough for me to be able to speak words.

“Indigo *is* my name. My chosen name *and* my legal name. And it always will be. Louise is a deadname and I will never use it again.”

“It’s not the only name you’ve changed now, is it, Ms. Nilsson? Or is it *Andrews*?”

My mouth, now dry, barely allows me to swallow. I knew from those days working at the office that he must have paid someone to look into me, a fact that sickens me to my stomach, especially when he says the name of my father, a man no longer with us who would have killed him for talking to me like that.

Not to mention, uttering the name of a man who hurt me, who led my mother to kick me out of her house, refusing to

believe that I didn't try to seduce him, but that it was he who would brush against me constantly, making me wonder if it was all in my head, until the brushing turning into rubbing when he grabbed me that last day in the basement, a day when I was forced me to grab a tool and split his head open to get away...

"Andrews is my step-father's name," I respond, aware that my voice shook a little. "My mother changed my surname to his when I was seven years old and didn't give me a choice in the matter. I haven't used that name since I was seventeen. Nor will I ever use it again." Grey squeezes my hand under the table. "Nilsson was my father's name. He's deceased now. And that's the *only* name I'll ever use."

"She comes from money?" asks his mom, eyes narrowing. The woman couldn't sound more like a soap opera villain if she tried.

"Yes, she does," drawls Landon, his fingers curling to form fists on the table, his two silver rings, the symbols on which I can't quite make out, glistening in the low light.

"I think we're done with this discussion," says Grey, breathless. He once promised me he wouldn't look into my past, but I should have told him myself so that he didn't get ambushed.

"Not that I should have to explain myself," I continue, "but... it's my mother and stepmother who have the money, not me. And as for my family, I'd really rather you asked me about them directly instead of researching them behind my back."

I realize I trembled a little and some annoying droplet of a tear is now teetering on my lower lid, one which I know Landon sees for it makes him sit up and lean towards me, inspecting it so unabashedly that I feel like I'm in some fever dream.

"Message noted, In-di-go." He draws out my name sneeringly, the name I love and adore and that fits me and has made me feel free and alive since I first chose it for myself and rid myself of the name my mother would sneer at me. "I will

ask you my questions directly... or maybe we could invite your parents to dinner..."

"That's enough." Grey's snarl cuts through his father's, drawing his gaze for just a moment.

"I'm not in contact with my mother or her husband," I shoot back, refusing to turn into a wallflower in the face of such dominant men. "Nor do I intend to be."

"Why on Earth not?" asks the bleached wraith in a pause from her communion with the antichrist.

"Because... they're not healthy people. And I refuse to allow toxic people to have access to me."

"That's your mother, Indigo. She's the one who brought you into this world. You owe her a minimum of respect."

Toxic people and their obsession with hierarchy.

"I'm sorry, but I don't agree. She made her choices and I refuse to feel like I owe someone for being brought into this world. Parents need to stop acting like they're doing kids a big favor just for having the immense privilege of bringing them up. That was *their* choice, not ours. And anyway, I have two mothers who have shown me more love and acceptance than my birth mother ever has done. They are my mothers. If you want to meet my family, it's them and no one else."

Sandra turns to her husband as we're plunged into the kind of suffocating silence that makes you want to run from the room just to be able to breathe again. "Who are these women?"

"Your soul mothers, no? Isn't that what you call them?" Landon says with disdain, his thick muscles flexing beneath his tight white shirt.

Where would he even hear that?

"I consider them to be my real mothers. In every sense including physically."

I glance to the left to see Grey's eyes skewering his father's as we both attempt the same dance, not wanting to give them what they clearly want—one or both of us so

outraged that we storm out, never to be seen by his family again.

I exhale an audible breath, meeting the eye contact of both parents head-on until the clicks of metal, the scrape of wood and the babble of merry voices blast through the house.

A woman's voice carves through the tension.

“Mom?”

“In here.” Sandra's tone is sharp, as if scratched by irritation, as my mind begins to wander through the last hour, wondering what I could have done differently, if anything. I really did try to be cordial and polite. I could have ignored the family stuff but then why the hell should I when their comments are so clearly designed to antagonize?

If earning their approval means turning myself into a doormat, I'm not sure I'm genetically designed for it, unless it's one of those ones which trips everyone up as they walk in.

As the mom rings the bell, a new face walks into the room—another giant of a woman as tall as Sandra. She's in her mid-twenties with thick and long hair bearing pronounced blond highlights and wearing a low-cut royal blue top tucked into a short white skirt.

Her eyes widen as she scans the room, settling on my face as a man walks in behind her, looking kind of like Grey but with darker eyes and hair slightly less thick than Grey's.

I know instantly that they're his brother and sister just by their large stature and the similarity in features.

As a third woman walks into the room, Grey's whole body turns rigid. From the side, I see his eyes flit between the woman and his father.

The woman is breathtakingly beautiful, even taller than the blonde despite her bare feet. In fact, this one must be scraping six feet. If the entire room stands up in one go, I'm going to feel like their freaking garden gnome.

The woman now watching me has luminous green eyes and the kind of face that you see on the cover of magazines.

Her black hair is straight but the ends are curled into perfect loose spirals, the kind that me, with my incompetence with hair styling products, has never been able to master. Her body is wrapped in a tight burgundy dress with sleeves that reach her elbows above bracelets and rings of gold.

“So, this must be Indigo,” sings the first blonde and relief flutters through my system at the sight of someone who actually seems excited to see me here. “I’m Elise. Grey’s sister.” She comes to sit at the end of the table to my right, a huge grin spreading across her pretty face. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here,” I reply but as I do so, I spot her aim a narrow-eyed glance at the brunette, her smile suddenly less than tepid.

I can’t help but flinch as the chair to my right is pulled out and the man sits down next to me.

“Tyrion,” he says, eyes flaring as they lock onto mine. “Grey’s brother. Nice to meet you.”

“Indigo.”

He holds out a hand which I take, swallowing as he grips it almost as tightly as Grey did that first day I walked into his office.

“And this is Gabriella,” says Grey’s mom as the brunette takes a seat next to Landon, diagonally opposite me. “A very close friend of the family’s... and of Greyson’s.”

“I think we’ll be leaving,” Grey announces, his jaw tight, anger clearly weaved into the words he’s attempting to speak with composure.

“No, you’ll be staying for dessert,” bites hell-mom. “I oversaw its preparation myself.”

At that moment, the waiter walks in carrying a large silver tray which he sets onto a side table nearby. He removes our plates and then places a dessert in front of each person, even supplying one to the three newcomers.

I want to rave about how delicious they look—delicate French patisseries with layers of pink mousse, vanilla sponge

and a magenta jelly on top, cut into elegant rectangles and decorated with white chocolate curls—but the tension has stripped me of my voice, making my body seize up the way it used to do when I was a child, undoing my ability to be spontaneous.

It doesn't help that I now seem to have two people glaring at me—Grey's father opposite and the woman now sitting next to him, Gabriella. I've never heard Grey mention her before.

I try to smile at her but her lips don't move in response and the way her inky eyes refuse to leave my face allows the murk of malaise to ooze into me.

Jesus, these people really take eye contact to new heights.

“Wow, this looks delicious,” I manage as we begin to eat. I would compliment the mom at this point, but I know from the previous discussion that they hired a caterer to do the cooking.

“Have you enjoyed dinner, Indigo?” asks Tyrion next to me, a smirk scribbled into his handsome face. I glance down at his fingers to see a single silver ring, one which looks remarkably similar to the one his father is wearing.

“It's Indie,” I reply gently. “And yeah, the food's been... delicious.”

“So, how did you and Greyson meet?” I ask Gabriella, as she slides her silver spoon through the pink layers, bringing it to her bright-red lips and sucking the cake from the spoon as she watches me.

I may be a bitch, but anyone would think she was filming the opening scene of a porn movie with that mouth action.

“We're childhood friends,” she replies, glistening eyes sliding to the man I came with, “aren't we, Grey? Our families are very close.”

“Oh, that's awesome,” I reply, aware of energy now so bleak that no amount of raspberry mousse cake will be able to lighten the ambiance. “What was he like as a boy?”

But before Gabriella can answer, Tyrion sniggers a response in a way which I'm guessing is supposed be a joke,

but which chills my blood anyway. “*Traumatized.*”

The dark smirk in Tyrion’s voice has Grey placing his spoon down onto his plate. His body language, head bowed, eyes staring down at his plate, coupled with that single word, has my stomach sinking to the floor and any dregs of appetite I had left seeping into the hell half these people crawled out of.

“Thank you for dinner,” says Grey. “We’ll be leaving now.”

“Oh, so soon?” replies Elise. “We didn’t get a chance to get to know your lovely Indigo.”

Her words and her tone are warm, kind even, but something in her face reads the exact opposite—the disingenuous smirk, the eyes gleaming with some kind of snide delight, the way she glances over at Gabriella who is now eyeballing me as if she wants to ram that spoon down my throat.

I glance over at Tyrion who licks his lips most lewdly as he studies me before pivoting my gaze to Gabriella. She’s sharing Landon’s ravenous glower, only this time, unless I’m mistaken, she seems to be breathing through... rage.

“Another time,” replies Grey and I place my spoon down onto the plate.

“The food was lovely. Thank you,” I say, though no one answers as Grey gets to his feet, placing his hand on my waist and pulling my chair out as I make it to my feet.

He grips my hand tightly. “Please don’t get up. We’ll see ourselves out. Thank you for dinner.”

I throw them a lukewarm smile as my date pulls me from the room, leading me to the entrance hall where we don our shoes and coats in silence. The silence doesn’t come only from us but from them too, one that weighs on both of us as Grey holds out my coat for me to slide my arms into.

As he draws the door closed behind us, I exhale a shuddering breath of relief.

Indigo

“God that was... intense,” I breathe out, glad I managed to numb my way through some of it with wine. “Though a few of them could probably work on their social skills,” I jest, in some feeble attempt to loosen the tension clearly gripping Grey’s huge frame.

I look up at him to find him stone-faced and unspeaking, walking us in brisk long strides down the driveway, through the gate and back towards the car.

Pulling the key from his pocket, he presses a button to unlock the doors of his Bentley, opening the passenger door for me and holding it open.

We don’t speak as I get in, nor do we speak as he checks his mirrors and pulls out onto the quiet street.

“Are you okay?” I ask, observing how tightly he’s gripping the steering wheel and how shaken he looks. “Look, it honestly could have been worse,” I say, aware that the only way it could have *really* gotten much worse is if someone’s face had ended up in the raspberry mousse cake. “I really was expecting blood at one point, so I’d say it was a success. Plus, at least now I know what to expect, so next time I’ll just give them a bit more attitude. I swear they’ll love me by the time I’m finished with them.”

As I say the words, he pulls the car over, stopping the engine and turning it off. We're a couple of hundred feet away from his parents' house but this patch of the street is flanked by a tall hedge on either side and very dark but for light seeping over from a frankly gothic-looking mansion behind a mammoth gate on the other side of the street.

Come to think of it, this entire street kind of feels like the set of a rich-people horror movie.

"Grey..."

He remains mute, his breathing ragged as he stares down at the steering wheel. "I'm very sorry for their conduct," he says, his teeth gritted.

"It's not your fault. Look, it honestly could—"

"Is your phone charged?"

"Um, yeah, I think so." I grab it from my purse to check as he undoes his seatbelt, spotting a couple of messages waiting for me. "Yeah, it is."

"Good. When I get out, I'm gonna lock the doors, but you can lock and unlock them by pressing this button." He taps on a button in the console on his side of the car. "It will lock all the interior doors. I'm leaving the key inside. If anyone comes up to you, drive away, park and call me. Is that understood?"

"Wait a minute."

"Is that understood?"

"You're not going back there!"

"Don't get out. Wait for me. Call me the second you need me and I'll be back here."

"Wait!"

Before I can stop him, he's out of the car and slamming the door behind him. I turn, watching him disappear as he heads back to the house.

Greyson

With every step I take, I'm aware that I'm contradicting my own advice—to not give these people this reaction; to not let them have the satisfaction of seeing me upset, of confirming my role as black sheep of the family, a role I've occupied my whole life for daring to not show reverence to a man who has not treated me as human since the day I was born.

What I hadn't factored in was seeing her little face drop every time my so-called parents launched a new arrow at her, every time Sandra smirked in response to one of Indigo's earnest answers, every time her wide eyes met my father's lascivious glare.

It seems being permanently disappointed by my parents is a chronic compulsion of mine, one I facilitate by not giving up all hope as Gideon and Kennedy tell me to, as the one therapist I saw a few years ago told me to.

I of all people should know what they're capable of, especially him. And yet for reasons I don't understand, I hold out this hope that maybe one day he will understand the pain he has caused me, understand what he took from me, and that one day, he will grant me some frail vestige of approval without requiring me to embrace the side of me that resembles him.

The monster.

The man who has informed me my entire life that I am also one, that I allowed it to happen, that I wanted it.

I still can't let go of the hope that one day he will say or do something to soothe the endless black ache which casts a cloud of soot over the world, with the exception of one very vibrant girl, a girl I can't help feeling that I'm pulling into this domain of shadows.

The thought of Indigo's face as she absorbed blow after blow, snide comment after snide comment, the unrelenting invasive questions and my father's predatory eyes tunneling into her—especially when I know of his tastes for wide-eyed young things like her—propels my feet forwards as I make it through the gate, the image of Gabriella walking into that room like a thousand-watt charge bursting through me.

I will not spend another night pacing in solitary torment and resentment at one of the fucked-up things I've endured at their hands. I will not subject Indigo to my rancor and irritation at myself for not daring to confront him once again—a state I've found myself in after multiple beatings as a child when I used to dare tell him that I knew what he'd done.

Ours is a silence simmering in secrets.

And I think he knows that one day, I won't be able to hold them in anymore...

As I make it to the front door, I prepare to ring the bell, but try the handle anyway, finding the door still unlocked. I open it, entering to the chatter of voices. I slam it shut behind me to alert them to my presence, plunging the house into momentary silence.

As I walk into the dining room, my father gets to his feet, as does my brother who flanks him.

“Back so soon, brother?” says Tyrion. “No Indie? We were hoping to get to know her better.”

“Why?” I ask, coming to stand ten feet before my father, squaring my body at his tall, stocky frame, his arms and neck

snaked with thick veins that I've spent years imagining biting through. "Why is she here?"

"You don't talk about me in the third person!" exclaims Gabriella, getting to her feet.

My eyes slide to her as she takes a step towards me. "You have the nerve to ask why *I'm* here! Why was that *whore* here?! You do realize we're engaged to be married, right?!"

"Still just as delusional," I snarl. "We are not engaged. For one, I don't recall asking you nor giving you that ring you wear. In fact, all I remember saying to you this year is that I can barely stomach being around you." She takes another step forwards, her face reddening with anger. "And asking you to help your father see reason as regards this farce."

"You son of a bitch," she sneers breathlessly. "Who the hell else is gonna take you on? Does she even know how fucked-up you are? Does she know what you're hiding inside you? Or your proclivities? Or let me guess... You don't subject *her* to the stuff you did me."

"I don't remember you complaining at the time, Gabriella. On the contrary."

"Yeah, well, does *she* get to see the *monster*?" My glare drifts to my father as she speaks, his dark eyes flaring as he absorbs words that I know will nourish him, for all he's ever wanted for me is to be like him. "Or are you breaking *her* in gently?"

"You don't speak about that woman," I growl. "*Ever.*"

Gabriella's long black hair falls out from behind her ears, concealing the sides of her heavily made-up brown eyes, the same exact shape as Vitaly, her father's.

I glance at my sister, still sitting down, her lips twisted into a ravenous smile as she enjoys the after-dinner venom.

"I'll speak about whoever the fuck I want," Gabriella barks. "Especially about the *whore* ruining my engagement!"

Is everyone around here insane?

Or is it me who's losing my fucking mind?

“I have made it clear to you in more ways than I can count that we are *done*.”

“And I told you that I’m not disobeying my father! Unlike you, I actually give a shit about family. About loyalty.”

Her words mist the room in frigid air as my gaze meets my mother’s and then my father’s. He glares back at me, wrath pulsing through his veins, as if it’s *me* who has spent his life hurting him and not the opposite; as if it’s me who took the most precious things from him; as if it’s me making the most unreasonable demands, reducing him to a pawn in some twisted game of power and fortune.

“Loyal to a father who would have you marry a man you don’t love,” I respond to her features softening, her gaze melting as she steps towards me, her tight dress clinging to her lithe body.

“But I do love you! Do you think I don’t have other options?! I could have any fucking man I want around here.” Tyrion smirks as she says the words. I highly suspect he’s already been one of them. “I only want you, Grey. And we’d be good together. Much better than you and her. You don’t even fit.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“You looked fucking ridiculous together!” snaps my mother, exhaling the smoke from a cigarette in a trembling breath. “That hair. It’s *so fucking awful*! Who the fuck would ever take her seriously with hair like that?!”

“You mean if she bleached the ever-loving shit out of it, we’d take her seriously,” I sneer, “but because it’s pink, her value as a human vanishes? How enlightened.”

She shakes her head, rage rippling through her system. “You know full well that she’d look fucking *ridiculous* at any social gathering we held. The hair. That stupid hippy gemstone around her neck. Those hoops in her ears. You look awful together. It would be a fucking embarrassment to even introduce her to our friends! They’d think you’d lost your fucking mind. And what’s more, I don’t even recognize you

anymore! One of the few things I admired about you was your ability to engage your brain over your emotions, Greyson.”

“To shut out *all* emotion, I think you mean,” I clarify. “That’s been convenient to you, hasn’t it?”

The growl of my father’s sounds like thunder pealing through the room as he takes a step towards me, and another, coming to stand in front of my brother and Gabriella. “You don’t speak to your fucking mother like that in front of me and get away with it...”

I’m ready when you are, Father...

His eyes sear into me in the low light, taking me back to a night when I saw those same flames of wrath smoldering in the darkness as they stalked me.

Take another step.

I’ve been waiting for it...

“You would humiliate your father by turning up with this girl on your arm, a girl who doesn’t even know how to respect her own fucking family, and not the respectable woman that has been carefully chosen for you? A woman who will be devoted to you.”

I take a moment to study his face, wondering if today’s the day, I finally get to split it open and feel his slick crimson blood on my fingers.

Between him and Tyrion, I wouldn’t get away unscathed, but then no physical injury can compare to the emotional pain I’ve endured at his hands.

“Indigo was perfectly respectful,” I say, knowing that any mild defense of her will be seen as disloyalty to him. “She dressed appropriately. Expressed gratitude. And interest. She could not have been more courteous or charming if she’d tried. What more exactly could she have done to please you?”

“Such a staunch defense of some whore you *just want to ‘get out of your system’*.” The lie ricochets around the room before crumbling before us. “Apparently, some hippy you

barely know is more important than your own fucking family. Is that the kind of *man* you are, Greyson?"

My body turns rigid as he takes another step towards me. "I guess my loyalty is with those who make me feel loved and accepted, Father. I'm sorry if that concept repulses you."

"You wouldn't know love if it bit you in the face," he snarls, his expression twisting in wrath at my accusation. "Nor would she, it seems... She thinks you're some civilized man, doesn't she? Is that the fantasy you've been feeding her? I know the truth, Greyson. Maybe I need to pay her a visit so that she understands it as well."

A howl of rage erupts inside me. "Go near that girl—"

"And you'll what?" he sneers, his hands curling into fists. "Amuse me..."

"I'll do what I should have done to you years ago."

I knew what he would do the second I dared say the words, expecting his fist to fly at my face at full force. I manage to block the blow and instead cock my own, landing it square on his nose which I feel crack beneath my knuckles before gushing with blood as he staggers backwards, caught by my brother as my mother screams at me, launching her hands at my face, hitting me over and over until I grab her by the throat and push her backwards.

"You bastard!" she screams as she's held back by Gabriella. "You disrespectful bastard!! We should have given you away!" She turns to my father who is wiping the blood from under his nose. I watch in vicious pleasure as it trickles into his mouth, staining his grayish lips. "I told you! I told you we should have given him away!!"

Well, I guess we can now drop the pretense... *Mother.*

I square my body at my father as he recovers from the single blow, waiting for more, either from him or from Tyrion who is used to doing Landon's bidding.

My father slides his large palm over his ruddy face, wiping the blood across his cheek, the sight utterly savage.

He waits for a moment, as if expecting some expression of contrition, but none come.

In fact, I don't feel guilt. Not one bit. I only feel frustration that I didn't manage to break every bone in his face. It still wouldn't come close to the bones broken in my body.

As I revel in the pain I know he must feel, in the sight of the thick scarlet liquid still trickling onto his lips, I feel afraid of the pleasure I feel. And just as a modicum of concern creeps in over what I know is a fracture in his nose, my body turns cold as I watch my father's expression morph—from pure rage into something else.

His eyes widen as he stands up straight and before I know it, the wrath dissolves as his lips begin to twist up, parting as they form some barbarous grin, as if an animal about to attack.

I swallow, shaking my head, not understanding until he speaks, the words slowly rasping from his throat.

“I always told you the truth... *son*. That you're a beast... just like me. And that you *wanted* it. And I was right. So, I'll let you have your fun, because it isn't *me* she needs protecting from... It's *you*. And once you realize that, you'll come crawling back to the only woman you don't have to hide from.”

His words leave me trembling, my body plunged into ice as I take a step backwards and another, turning to walk away.

As my feet take me unwillingly to the creature waiting for me in that car, I wipe a solitary tear from my face as I wonder if she's cold, or if she's afraid.

And if I'm about to drag her into hell...

Greyson

“**Y**ou don’t have to carry me everywhere,” she moans.

“I enjoy carrying you,” I whisper into her ear before placing her down onto the steps of my house, bringing out my key and opening the door.

“Oh, you’re talking now,” she gripes after the wordless drive to my place.

I didn’t intend to not speak to her, but my body was frozen rigid, the words refusing to emerge. The same mutism happened to me as a child, a mechanism which kept me somewhat safe when I knew that expressing the riot of emotions I kept hidden would be met with wrath.

“How lucky I am that you’d finally gift me a word or two,” she snipes as she removes her shoes and coat, as I do likewise.

I take the purse from her hand and reach down and pick her up again, only this time, she doesn’t resist, perhaps understanding that her strength is no match for mine. I kick the front door closed behind us and carry her down the long hallway to the living room in silence, once again unsure who I even am anymore.

But then, do I know who she is? Despite my instincts and need for control, I agreed not to look into her. Hearing about her mother, her wealth is one thing, but the way she spoke

about her stepfather reeked of secrets and traumas—something I understand well.

And if he hurt her, I may truly get my wish to rip someone's throat out.

I place her down in the darkness, moving over to the tigerwood table to turn on a small lamp that emits just enough light to not startle her eyes. I place her purse down onto the wood.

She comes to stand square in front of me, not ten feet away, her pink hair laying over the modest dress I wish to rip from her body to undo the memory of my mother's disdainful gaze roaming up and down her slim frame.

Her green eyes widen as she glares at me as if expecting answers I can't provide.

"Why didn't you speak?" she asks, her breathing shallow. "*We can get through anything as long as we're united.* Remember all that bullshit you spouted at me before we walked in there?"

"I told you I'd try not to shut down, or to shut you out." I shake my head slowly. "But there are times when it will happen. I can't always control it."

Her words seem to hurt her as she wraps her hands around her slim waist.

"Well, just so you know," she says, "when you refuse to speak, it makes me feel rejected... and like... you're hiding things from me."

But I am, Indigo...

Things that would terrify you...

"I know."

"You know?" Her brow creases, her eyes solemn despite the irritation tightening her jaw. "Is that all you have to say? What happened when you went back in there? I mean, you don't *have* to tell me. Maybe I'm just some replaceable bystander in all this? Some prop in a war between you and your family? If that's the case, have I served my little

purpose?” Despite her irate tone, tears fill her eyes and her bottom lip quivers a little before she bites it gently as if to stop it.

I close my eyes for a moment, aching to lick the saltwater from her skin, but not knowing if doing so will make more come, and come... until they never stop.

“That’s not what this was, Indigo,” I reply softly, opening my eyes to find them misting in tears as I watch a single droplet trickle over the perfect curve of her flushed cheek. “I had hope... I... I don’t know why. I don’t know why I’m still caught in their web. I don’t know what it is about him which draws me back over and over.”

It can't be what he says...

It can’t be that I’m fighting a monster who is just like him, a monster who comes alive in his presence, despite the pain of it.

“I should have taken you out sooner,” I continue.

“I’m not angry at you for not getting me out. We had a plan. We knew going in what we were doing, and frankly, I think we did a damn good job of keeping our cool. I’m mad because...”

She drops her head, allowing another tear to fall onto the hardwood beneath her small feet, glistening like a diamond in a moonlit cave.

“I know there are whole pieces of your life you hide away from me. And I know we haven’t been dating that long, and you don’t owe me your whole life story, but... sometimes shutting me out like that, it makes me feel like... none of this is real. Like it’s some experiment.”

The word makes my body seize.

She trembles as she searches my eyes, the tremors making her so vulnerable, so open, so delectable. Her fear is so pure that it renders me ravenous, wakening the beast inside me.

“Can you understand why that makes me afraid?”

“I know you’re afraid. I’m afraid too.”

I'm afraid I can't run fast enough while carrying her to escape the threat of darkness following us.

"What did they say?" she asks, her body wilting a little, forcing me to restrain the torment of desire that her weakness arouses in me. "When you went back there?"

Vigor drips from me at the memory of how gracious she was despite the humiliating words fielded at her as she tried to eat. I glanced at her face when Gabriella was sitting down. Her eyes were eager, hopeful, as if the arrival of new people filled her with relief.

Little did she know that not one of them had good intentions towards her, especially not Gabriella.

"Do you want to know, Indigo? The truth?"

"They didn't like me?" she asks, her voice quivering.

"They didn't like *us*," I correct. "They don't think we fit."

"Fit? I mean, we spent less than an hour with them. How do they— They don't even know me!" She takes a step back, pink splotches seeping into her neck. "And as for *fitting*, no offense, but your mom looks like some trophy wife who daren't say *No* to her rich husband. He glares at her as if she's his property and nothing more. I've felt more love exchanged between two goats I once saw at a local petting zoo."

"My father's not interested in love. He's interested in submission. That's what he gets from her."

I stiffen as I realize to what degree I also need that from her.

"Oh, and I suppose I'm not *submissive* enough for his tastes... or is that just one of a hundred things they hate about me? What else should I add to the list?"

"You want to torture yourself?" I suggest.

"I want to know. I really want to understand how to meet their exacting standards. I guess the hair was mentioned?"

"My mother fixated on it."

“See, I told you I shouldn’t wear it down! We should have broken them in more gently.”

“If it wasn’t the hair, it would have been the earrings, or the clothes, or the voice, or the tone, or your parents, or any number of fucking things.”

“So, even if I’d bleached my hair to straw status like your mother, I wouldn’t have been accepted,” she scoffs. “Well, guess what? I’m not inferior to these people! In fact, I feel pretty fucking *superior* to most of them. For one, I don’t have the emotional range of a gnat, and therefore don’t judge people on the most ridiculous of superficial criteria and invite them to dinner with the sole intent of picking them apart.”

“Indigo.”

“And two, I don’t have the spiritual capacity of a freshly sanded toenail, so I don’t reduce people to nothing other than their outer shell.”

I take a step towards her, forcing her to peer up.

“Oh, and maybe if her husband hadn’t been glaring at me all night as if he was getting ready to exsanguinate me, I could have been my usual sociable self.”

“Indigo, stop,” I growl, the image of my father’s lewd glower causing my hands to ball into fists.

I know full well the salacious thoughts passing through my father’s twisted mind, for I have the same impulses when I take in the disobedience painted across her breathtaking face.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to bring that up. It’s just...” She takes a step towards me, taunting the merciless beast inside me with her body. “For a parent to make their kid feel that way, it’s... abusive.” Tears teeter on her waterline. “And I’m not apologizing for being a decent person who doesn’t treat people like garbage or bow down to men as if they’re inherently more valuable than me because of their genitals.”

I try to smile at the defiant way that she says it, but I can’t as my mind prowls back to talk of her family. The mother. The stepfather whose name she refuses to ever bear.

“Was it true?” I ask. “About your parents? Their wealth.”

“Your father was such an asshole to look into me like that.”

“I know, Indie. But I can’t unhear what he said.”

“It’s *their* wealth,” I reply. “Not mine. It might become mine if I were willing to engage with their toxic shit... which I’m not. No amount of money is worth it.”

“And your... stepfather?”

She peers down before finding my eyes again. “He’s not a nice man. And... I don’t want to talk about him tonight. It’s already been... a lot.”

I bow my head, the civility masking the rage and shame I feel as I prepare to answer a question I know she will already have in her head.

“Indigo, I need to tell you about... the woman who turned up at the end.”

“Your sister?”

“No, the other—”

“Gabriella?”

“Yes.”

She frowns, no doubt sensing the dread dripping from my tone. I don’t even know how to explain the insanity of my link to her, something that no one from a sane background could ever comprehend.

“What about her?” she asks, her voice a frail breeze.

“I’ve known her since I was a child. Her father is friends with my father. Close friends. As well as being a client of his.”

“A PR client?”

“Yes. Crisis management, in particular. Which is something people need when they are prone to... *misdeeds*.”

Or crimes of the worst kind, more like—another reason why my father keeps Vitaly as one of their VIP clients, ones I

don't have access to, for he knows full well there are some crimes I refuse to help clients cover up.

“Her family is very powerful. And many years ago, when I was still a child, my father and hers, they... made... some kind of pact... and... when I was seventeen, I was informed that I'd...” I shift my weight as her earnest eyes peer into me, making me feel as if blood is draining from my body. “I would be marrying her. She's the woman you've heard about. The woman you asked me about on the island.”

She takes a step back, her face as pale as winter frost.

“It was something they concocted to make both families more powerful, more protected, and to reaffirm their control, their role as heads of the family.”

“*Control?* They're arranging their kids' marriage... Do these people know what century we're living in?!”

“They don't care about social norms, Indigo. Or at least, not behind closed doors.”

“And do you want to? Marry her?”

I feel my expression coarsening into stone. “Of course not. I feel *nothing* for her. Nothing but vague feelings of revulsion.”

“But I bet she wants it, right? That's why she was throwing daggers at me as if she wanted to ram her knife through my windpipe, isn't it? Another stranger to add to the list of people who now hate me.”

Her slight fingers wrap around her arms as she peers up at me as if wanting me to reassure her—to tell her that Gabriella is as opposed to this union as I am. Only I can't, for I know she'd be willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen, to the point that I have to block her number to stop the barrage of messages, of pictures, of voicemails she sends my way, and to inform security in my building to never let her in.

“She does want it?” she asks softly. “Doesn't she?”

I steel myself to answer. “Yes. She wants it.”

“Well, that's just great.”

As her breathing rattles, my fingers itch to touch her, to carry her, to pin her down and obliterate the fear from her body.

“Did you know she was going to be there?” she finally asks.

“Of course not.”

“But your parents knew, right? They designed that little freakshow at the end, didn’t they?” Another tear falls down her delicate face. “So, they must think there’s a chance you’ll end up with her.”

“They believe that if they pressure me for long enough, I’ll give in.” I step forwards, my tone resolute. “I *won’t*. She means nothing to me, Indigo. Your very existence blasts hers into oblivion. You are everything she isn’t. Your color. Your strength. The way you treat me. The way you *love*.” The word hangs heavily over us, for neither of us has said it, both no doubt afraid that once we do, we can’t go back. “I’ve never hungered for her the way I do you, nor dreamed of her voice. I’ve never been ravenous for her flesh the way I am for yours, or felt consumed to the point of insanity by her the way I’ve felt about you since the first day we met.”

“But it would make everyone happy, wouldn’t it? Isn’t that how you’d get daddy’s approval?”

“He offers approval in dregs that he takes away, Indigo. We both know that.”

“And we both know how much children yearn for their parents’ approval,” she replies. “Even abusive parents.”

“Yes,” I reply solemnly.

“You... you slept with her, didn’t you?” Her arms wrap tightly around her waist.

“Yes. We were a couple... many years ago. In my early twenties, I was resigned to it. And seeing as I have certain... emotional limitations, I thought maybe it would be the right thing to do. We dated on and off with the understanding that when we hit thirty, we’d be married. But around twenty-five, the unease I was living became intolerable. I knew that not

only did I not love this woman, I didn't *like* her either. It became more and more difficult to entertain. And then when I met you, it became impossible."

"But that's why you wanted me to meet them so much, isn't it? I'm this thing you want them to accept so that they get off your back about her?"

"I never thought they would accept you. Not really."

She frowns, swallowing thickly. "Then, why?"

"Because... I'm trying to be human, Indigo... for once."

She shakes her head, looking as if she's alone and wandering through some thick forest in the dark... lost and afraid.

Only I don't know if I'm the man who will rescue her or the wolf stalking her, just waiting for the chance to bite.

"I'm gonna call a cab," she finally says, a tear dripping between her plump lips. "I think I should go home."

"I can take you home... or... you can spend the night in your room. I won't go near you. I won't ask to talk. Tomorrow, if you still want to leave, I'll drive you back"

She contemplates the plea for a moment. "Okay. But I don't want you knocking on the door, or coming into my room. We can't fuck our way out of this. I need some space. And I may decide to call my friends and rant dramatically about tonight and I don't want you listening."

I bow my head in acquiescence to her request.

She watches me for a moment before picking up her purse from the table and leaving the room, plunging it into darkness.

Landon Everitt

My hands ball into fists as Vitaly stares at me from the other side of the table.

“You need to get that fixed.” He gestures towards my fucking face. “I’ll drive you if you want.”

“I’ll drive myself,” I retort, lifting a silver cigarette case to my face to glare at my distorted reflection, the skin around my eyes and nose now mottled with deep indigo. “It’s not the first time it’s been broken. I doubt it will be the last.”

I throw the case down onto the table of his dining room.

“You cannot allow your son to disrespect you like this, Landon.”

My fist slams into the table before I can stop it, the ice cubes in our tumblers rattling as the table stops shaking.

“I’m sorry,” I growl, my chest shaking from rage and humiliation. “It’s not you. It’s *him*.”

“I understand. If my son dared defy me, he’d pay for it in hell.”

I should have left him there...

That was my first mistake.

Thinking that he could ever live up to his name.

Thinking he would be anything other than *her*.

Weak. Pitiful. Not worthy of our fucking name.

I should have left him.

That way I wouldn't have to deal with this disrespect, nor the humiliation of having a son who treats his father with such contempt, who refuses to obey simple wishes for the good of his entire family.

The ungrateful fuck.

He owes me.

He owes me everything.

As my breathing steadies, Vitaly speaks. "What are you going to do? You can't allow him to defy you. It will undermine your role as head of the family. It will undermine your company."

My rancorous glare lifts to meet his beady brown eyes. "You don't think I fucking know that? What do I do, Vitaly? Kidnap the ungrateful fuck? Drag him down the aisle?"

"What do you know about this girl?"

I exhale a rattling breath as her face floats before me. She is indeed utterly exquisite. Despite my wrath at my son's disdain for me, my cock throbbed every time she looked up at me, every time she inserted food between those plump pink lips, every time my gaze wandered over the curves of her small body.

I wonder how much that would cost me...

I don't blame Greyson for thoroughly exploring the pleasure a face and body and voice like hers can offer. He can brutally fuck her into the afterlife for all I care.

But what he will not do is present a woman other than the one carefully chosen for him, offer up some thing he dragged off the streets as her replacement because she calms the beast inside him.

"She's estranged from her parents. Her father is dead. But the stepfather is Bennett Andrews." Vitaly's eyes light up.

“He’s know for his—”

“Proclivities,” replies Vitaly, clearly having heard the same rumors as I have about this wealthy banker, a man who by rights should be on our books. Every politician, businessman and billionaire with something to hide around here is.

“He’s not a client of yours?”

“No,” I reply.

“Maybe he needs to be,” he suggests, eyes narrowing as he brings his lit cigar to his lips, the tip flaring with orange flame as he inhales.

I nod. “The mother is very wealthy but she and the girl are not close.”

“That’s useful. It weakens her.”

“Yes.”

“And there are other people in her past... People who know how to hurt her. Every day I learn more and more about how to cause her pain.”

I harden at the very thought of her tears.

“Nice. It strikes me,” muses Vitaly. “That this girl is a point of weakness for your son. And that if he won’t see reason, we may need to shift our focus to her, not him.”

“That’s already begun,” I reply, staring at my tumbler of whiskey before downing the whole thing, relishing in the corrosive burn down my throat. “I was hoping that once she learns about the parts of him he hides, this bond they share will be broken... but I’m not so sure that will happen now. This feels... different. *He* feels different.”

“He’s contaminated by her, Landon.”

“That’s the problem,” I sneer, my jaw tightening. “He doesn’t see it that way. He thinks she frees him.”

“We don’t want our children free,” seethes Vitaly. “It weakens us, undermines our role. Our children must obey us. That’s how it works in decent families.”

“And he will. If I have to get to him through her, I’ll do it. By the time I’m finished with her, he’ll be on his knees, begging for me to let her go.”

Indigo

“**B**ut he doesn’t want to be with her now?” asks Fran as I stare at my phone, my head nestled onto the pillow on the king-size bed of the guestroom, illuminated only by the blue light of the small screen and the floodlight of the gibbous moon, only a day or two away from being full.

“So he says,” I reply with a sigh, waiting for Rami to pipe up with her opinions as she moves about in the background of the living room they share.

The three of us often have late-night chats and tonight, as they were both free, I asked if I could vent about dinner and how worthless it made me feel... even if I do know none of it was Grey’s fault.

I knew they’d be disapproving assholes so it shouldn’t bother me this much, except it plays into my fears. My heart has never ached for a man the way I want him, but my head is constantly telling me we’re an odd fit, that something’s wrong, something I don’t know about.

“I mean, it wasn’t his fault,” Fran says, her skin covered in a white clay face mask that crinkles when she talks. “It’s not like he knew she was gonna turn up.”

Fran is ever the optimist when it comes to romance, which is why I want to hear from Rami. She’s jaded and likes to

batter me about with the realism stick when I float off into the clouds.

“I know. I just felt like such a freak around them. Like, I swear to God, I’ve had vibrators with more emotional and spiritual range than these people. They literally don’t have the capacity to even understand their kid’s basic needs or to see beyond physical appearance. It’s like dealing with the cult of the emotionally devolved.”

“Fuck ‘em,” barks Rami in the background. “They made you feel like shit. There’s no excuse for that. They can sit and spin for eternity as far as I’m concerned.”

“Or maybe,” I say, not wanting the words to come out, “it was wondering if Grey agreed with them that hurt.”

“I doubt he would,” replies Fran, her gorgeous ginger waves covering half the screen. “I mean, if he gave a shit about appearances, he wouldn’t have stalked you all over the DC area and repeatedly dragged you back to his cave.”

“Like some neanderthal with a hard-on,” deadpans Rami in the background, making me break into laughter for the first time since we got home. “Honestly, they can both sit on a cactus,” she continues, clearly riled up and in mama bear mode. “Do you want to be around people who make you feel inferior? *Fuck that*. What’s next? You’ll be wearing twinsets and pearls just to please them?”

“Like hell,” I spit out, though my outrage at the thought is muted as I realize I did dress exactly how I thought they’d want to see me tonight.

“Fuck that. Fuck *them*. Honestly, after the crap you’ve been through, you don’t need them. You don’t need *him* for that matter.”

Them? No, I don’t.

But *him?*

My mind is caught in some draft connecting my room to his, constantly drawn to the image of him lying in his bed, picturing the mass of his muscular body and whether it’s

moving or still, whether he's naked or clothed, awake or asleep.

"He's not the only talented dick you can feel safe with," snipes Rami.

"He isn't?"

"No."

"Well, I'm gonna need some convincing," I reply. "I'm hormonally challenged when it comes to that man. He's basically been a one-man libido reanimator."

"Fine. Then use him for that. Didn't he suggest that at one point? Using his body? Kind of like a living dildo with limbs?"

"Stop," I chuckle. "I honestly wish his dick was all I cared about. I can't really describe why I can barely think of anything else. I feel... human around him. I feel like I can speak without being shouted down or demeaned. Apart from the fact that I love watching him and listening to him and trying to uncover who he is, he makes me feel... safe."

"*Feel* safe," adds Rami, joining Fran on the sofa and tilting the phone so that I have to look into all-seeing brown eyes. She slides her short black hair back off her forehead. "*Feel*. That's the operative word. It doesn't mean you *are* safe. For all we know, he likes you letting your guard down so that you don't offer up any resistance when he tries to sink his teeth into your neck."

"Stop it," Fran laughs.

"I don't think that's it," I add.

"Oh, no? How safe did you feel when the woman his family want him to marry walked into the room tonight?" barbs Rami.

"That's not his fault," counters Fran. "He clearly didn't know about it."

"And what if Indie's some experiment or something?" adds Rami. "Some last-ditch attempt to defy daddy?"

“Does it feel like that when you’re with him?” asks Fran.

“No,” I reply. “I don’t think so. It feels more like he’s... learning to be human or something.”

“Well, tell him to get back to you once that’s done,” snipes Rami.

I would tell her she has a point, only after the events of the past year, I know how easy it is to feel less than human, for I’ve struggled with that particular brand of abyss since around the middle of my relationship with Micah.

I shudder in a breath. “How did we look together? On the island? I mean, did we look like we fit?”

“All I remember is him glaring at you constantly as if he wanted to bite into your neck and suck all your blood out,” deadpans Rami to my smirk of amusement.

“Agree,” adds Frannie with a grin. “That glare was *not* human. Honestly, the chemistry between you two was so hot that it was kind of hard to tell, but, yeah, you looked good together. You looked amazing. I mean, your styles couldn’t be more different, but there was this kind of ease amidst the crackle, if that makes sense. And you looked confident around him. I loved that.”

I think I know what she means. From the first day I met Grey, I’ve spoken to him with an audacity that I’ve not dared to around other men I’ve dated for a long time. What’s more, I knew he wouldn’t hold it against me, even when he glared at me so hard that I felt the heat of his eyes on my face.

“Look, I once dated a guy,” says Fran, “whose mommy was quite the bitch. I mean we’re talking no boundaries, an opinion on every single fucking thing that you say or do or wear. No sense of personal space. The whole nine yards. And when she was a rude twat to me, her spineless little gnome of a son would back her up! He didn’t dare stand up to her. And I’d just have to bend over and take it. At least Grey is defending you. That’s all that matters.”

“Apart from the six-foot gazelle who strode in looking like she wanted to rip my head off my tiny body,” I add to Rami’s

grin.

“Well, he doesn’t want to be with her, right? I mean he could be. It’d make the family happy. She wants him, but he wants *you*. If you’re not happy and he’s not safe to be around, that’s one thing, but don’t find excuses to run away because you’re afraid that something *may* happen.”

“Ouch,” I gripe. “That hurt.”

“Look, I’m sorry, babe,” Fran replies, huffing out a breath of conciliation. “But you have a man who wants you so much that he’d defy that fucked-up family of his. Don’t punish him for *them* being such total assholes. I honestly think you’re angry at the wrong person.”

“Oh God, quit it,” I moan. “Now I feel guilty.”

“That’s what friends are for,” deadpans Rami as Fran’s lips widen into a smile.

“Fuucckkk,” I sigh.

“Go find his dick and apologize to it,” adds Fran as I muffle laughter as she references the rather vivid encounter Grey and I had on his dining table.

“You’re not gonna let me forget I told you that, are you?”

“Hell no. That man is freaking *hot*.”

“I know, but I’m not apologizing for feeling emotion. I had enough of that dynamic with my mother.”

“No, don’t do that,” replies Fran. “Just ride that dick for therapy. Do it for me. I haven’t had any in weeks.”

“Or just tend to yourself,” interjects Rami. “At least you’re guaranteed an orgasm that way, which is more than you can hope for from most men.”

“Stop,” giggle Fran and I in unison as my nervous system begins to finally calm down.

We talk a while longer about Fran’s day, about a woman Rami’s dating, about someone who did the yoga retreat with us, until we decide to call it a night.

I lie back down, staring at the dark craters of the nearly-full moon, my body now bathing in guilt.

I know I have the right to feel upset. I also know the man did nothing wrong. If anything, he protected me.

As my body heats in agitation, I take off my clothes and head to the en-suite shower. I tie my hair up into a messy bun and rinse myself off with cool water, stepping out and into a thin red bathrobe hanging from the door which Grey told me the other day was brand new, bought for me.

Feeling stifled despite the large room, I sit on the bed, taking some deep breaths to try to calm myself down, only I can't manage it. Instead, I get back to my feet and gently open the door, heading out and walking down the wide corridor of the upper level towards his room on the far side of the house.

Wondering for a moment if I even have the right to go there after making my big speech about how he better not knock on my door, I decide to anyway, just to listen out for signs that he's awake.

My heart pounds against my ribcage and moisture is wicked from my mouth as my jelly-like legs take me there, my steps onto the hardwood stupidly slippery from the shower.

"Shit," I mutter breathlessly as I make it past one of the other rooms upstairs, the door wide open, the moon-cast shadows playing tricks on me, conjuring up humanoid figures in my peripheral vision.

My exposed skin prickles with goosebumps, just as it did when I saw that black paint thrown onto my door, something I've been trying to ignore so that it doesn't send me into a tailspin of panic.

As I approach Greyson's room, I see that the door is pushed closed but not completely. There's the tiniest sliver of a gap between the inky frame and the even darker door, the grooves of its engraved wood evident in just the faint moonlight seeping into the rooms nearby.

I bring a hand up to my chest, suddenly seeing a monster sleeping inside its cave whose wrath I'm about to waken.

But the thought of the strong pulse booming through his veins has my fingertips reaching for the side of the door, and despite my trepidation, I push a little and a little more, peering inside to see a dense body lying under a thin gray sheet.

From the dewy skin exposed, it looks like he's wearing nothing. My eyes pan upwards over the rigid slabs of muscle to his face, his eyes closed, his head nestled into a pillow.

I enter, taking a few steps towards the bed, wondering if I should go back, but just as I'm about to turn, I inhale roughly as his eyes open, fixing onto me like a dragon's in a cave when it smells human flesh.

Deciding that turning back will make me look even more ridiculous at this point, I speak. "Did I wake you?"

"Close the door behind you," he responds firmly. "And come in. All the way."

Indigo

By the time I've closed the door and turned back around, he is on his feet, completely naked, his cock hard as he walks towards me.

The moonlight bounces off the flexing ridges of muscle, making the skin beneath my robe tingle and my pussy clench as if tightening around him.

My feet tentatively take me forwards a few steps only to stop as he continues his advance. I've never been inside his room before, having only seen him point it out to me from the corridor, but it's large and dark, the walls painted in what I assume, in the dim light, to be a gunmetal gray.

The huge bed is four-poster and made of wood stained black and intricately carved. The furniture is sleek and elegant with live edges and modern, masculine hardware and finishes. On the walls hang three oil paintings—an oak tree, a wolf, and a field full of flowers.

I gaze up at him as he comes to stand before me, towering over me like a giant, his features sober.

I manage to find my voice despite his arresting presence, refusing to wilt in front of him. "I want to speak for a moment."

He bows his head.

“I know none of it was your fault, but I’m not apologizing for being upset or angry or jealous, nor for not being happy with your parents. And I’m not changing *one single thing* about myself in the hopes of getting their approval. I’ve decided that I don’t want the approval of people who treat me like that. So... well... that’s it.”

I try to catch my breath, realizing I must have spoken that entire little speech without taking in air.

“You have every right to be upset,” he replies, unblinking as he inspects my face, eyes spotted with wisps of silver in the moonlight. “Their behavior was unconscionable... as was her arrival. If it helps, I felt what you felt. I may sound insane, but... I feel like I can feel what you do... in my chest.”

I nod, gulping down the rejection I still feel as my eyes wander briefly down to the gleaming curves of his defined pecs.

“And for the record, when I look at that woman, I feel disgust,” he says, his tone earnest. “And I feel trauma from the pressure I’ve been put under my whole adult life despite them knowing how that pressure makes me feel.”

I blink fast, determined to dissimilate the stupid tears of relief I feel welling up in my eyes.

“I hate that she even got the chance to look at you,” he continues. “I want to protect you from all those people. *Always.*”

My sharp inhale brushes the air between us and we remain unmoving, trapped in a bubble with each other as the irritation and hurt and frustration I felt earlier melts a little, leaving me hyperaware of his body, and of my own arousal... and of the promise he spoke to me earlier about his after-dinner plans.

“And I’m sorry that I shut down the way that I did. I can’t help it, Indigo. Being around that man, it... takes my humanity from me... and sometimes it takes a while for it to come back.”

“That’s the part that scares me,” I reply. “Sometimes it takes a long time, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. It can take days. And then, from time to time, something breaks inside me and... it can take weeks.”

“Do you think... getting things out will help?”

“Yes. That’s why I’m starting therapy next week. That’s why we *both* are.”

“Sometimes,” I continue, realizing I may be pushing all of his buttons but deciding to do it anyway. “You seem... afraid of something... As if something’s going to happen that you can’t stop.”

His intense gaze floats slowly down my body and back up again.

“I’m afraid that... it would be easier to give in, to forget, to not feel, to become what my father wants me to become. To become like *him*.”

I feel myself tremble at the very thought. “Could you?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I don’t believe so. I’ve always fought it, Indigo. Ever since I was a boy. I’m going to keep fighting it, but... some days, I lose myself. Not for long, but it happens. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted nothing to do with that.”

He takes a step towards me, his chest rising and falling fast, the muscles of his bare frame contracting.

“Can you accept me like this? Not always feeling human?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I respond, “there are things that have happened to me which make me feel less than human as well. Which make me hide. So, I understand. In fact, knowing you feel this way is part of why I feel safe with you.”

Darkness creeps into the troughs under his eyes. “What things have happened?”

I swallow down the answer, not wanting to taint the air between us with talk of things I never want to speak of again.

“Maybe there’ll be a day when we both tell each other our secrets,” I respond.

“Indigo, the thought of people hurting you, do you know what it does to me? Do you know that I could commit murder to avenge you?”

“I don’t need that,” I respond. “I just need... to be safe with you.”

His eyes glisten as if sheathed in dew. “You know I’m not the perfect man for that. I can save you from others, but I don’t know if I can always save you from myself.”

“Then, in those moments, I’ll save myself.”

He nods, his incandescent gaze prowling over my face, devouring my lips.

I remain unmoving as he steps towards me, slowly striding around me until he’s at my back, his breath hot on my exposed nape above my messy bun.

He leans into me, his mouth gently brushing the side of my face from behind, causing my heartrate to careen, and the percussion of my blood to thud in my ears like a drum.

As he sweeps his lips across my skin, inhaling deeply as if to breathe me in, I hold back the moan I want to let out as a hoarse groan rasps in his throat.

“Do you really think it was wise to walk into my room uninvited dressed like that, Indigo?” My nipples stiffen into hard points under the thin red terrycloth of my bathrobe.

I recognize the shifts in mood now—from the vulnerable man to the wolf who needs satiating. It’s the way he says my full name instead of just *Indie*, and the way his tone changes, from elegant into a merciful growl. It’s almost a different voice, belonging to an altogether different animal, one who makes my veins veritably throb with passing blood.

“You knew what would happen to you when you came into my room like that, didn’t you, little one?”

He leans over me, his fingers finding the top of my robe which he very slowly pulls apart until my breasts fall out of

the fabric to the prod of his thick erection against the top of my buttocks. His breathing grows ragged as he groans his arousal. “Very nice. Did you really think it was safe for you to walk that delicious little body of yours into my room unannounced?”

I close my eyes as his fingers weave down my chest, cupping and then kneading my breasts before pulling hard at the nipples, making me whimper beneath his touch.

“You remember my plans for you? The ones I told you about earlier.”

“Yes,” I reply, opening my eyes to peer down as he gently undoes the belt of my bathrobe, opening it up wide so that the entire front of my entire body is exposed. My nipples, tapered into points, move as I pant, unable to stop the rapid breathing as he stares down at my body, bestial noises vibrating from him and into me.

He rolls my nipples between his fingers. “Do you like when I stalk you?”

I hate that word, but somehow when he says it, it relieves me. I stare at the painting opposite me as he groans into my ear, his erection pulsing greedily against my ass.

“When did you buy that painting?” I ask, observing the wildflowers filling a field flanked by trees, their vibrant colors visible despite the low light.

“The day after I heard Marilla call you that name,” he replies, causing me to pivot, panting as I stare up at him. He remains unmoving, watching my face as he caresses my breasts.

“The day you came to the pub?”

He nods. “I called my art dealer the next afternoon. She sent me some pictures and I picked this one.”

“We split up that morning,” I say.

“I know. But... I knew I would get you back. I knew it would take much more than that to untie a knot this strong.”

“That all sounds kind of creepy and stalkerish.”

“I know,” he replies, not an ounce of shame in his voice. “That’s not something I know how to control around you, Indigo. You trigger my need to stalk, to hunt, to watch you as you accommodate my intrusions, to ravage you.” His hand glides over my chest and wraps around my neck. “But do you like me stalking you? Watching you? Don’t you? You like my obsession with you, don’t you? I believe it makes you very wet... or am I wrong?”

As my own arousal seeps into the folds of my sex, I don’t answer.

He lifts his middle and index finger to my mouth. “Suck,” he orders. “Thoroughly.”

As his fingers slowly penetrate my mouth, I can’t help but welcome them, licking with my tongue for over a minute as his eyes narrow and his cock stands fully erect, leaving me desperate to taste it.

Slowly gliding his hand down my abdomen and onto my sex, Grey uses my own saliva to open up the silken folds, brushing his strong fingers upwards until he enters into contact with my clit. I shiver with arousal as his fingers move back and forth, stimulating the already engorged knot of nerves before locating the entrance to me, straining at the opening.

He pushes in with one finger, just half an inch. “Mmm... So nice and tight for me, Indigo. It’s my cock that will be opening you up.”

A note of pleasure escapes me before I can stop it. I can’t help it. The man does things to my pleasure centers that I didn’t know were possibly without inserting extra strong batteries. What’s more, I feel protected despite the momentary fear that his words and demeanor arouse. It’s such a new feeling that I can’t help but want to bask in its sun.

As he withdraws his hand and I lift my head, his sinful lips find my ear. “I need to make something clear. My cock is very, very hungry for you.” I whimper as he rubs the dense column up and down the side of my ass. “So much so that you sleeping in my bad is going to be... challenging... unless it’s satisfied. So, I’m giving you a minute to leave. You won’t

need to explain or worry about the consequences. There won't be any. But if you stay, it's my intention to fuck you very severely, starting with your throat—" I inhale so fast that my gasp cuts through his words. "I intend to teach you how to use my dick to soothe yourself. To turn it into your own personal pacifier."

Holy fuck...

"I also ache to choke you tonight," he whispers. "I want to watch you gasp for air and beg me to stop out of fear."

My pussy tingles, contracting in waves, at the deviant yet elegant way in which he's speaking such filthy words, but I can't help but wonder if his savage side, if the fact that he needs to take back this much control, is triggered by contact with his father. And whether that's a good thing...

"I want to deprive you of your senses, Indigo, so that you feel and taste only my cock." My eyes close as his lips caress the shell of my ear. "I want to bind your hands and feet so you can't move. So that you have no choice but to take all of me."

His hot breath lashes the side of my face. "I'm going to push those soft limits you told me about. And push... And push... until I get the pleasure and compliance I need from your eager little body."

"Greyson," I breathe, knowing he likes me using his full name when he's in Dom mode.

"There are days when we'll make love. And there are other days when my desire for you renders me uncivilized. And those days, I require you to submit to me. Those nights, I want you to be my compliant little whore."

Fuck...

"Tonight is one of those nights, Indigo. And because I require a lot from you, I'm going to give you a minute to leave my room. No consequences."

He shifts his weight, standing straight up so that I can see his face as I peer over my right shoulder. He stares down at me, unmoving but for the tensing of his muscles as I contemplate defying my wickedly aroused body and walking

out. Only I want him like this. Raw, wild and uncivilized. I want to experience the pleasure of submission again, even if it's at the hands of the beast that sometimes comes out to play.

"If I stay, I can still use the safe word if I need to?" I ask.

"*Always*," he replies swiftly. "You have the power, Indigo. I can only do what you allow me to do."

"Even if I'm tied up?"

"Especially if you're tied up. That's when you'll need it the most. You have twenty seconds left."

I feel every single one of them beat in my chest as he stares down at me, some dark statue backlit by the pregnant ink-wrapped moon behind him.

"I'm not leaving," I respond.

His eyes flare before I lose contact with his skin, turning to see him walking towards the door. He locks it using a deadbolt near the top, the scrape of metal making me jump.

I know the lock is just for effect, but damn, this man knows how to make a woman feel vulnerable.

A few moments later, I watch him head to a black dresser on the back wall, open the top drawer and bring something out.

I turn back around, unable to control my breathing, flinching as his fingers begin to brush my neck upwards as if lifting the tiny errant hairs that have resisted my bun.

I close my eyes for a second as I feel him wrap something around my neck. It's smooth, thick and firm and as he clasps it into place at the back, I know instantly that it's the black leather collar, the one he wants kept in his room for when I come into it.

My fingers reach for it, haltingly exploring the thick leather strap with the metal studs embossed in it.

My body is in a state of confusion—wildly aroused at the idea of wearing his collar. One he designed. One with my name inside it.

But at the same time, my mind short-circuits at the thought of wearing something that turns me into someone's property. Can I really do it?

My eyes open to find Greyson standing before me, studying my no-doubt flushing face in the darkness.

His eyes drop to my fingers as they pry themselves between the leather and my skin, as if not sure if I can keep the thing on. It's one thing wearing the daintier silver or gold chokers, but another to wear a thick leather collar with silver rings in it, one you most definitely could not get away with wearing in public.

"It won't be comfortable at first, Indigo. In life, we are equals, but in bed, you'll need to submit to me, and that will take some time for you to accept," he says, as if he has a hotline to my inner thoughts. "Once you feel safe with me, you'll drop to your knees and beg me to put it on you."

"I don't know if I like it. The collar."

His eyes taper up at the corners. "I don't expect you to like it yet. You're a very disobedient little brat. I'll enjoy you fighting it because I know, with time, you'll reach for it when it's not on you. You'll miss feeling like my property."

I swallow nervously, my arousal currently being the only thing stopping me from ripping it off. "I might take it off," I say.

"You can always take it off," he says gently, "or ask me to take it off if your hands are... unable to assist you."

Relief lightens my body as he says it, mixing with pleasure at the thought of him restraining my hands, a fact that makes no sense to any part of me.

As I decide that I want him to reset my body, to allow me to enjoy submission again, to give me the pleasure I've felt lacking in sex for so long, my hand drops to my side and I peer up at him, letting him know I'll wear it... for now.

His gaze hungrily stalks the curves of my body. "Are you ready?"

“Yes.”

“Good. From this point on, I’m not Greyson to you. You will address me as *Sir*. I’ll be in charge of what happens to you tonight. I’ll be in charge of what you wear, what you see, what you hear, what you taste. What goes inside you. And how. Is that understood?”

I swallow, unable to nod.

“Is that understood?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Yes *what*, Indigo?”

I remain mute, unable to say it. I want to say *Yes, Sir*, but I guess I’ll need more *training* before I say those words.

At my refusal to answer, his eyes narrow, but there’s a glimmer of something light in them—amusement, maybe? Or does he just enjoy the challenge?

I raise my chin, glaring back at him and his lips widen into a sinful smile.

“Now, take off your robe, take out the belt and hand it to me. Then put the rest on the floor at your feet. It will protect your knees. You’ll be on them for a while.”

My mouth floods as he gives the instruction and I imagine getting to suck on his cock for the first time, cleansing myself of the feel of anyone else’s.

I glance down at my naked body peeking out from the sides of the red robe before drawing the belt out of the straps. I hand it to him, my fingers skimming his sturdy hands as I do.

I ease the robe off my shoulders as his eyes roam up and down my naked body. Folding it up, I place it on the floor before standing back up to look at him.

“Good girl.”

That’s not fair, I moan internally, weakened by my awareness of the effect those words have on me.

“Turn around and put your hands behind your back. I’m going to restrain your arms. Do you understand what that means?”

I nod before waiting for a moment, then slowly turn around, placing my hands behind me. I expect him to wrap the soft belt around my wrists, but instead, he slides it all the way up the underside of my arms, past my elbows, making me whimper as he begins to coil the fabric around my arms, taking his time, winding the belt between them at times and around them at others, until he reaches the bottom, tying them tightly around my wrists.

I glance down at my body, my breasts pushed out due to my arms being pulled back. It doesn’t hurt but I haven’t had anyone restrain me since... that day, when I couldn’t move. I need to breathe through the feeling, to recalibrate the experience with this man so vibrant.

Without instruction, I turn back around and look up to find him studying my state, unable to stop myself from glancing at his fully erect cock.

“Very nice, Indigo,” he groans. “Is it uncomfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Good. It’s supposed to be. Do you know that it pleases me that you can take a little discomfort for me?”

“Yes.”

His eyes narrow as I refuse to add the requested *Sir* to the word.

“Now drop to your knees for me like a good little girl. I’ll make sure you don’t fall.”

I glance down at the robe below me, using my thigh muscles to gently lower myself. His hand reaches for my shoulder to stop me tipping forwards as I make it down, nestling my knees into the soft fabric of my robe. His fingers curl under my chin, using it to angle my body straight, then lifting it so that I have to peer up at him.

His breathing is hoarse. “You have no idea how appetizing you look like that.”

My lips part as he appraises me in my vulnerable state.

“Wider. Open your mouth nice and wide for me. You’re going to take me like a brave girl.”

I do, opening it further upon instruction.

“Now present me your little tongue. I want to see what’s going to be licking my cock.”

As I hold my tongue out for him, blushing profusely, my eyes wander to his cock, already fully engorged with thick veins that look like they could frankly pop. The head is pointing straight at my mouth, making me resist the urge to dip my head forwards and taste it.

I suppose that would be rather naughty of me... and no doubt met with some deviant punishment.

“Beautiful,” he rasps, releasing my chin as he inspects my offering. “Do you wish to suck, Indigo?”

“Yes,” I reply way too eagerly, acutely aware of the longing in my voice.

“Then ask me for the right to. And address me properly.”

God, I’ve never done the begging thing before. I don’t even know how to say words like this to a man, but... I suddenly want to. Plus, I know full well there’s no way he’ll slide his cock into my mouth unless I ask politely.

He contemplates me as I ready myself to plead for something most men can’t give away fast enough.

“Please... may I... suck... your cock... Sir?”

His chest moves as if exhaling in relief as he takes a step towards me, wrapping his fingers around his now fully erect shaft and angling it down in the direction of my mouth.

“You may,” he replies. “You may lick and suck the head. No more.”

“Hey, no fair. I’ve already done that.”

“Let’s call this foreplay. If you suck respectfully, you’ll get to tend to the rest of me. Is that clear?”

“You’re mean.”

“Is it clear?” he growls.

“Yes.”

“Yes, *what*, Indigo?”

Oh God, he’s gonna make me say it again.

“Yes... Sir.”

“Good. Now, don’t take your eyes off mine unless I instruct you to do so. Is that clear? Not for one second.”

I inhale in preparation, wetting my lips as he takes a final step forwards, placing the head of his cock onto my bottom lip, sliding it very slowly left and right, his gaze utterly bestial. Keeping my eyes fixed onto his, I allow my tongue to emerge, relief undulating through my body as the muscle touches his cock once again.

Fuck, he feels so good...

I lick once, tasting the pre-cum leaking from him, desperate to taste more, to have him shoot his load down my throat, to satisfy him by swallowing.

Relax, Indie...

Aching for more of him, I slowly wrap my lips around the smooth head, staring up at him as reverentially as I can while I suck, easing my slippery lips back and forth, yearning to go deeper down his shaft. As I inch my head forwards, wanting to taste more, he takes hold of my bun with one hand, pulling my head back.

“Tsk, tsk. Not yet, Indigo.”

He shakes his head sternly like a teacher disciplining his naughty student, slowly easing his grip on my hair so that I can go back to sucking on just the dome, which I do, closing my eyes to taste him properly. The head is fully engorged, filling half of my mouth, just begging me to milk it.

“Eyes open, Indigo,” he instructs, and as I comply, he lets out a low groan of pleasure that makes me wish my hands were untied so that I could play with my clit.

As my tongue takes a long leisurely lick up the underside of his tip, he asks, “Do you like it?”

I nod, sliding my famished tongue in a circle around the head.

“Then, what do you say, Indigo?” he asks as he pulls his cock out of my mouth with his hand, tapping it against my lips and then my cheek.

“I want more.”

He smiles darkly. “What else?”

“Thank you?” I suggest, unsure what he wants.

“Thank you, what?”

“Thank you... Sir?”

His hands fist at his sides as he glowers down at me. “What else do you say to me? And make it detailed.”

“Please can I... suck the rest of your cock?”

“Very good.”

Very good? Why do I sometimes feel as if I'm at sex school with this man, and I'm on lesson one?

He disappears from view, heading behind me, the scrape of wood alerting me to him pulling out a drawer. A moment later, I feel his hand on my ankle, turning my head a little but unable to see for the binds around my arms stop me from pivoting my pelvis enough.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I feel a cuff of some sort envelop one ankle and then another. I hear the clunk of metal, a chain maybe and feel him tying something. And as I try to move, I realize that the belt tied around my arms now has a chain looped through it which is connected to the cuffs around my ankles.

I whimper as he pulls my hair back, twisting my head to the side a little and whispering into my ear. “Nothing I’m using on you has ever been used on anyone else. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” I breathe in relief as he leans over me from behind and gently eases my knees wide apart.

As I try to move, I can’t, the chain rendering my body useless.

His breath of arousal blasts hotly against the nape of my neck. From the side, I see him stand up and move around me to face me.

His cock is thick with blood and pointing at the ceiling. It’s apparent that tying me up like this is wickedly arousing to him.

“Can you move?”

I shake my head.

“Good. That’s what I want, Indigo. I want that little hole of yours fully open and available for me to use whenever I want. Can you understand the pleasure that gives me?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tolerate it?”

Tolerate it? As outraged as my current state leaves me, I think I could have an orgasm just thinking about it...

“Yes... *Sir.*”

“My good girl. You know what it does to me when you say those words to me?”

I nod.

“Good.”

Good...

How can that one little word sound so sinful when it emerges from Greyson’s lips?

“I intend to take away your sight,” he continues, “and your hearing, so that you feel and taste nothing but me. So that you

become my compliant little doll. Will you allow me to do that?”

As I consider the question, it hits me that I’m not finding myself encased in the sensation I was so afraid of—claustrophobia, or malaise, or feeling like my skin could crawl, or that I’m making some concession I don’t want to.

My body feels light, fueled by arousal.

“Yes... Sir.”

Amusement seems to warm his eyes at my clumsy attempts at addressing him correctly before he disappears behind me, and a few moments later, I shudder as the already dark room is plunged into blackness. Some fabric is wrapped around my eyes, taking my sight, following by another piece, which he ties at the base of my neck, muffling away almost all sound.

I can’t help the shallow breaths I’m taking as I get used to the sensory deprivation, unable to see or hear where he is.

The unexpected brush of my arms behind my back by something soft—multiple chords of leather, I think, based on the way it molds to the contours of my body—has me inhaling stiffly, absorbing the teasing lash up my arms, over my shoulder and then around my front, over my waist, my breasts, up my neck, under my chin.

I flinch at the sound of something dropping to the floor nearby. I know he’s standing in front of me, watching me in the dark, causing goosebumps to prickle up my skin.

Some moments later, his fingers lift my chin way up before prying open my mouth. As I kneel, sitting on my ankles, my knees wide apart, my juicy pussy exposed and my mouth now open, I know what’s coming next.

I just hope that in the sensory-deprived state I’m in I can do it justice...

A soft moan escapes me as I feel his cock penetrate my mouth, ramming all the way in to stab my throat in one fell swoop before withdrawing. I whimper as the head makes it back over my lips, very slowly sliding deep inside. I can’t

move my body much accept to shift myself up a little, but I do my very best to stimulate his dick with my tongue, reveling as I get to feel his greedy shaft filling up my small mouth for the first time.

He exhales roughly as he pushes his dick inside gently, and then less gently, invading so deeply that I have to relax my throat muscles to accommodate the repeated thrusts.

This man looks so civilized to the outer world, but in reality, he's a beast... and a filthy one at that.

He lifts the fabric covering one of my ears.

“Your mouth is most accommodating, Indigo,” he snarls, snaking the dome of his dick across my lips, tapping them roughly like the kinky bastard that he is. “It's been worth the hell of the wait.”

“I want more,” I implore.

“Do you deserve it?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... This time you're going to suck very slowly, Indigo. I want you to learn to soothe yourself with my cock. Until any anxiety is gone. And you feel nothing but pleasure. Nothing but me. Is that understood? This is how I want you to learn to relax.”

I nod and he replaces the fabric around my ears. His dense cock breaches the threshold of my mouth once again, invading deep into my throat and staying there as I try to keep my throat muscles open for him. I focus on the feel of him in my mouth—how hard it is, how smooth, how clean he tastes, how desperate I am to taste his cum, to swallow it and then show him my clean tongue.

Pleasure undulates through my core in warm streams and I can't help but be aware of stress leaving me as I suck rhythmically, my pussy throbbing, my head bobbing as I take him in deep before taking leisurely licks up the underside of him.

“You taste so good,” I whisper.

“Don’t stop, little one.”

Sometimes he remains deep inside my throat for a few seconds, making me think he’s going to ejaculate down it. At others, he swipes his cock, left and right over my tongue as I feel only him, taste only him. At moments which jar me, the unwanted memory of someone else crawls into my mind, but when that happens, I picture Grey’s face, imagine him watching his cock slide into and out of my mouth over and over... and the cloying murk of that memory vanishes.

At one point, he taps his cock against my lips, and then my cheek, sliding the head all over my mouth before pushing in again. Despite the fabric covering my ear, I hear a deep but faint groan, its sound so diabolically sinful, making me moan in pleasure as his thrusts get faster and faster until I gag, feeling saliva drip onto my breasts.

He takes hold of the bun at the back of my head and uses it to begin to fuck my mouth in earnest, the drives into me rabid, poking at my throat until I gag.

My mouth, now a sloppy mess, becomes the vehicle for his amusement, this dripping wet hole that he explores—my lips, the inner seam, moving his cock left to right, up and down, before pushing way in, making me gag over and over.

The underside slides slowly down my tongue as pleasure seizes my cells and he begins to fuck my mouth more gently, allowing me to feel him properly, every inch of him filling me up... until he stops.

He removes the fabric from over my ears, and begins to slip his fingers over my chin, positively soaked in saliva.

“You suck like an angel, Indigo.”

His words make pleasure surge through my body. I hold back the urge to beg for more, already missing the feel of him in my mouth, desperate to be able to swallow his cum.

“I need to fuck you,” he groans, his jaw tensing audibly. “Will you allow that?”

“Yes,” I reply embarrassingly fast, aroused by the way he asks me, as if afraid that if he doesn’t, he’ll lose control and

turn into some rabid monster.

I feel his hands reach under my armpits, sliding down the sides of my body. A heartbeat later, I'm lifted into the air, my breasts pressing against his chest and my legs bent wide. His arms shift so that they're holding up the underside of my bent legs, carrying my full weight.

My knees are wide apart, but my ankles close together at the back, able to move by only the width of the chain.

He tips my weight forwards so that I'm leaning onto his chest and can't fall backwards, my hands tied behind me, as he maneuvers my bound body so that the entrance to my pussy begins to press down onto his thick erection.

"Oh my God," I whisper as he slides me all the way down onto him, pushing the tight wet walls of my sex apart until the head of his cock pinches my cervix.

I can't see, but my lips slip against his strong neck as his growl of pleasure vibrates through my body.

I feel him walking us a few steps to the right, in the direction of the window, I think. In my unseeing state, it's impossible to tell for sure, but I think I can see moonlight seeping into the tiny gap at the bottom of my blindfold.

I gasp as he begins to lift and lower me onto his cock, indeed turning me into a doll he can use at will, for I can't move my limbs, nor do I want to.

How can I trust a man who says he's hiding a monster so much?

"Indigo," he whispers as he fucks the tight hole available to him at his leisure. "You have no idea what you do to me. Allowing me to fuck you when you're vulnerable like this... You can't imagine the pleasure that compliant little pussy of yours is giving me... or how powerful I feel when I'm with you."

I moan, clamping my teeth around the ridge between his neck and shoulder, licking the flesh before sucking as he bends his knees, thrusting upwards into my dripping pussy.

At the sound of a howl from some creature in the woods nearby, Grey lets out a long deep groan of pleasure, cursing as he drives into me faster. *"Fuuccckk."*

I whimper loudly as his cock stretches me out, my pussy tender from the invasion.

"I'm here, little girl," he whispers into my ear. "You're safe. Just breathe through it. Melt into the pleasure."

I remain silent, my cells alight with pleasure tinged by the pain of his huge cock using my insides to bring him to ecstasy. I tip my head onto his shoulder, listening to his bestial groans, reveling in the vibration of them in my body.

"Does it hurt?" he asks.

"A little."

"Can you take it for me?"

"Yes," I reply. "Don't stop."

"That's right. Such an obedient little girl."

I dissolve into his tall rock-hard body as he carries us a few more steps, pressing my back into what I believe is the wall beneath the window, using it and his bent leg to prop up my weight.

"I want to squeeze your throat, Indigo. And bite, just a little. I remember the hard limit—no passing out, no breaking of skin." I recall the day we went through the list together, realizing he memorized everything I said. "Can you allow it? The collar will protect you."

"Can you take the blindfold off? I don't want it to happen in the dark."

The thing is torn off me quickly and thrown to the ground as his stunning glistening face comes into focus, the moon behind me turning his eyes into polished spheres of silver.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yes."

Using one hand to keep me suspended in the air, he raises the other to my throat, winding his fingers around my neck and beginning to squeeze as he slowly impales me. The collar does in fact protect my neck, but I still feel my airway closing off, my eyes widening, my face tensing as his eyes tunnel into me and the cadence of his thrusts increases.

He releases my neck, allowing me to gasp for air which he studies breathlessly, his arousal unmistakable as he slides so deeply into me that it pinches.

He contracts his fingers around my throat once again, only this time, it feels different—firmer, leaving me without air, taking me back to a day almost a year ago when I thought I might not make it out alive.

As he dips his head and his teeth begin to bite into the skin near my shoulder, the unexpected memory seizes me and panic sends my body into a frenzy.

I shake my head as his teeth sink into my flesh with a growl, feeling stupid tears stream down my face.

As a breath of panic flees from my throat, he stops instantly despite me not using the safe word, standing back up straight, his brow furrowed as his eyes come to zoom in on me. Our heartbeats rage against each other as my slippery breasts slide against his hard chest.

I hate these moments of panic.

I just need them to go away for good.

Just as I'm about to tell him to keep going, he presses me firmly into the wall, using his bent leg to hold me up. He reaches behind my neck, unclasping the collar and throwing it to the floor before fumbling at the belt tying my arms together, pulling the knot looser and looser until my arm is finally free.

I gently ease it back in front of me, gripping onto his shoulder as he unclips my ankles from each other with one hand, allowing my legs to fall either side of him. He raises me, shifting his weight so that he's holding the underside of my ass.

“Do you want to stop?” he asks.

“No,” I reply swiftly. “Don’t stop. Please.”

He nods, tipping his forehead to mine, staring down at me as he fucks me, softer this time, his eyes not leaving my face until he drops his lips to mine. His tongue leaves his mouth and he licks the seam of my lips, groaning as I grip his shoulders tightly, breathing through the invasion into my sore pussy.

“Enough?” he asks.

I nod, wincing as he begins to thrusts more quickly, his eyes lifting to stare up at something out of the window behind me before peering back down at me, grimacing as he lets out wave after wave of rough growl, the sound desperate, his body seized by pleasure.

Finally, he exclaims loudly, pumping my insides full of his cum as he uses his hands to bounce me up and down his dick.

As he catches his breath, he whispers my name, almost as if not meaning to, grazing my jaw with his lips as he lifts me under the arms, and his cum slides out of me, dripping onto the hardwood between us.

We stay there for a while, unmoving, his head tipped to my shoulder, his arms wrapped around me, my hands holding onto him so tightly that it scares me... until he finally carries me away.

Indigo

My eyes flutter as I find myself awakening, increasingly conscious that I'm lying in Grey's warm bed.

The memory of us lying next to each other after we fucked, his sinful eyes refusing to leave my face as he listened to me ramble away, as we eventually watched each other's bodies grow listless, cradles me for a moment, and I shift, my arms stretching out along the mattress, feeling for the hard muscle of his body.

Only I feel nothing, opening my eyes to find myself alone in his bed. I stretch before sitting up, listening out for noise from the en-suite bathroom twenty feet away.

Its door is half ajar but the light is off and for some reason, the silence sends a chill down my spine.

I sit up, glancing through the gaps in the curtains that he closed before we went to sleep.

Deciding to save my shower until after I've had a cup of tea, I get to my feet, noticing that his room—all dark colors, lean angles and masculine accents—is now perfectly tidy. The robe that had been dropped onto the floor is gone, the belt he used to tie my hands and the collar and chains along with it.

Well, he certainly is tidy, I mutter to myself.

There never seems to be a hair out of place around here.

I wander around the room a little, realizing that it's remarkably barren for a bedroom. I mean, he has his oil paintings and beautiful bespoke pieces of sturdy-looking furniture, but there are no bits of paper lying around, no pills, no lotions, cards, combs, nothing. It's as if everything is placed inside drawers or in cupboards. It makes my place look like a bomb has gone off inside a thrift store. Or five bombs, more like.

It's as if a ghost lives here.

Or no one...

That eerie chill seeps up my spine again, causing my skin to prickle.

"Grey?"

Silence.

I head to the door, opening it and peering down the empty unlit hallway.

My guest room with all my clothes in it is at the other end of this top level and as I spy its half-closed door, I decide to make my way over, naked.

He told me that Stanley is on strict instructions not to come in if we're in the house unless getting permission first.

And hey, if Grey catches me like this, that wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, would it?

As my feet take me over, I can't help but glance through the open doorways along the way—empty bedrooms and studies, I think. I'm tempted to wander inside, just as I was tempted to open the drawers next to Grey's bed, my longing to alleviate my fear that he's hiding secrets tugging at me.

But I can't do that. I'd positively hate it if he did that to me...

At the top of the stairs, I call out his name, listening out only to be met with silence. I let out an anxious sigh and head to the guestroom where I grab some dark leggings and pull them on as well as a bra, T-shirt and an oversized beige

woolen sweater—all clothes that Grey had delivered here for me.

It's strange to wear clothes someone else has picked out for you. I hated the way Micah would micromanage my outfits, usually giving in by the end in order to not have him give me shit all night long.

But when I put on the clothes Grey had brought for me, I feel... comforted.

I really don't know if that's a good thing or not.

I glance at my phone to see some missed calls—Fran, Marilla, a couple of yoga buddies, and then some others.

Six missed calls this morning. The number private.

Anxiety makes my pulse skyrocket as I listen to the messages on my phone, breathing out in relief to find just two, one from Marilla and another from a friend.

I'm still paranoid about all those weird calls I got when I left Micah—the silent calls, the anonymous ones, on top of all the ones he made from his own number.

Even after he got locked up, the horrible messages and weird calls kept going on, whether I changed my number or not. I have no idea how he found it again. At one point, I couldn't shake the thought that someone close to me must have given it to him... but who?

I trust Marilla, Orpha and Harry with my life, as I do Fran and Rami, and most of my friends.

I gave Kohl the new numbers but he hated Micah as much as I did, even though he only knew half the story of what happened with him.

And then my mother... On one of her better days, she's an empathy-devoid goblin creature with all the maternal instincts of a food processor, but she'd never do something as insane as giving my ex my number... Would she?

I mean, she did like him, for reasons I never fully got, and if I told her we had problems, she'd invariably blame me. Mind you, she's always done that, as if trying to train me to

tolerate the worse possible conduct in others, including herself...

I head to my message inbox to see a message from her, kicking myself for once again not having the guts to block her for good, in no small part because she starts harassing all my friends if I do.

You don't deserve decent parents.

Ungrateful whore.

You can burn in hell for all I care.

Just the usual, then, Mother.

As I archive the chat once more, pretending it doesn't make me want to burst into tears, another message comes through, making me jump.

Kohl again.

Hey Indie. Just wanted to say hi. Hope you're good.

He's nicer now than he was when we were together, though him being the first man I was with since the trauma of Micah didn't exactly help our relationship.

I decide to respond.

Thanks. Hope you are too.

I don't want to encourage the guy but he's been pretty low-key and respectful of my decision—well, once he'd gotten over the shock that is. The least I can do is keep things cordial. I don't want another unhinged ex on my tail.

Locking my phone, I head downstairs, calling out for Grey.

I check the living room, the library, the study, the kitchen—nothing.

Not even a note.

And in the kitchen, no sign that anyone was even up.

I fill the electric kettle with filtered water from the tap and set it on its dock, picking out a tea from the box and putting some leaves into the tea strainer which I place into a white cup I grab from the cupboard.

As I bathe in the ethereal shimmers of the morning sunlight stroking the garden, I decide to get some fresh air while I wait for him to get back from wherever the hell he is.

I head to the mudroom behind the kitchen and put on the new boots he bought me for the garden. I don't bother with a scarf or coat for the sun is bright and my T-shirt and fluffy sweater will suffice. And anyway, I like the feel of brisk air on my body.

I wander through the garden, inhaling the fresh air, very naughtily imagining the frankly barren place full of herbs and vegetables and hummingbirds.

I glance at the gap in the hedge at the back, looking out onto that untended field of wildflowers and weeds encased by woods, but decide instead to head over to the little opening in a large hedge to the right, closing off the barn behind it from the rest of the garden.

As I make it through, my gaze climbs up to see the wood weathered, the barn, where they once kept horses, clearly in need of repair.

As I make my way over there to check out the inside, my eye is caught by a large rectangular stone nestled in the grass twenty feet or so away between the left-hand side of the barn and the right-hand side of the tall hedge closing off the garden.

I walk past it, checking out the rotting wood of the huge barn door only to stop in my tracks, my heart skipping a beat.

Not knowing why, I turn towards that stone slab, my boots flattening the overgrown grass around it.

As I make it to within feet of it, I see flowers—a bunch of flowers, wild, no string to bind them, no order to their placement. They look fresh, as if having been cut within an hour and are lying over the top of what I now see is a tombstone.

Here lies our beloved

Vivien Ellson

Mother, daughter, sister, friend

Taken too soon.

Forever loved.

Forever missed.

Forever in our hearts.

I inspect the birth and death dates.

She was thirty years old when she died, and it was over twenty years ago. Twenty-two to be exact.

Which would have made Grey seven years old.

The age he was when he was in that car crash.

When a woman died.

My body freezes, rigid and cold.

She doesn't have his surname. Maybe it was his maternal aunt.

As I peer down at the tomb, weathered by rain and sun, grass growing over the sides of it, neglected but for freshly cut flowers in blue, yellow and white, the likes of which are abundant in the field at the back, I take a step back, pivoting at the sight of a dark figure watching me.

"Shit," I pant, my hand slamming my chest as I see Greyson standing ten feet behind me, watching me, unmoving, unspeaking.

He always stalks me so quietly, as if an expert at it.

"Shit. I... I'm sorry," I stammer. "I... I wasn't trying to... invade your privacy. I just... I... I saw the flowers and..."

He walks towards me, staring down at my face before his eyes stray to the tomb.

At his fraught silence, I finally ask, "Is this...?" I drop my head. "Nevermind. Sorry."

"Yes it is." His solemn eyes wander to my face.

“The woman who... died... in the accident that scarred you?”

He nods slowly.

“She was your family member?”

“Yes.”

“Who... who was she?”

A glimpse of pain flashes across his face but he swallows it down, his eyes soft as he regards me, but his jaw tensing.

“Yesterday was... emotional,” he finally says. “How about we talk about her another time?”

I frown, both hating his need to keep secrets but fully understanding why he does, for I do the same. I wonder in this moment if there are things we both keep inside us that we’ll never get out ...

“Okay,” I say to his gentle smile.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks as he lifts me into his arms, carrying me back towards the house.

I protest mildly but he ignores me, as I’ve come to expect.

“I did. You?”

But as I ask it, I realize I remember something from last night, only... I’m not sure if I dreamed it, or if Greyson really did wake me in the night, snarling in his sleep from some heinous nightmare, which stopped the second I awoke.

Did that happen, or did I just dream it?

“Yes,” he responds, dropping me down onto the step outside the mudroom.

We enter, closing the door behind us. Grey’s boots are off fast as my clumsy fingers grapple with the laces of mine. He heads to the kitchen as I take one shoe off, and then another, tucking them into a cubby on the floor.

As I go to stand up, my gaze is drawn to another pair of boots in the corner, only for trepidation to surge into my body,

my heart racing as a tremor rolls through me at the sight of paint mottled on the rubber sides of these boots.

Grey's boots, I think.

The paint... black.

I lean into them, my eyes straining as I try to see if the paint is old only to be startled by the arrival of Grey in the doorway of the mudroom.

His eyes wander from my face to the boots I was looking at and back.

“Ready for something to eat?” he asks, eyes narrowing.

“Um... sure,” I reply, my voice choked.

I get to my feet, my legs weak as I leave the mudroom only for him to pick me up and carry me out of the kitchen.

“Hey... where are we going?” I ask.

But he remains silent.

“I, um, I think I might need to go home today,” I say as he leads me down the hallway.

“Not today, Indigo,” he whispers, his breath heavy on my ear which he scrapes with his lips. “You’ll be staying with me. My wolf needs you.”

AFTERWORD

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading Hunger.

It's my first novel since completing the Black Oak series, and I was very nervous to write it after having written something so dark and emotional previously.

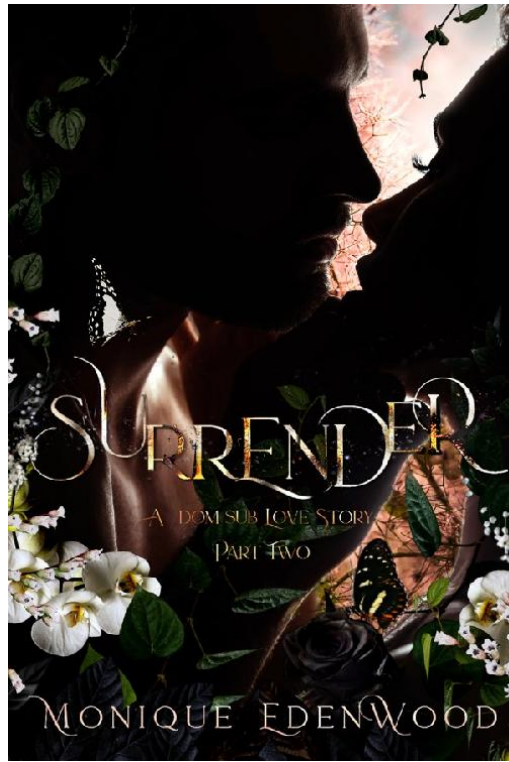
This time, I wanted to try something new and to write something a little lighter, a little funnier, but whose darkness and emotions build gradually in layers, leaving us dripping in uncertainty and hopefully with our hearts racing by the end.

I love both of these damaged characters very much and am excited to explore the twists and turns of the final part of their journey together which will come in April 2023.

Surrender is book 2 in the Hunger Duet and completes the story of the Wolf and the Wildflower.

It is available for pre-order now on Amazon and features a HEA for Indigo and Greyson.

[Surrender](#)



PLAYLIST

Please find below the playlist for Hunger.

Thank you to my amazing street team for helping me build this wonderful list of songs that evoke Grey and Indie.

Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIe8di78_sASHfB0OAyfidf5n_ZCRxEvi

Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6sz5jL3jacVDSQPiuAFmR6>

ALSO BY MONIQUE EDENWOOD

My first series is the Black Oak series, a completed six-novel dark romance saga available on Kindle Unlimited.

This saga follows the story of one woman and three very powerful, damaged and dangerous men, each desperate to claim her as their own.

The Black Oak series features:

-
- Jealous, possessive, dominant men
 - Bitter male rivalry over one woman
 - Dub-con
 - Graphic sex
-
- Secret societies
 - BDSM club
 - Biting
 - Bondage
 - Knife play
 - Blood play

Have you entered the Black Oak?

Book 1 is Enter The Black Oak.

[Enter The Black Oak](#)

WINNER OF THE 2021 INTERNATIONAL BOOK AWARDS in the category of Fiction-Romance.

One woman.

Two men.

Both powerful. Both breathtaking. Both damaged. Both dangerous.

Both desperate to claim her as their own.

Enter if you dare...

Falling for a man like Jackson Wilder was not something I had planned.

He was wild, experienced and savagely beautiful. He was also damaged and dangerous. Our love was a cosmic collision of lust and obsession that left me scorched by exquisite flames of desire and domination.

Jack possessed me. He educated me. Loving him was the greatest pleasure I'd ever known... up until the moment I discovered the dark secrets he had been hiding.

I could never have imagined that pulling myself out of the agony of betrayal would lead me to reconnect with a former friend, Cameron O'Neill, scion of one of Manhattan's wealthiest and most powerful dynasties, and sworn enemy of Jack.

Cameron's craving for me was acute. The relentless force of his devastating masculine beauty and his powerful, controlled virility was dizzying. Desire colored his fierce gaze. I knew it was wrong. Jack would never allow it. I had to do everything within my power to resist him, even when he pulled me down the rabbit hole where I uncovered dark truths about Manhattan's most secret society that led me to the brink of madness...

Enter The Black Oak is a thrilling romantic suspense set in Manhattan's high society which will take you on a dangerous journey through lust, desire, betrayal and obsession that will leave you breathless by the end and desperate for more. It won the International Book Award for 2021 in the category of Fiction-Romance.

For mature readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monique Edenwood is a British-Canadian author based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Her love of the magical trees and forests that she grew up surrounded by helped to inspire her first novel, *Enter the Black Oak*.

When she isn't writing or reading, she loves hiking and cycling around beautiful Vancouver and is a lover of 80's music and epic fantasy fiction.

She is passionate about helping people take a well-deserved break from their daily lives for a short while with the help of some very memorable fictional boyfriends and loves exploring the intimacies and complexities of relationships.

For more information or to contact the author, please join Monique's amazing and very friendly Facebook group, Monique's Clique, at the link below:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/137019131387654>

For updates on the Black Oak Trilogy, feel free to visit Facebook.com/Entertheblackoak or follow her on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/monique_edenwood_author or on Tiktok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@moniqueedenwood> or on Pinterest: <https://www.pinterest.ca/blackoak16/>

Monique absolutely loves hearing from readers of the Black Oak series and tries her very best to respond to every comment she gets.