



Love &

*Betrayal*

*International Bestselling Author*

**J.A. OWENBY**

# LOVE & BETRAYAL

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## TRIGGER WARNING

**D**ear Readers,

As my author career has grown, I've dived into a darker world, book by book. By the time I was ready to write *Zayne*, the story showed up to me as very dark ... rape, murder, and adopted sibling abuse, to name a few. Read on if you're comfortable with stories similar to K Webster and Shantel Tessier. Although *Zayne's* book differs from those two authors, the content is highly triggering. *Zayne* isn't an asshole antihero, but he crosses lines for the woman he loves, and I cheered him on!

I also wanted to write *Giselle's* story. Torture, tears, and abuse happen every day in our twisted and dark world, and it's hidden by the shadows of evil, sick people who pretend they're loving and kind.

I'm a survivor myself. I've recreated my world to be an amazing and loving place. There's always hope of escape and healing. *Giselle* and *Zayne's* story is just one example.

With that said, please review the trigger warnings.

*Love & Betrayal* is recommended for readers who are comfortable with **triggers, including but not limited to rape, adopted sibling abuse, emotional abuse, and attempted**

**suicide.** Due to dark, mature content, graphic and violent scenes, and sensitive topics, please consider this your trigger warning.

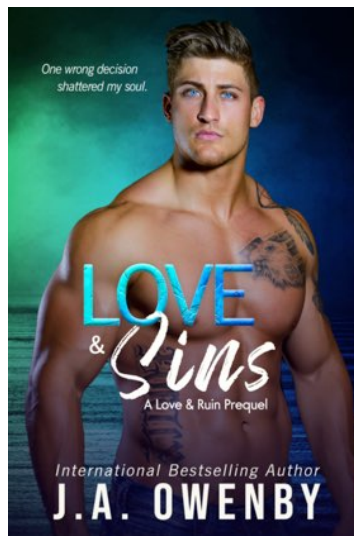
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# PROLOGUE

## Giselle

**T**he wall clock ticked loudly, marking each second that passed by as I closed my eyes and counted with the sound, hoping it would all be over soon.

The curtain of perfection I'd carefully constructed and presented to the world was tearing, and there wasn't a thread strong enough to stitch it back together and fix my brokenness. Not after ...

No one knew the dark secrets I hid. The ones ripping me to shreds from the inside out. As hard as I'd tried to escape, the monsters hunted me down, clawing at my soul.

I lay still on the mattress in the guest bedroom of the home I shared with my husband, Ander, wiggling my numbing fingers while I listened to the soothing classical music from the string quartet downstairs. Staring at the stark white ceiling as my vision blurred in and out, I swallowed hard as I prayed to a God I no longer believed in. My hand wrapped around the half-empty fifth of vodka as a single sleeping pill wobbled on the nightstand. The rest of the medication had traveled down my throat and into my stomach an hour ago.

A tear streamed down my cheek as I closed my eyes, releasing all the pain, frustration, and fear that had chained me to this world. Once I'd finally made the decision to end my life, in that split second, I'd had peace for the first time in years.

My ears perked up at the sound of my phone ringing. I suspected it was my husband since I was supposed to meet him for our anniversary party downstairs instead of lying here dying.

My stomach churned as Ander's words from earlier ricocheted in my mind. *You're a no-good little bitch.* Maybe I was. But what I needed to do had become crystal clear. There was no other escape—this was my only option. Soon, I would be free forever.

I softly chuckled as the childhood memory of my mother kneading dough flashed through my groggy brain. Flour dotted her nose and sharp cheekbones, giving her a gentle appearance. The aroma of sweet baked goods invaded my senses as if it were still that day.

*"Giselle, wedding rings are the world's smallest handcuffs."* Her face turned grim as she continued telling me about all the tragedies of marriage and how a woman was subjected to the will of the man in his role as the head of the household. It didn't matter if those handcuffs are diamond encrusted.

A dull ache spread through me at the memory. At the time, I'd been young enough to think her words were a joke. But not anymore. The only key I could find to release me from Ander's chains was at the bottom of a pill container and a fifth of Absolut.

The glass bottle slipped from my fingers, and I blinked as it shattered against the hardwood floor. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply as the fatal combination of pills and vodka infiltrated every cell of my being, then began counting backward from one hundred. Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven ... and with every number, the darkness of death began to tease me with its presence.

Suddenly, my body revolted. Rolling to the edge of the bed, I searched for the trashcan to empty the contents of my stomach. I blinked rapidly, willing the drugs to stay in my system, to take effect faster.

The room tilted on its side, and I gasped for air. I grabbed the nightstand and stood on wobbly legs, needing to be anywhere else other than here. Unable to think clearly, I staggered into the hall. *People. Oh, God. They are everywhere.*

Keeping my eyes trained on the bathroom door, I attempted to make my way through the groups of people laughing and drinking politely while they waited to use the restroom. If they only knew there was nothing in this house to be happy about.

“Excuse me,” I slurred, somehow managing to tap a lady on the shoulder after the second try. “I need the restroom.” I stumbled, nearly face-planting. Fortunately, a gentlemen caught my fall and helped me locate my balance again.

“Oh, hon, are you all right? You don’t look well at all,” he said. Turning to the small crowd, he asked, “Can we please let this lady use the facilities first?”

People parted, allowing me to approach. My palm smacked the doorframe, the sting zipping up my arm as I hurried inside. Somehow, I managed to have the sense to lock it behind me. A cold sweat beaded my forehead as I collapsed

to the marble floor. I sucked in a shaky breath and crawled my way to the toilet. With a trembling hand, I flipped up the seat and leaned against the wall. I wiped my forehead with my palm and willed myself not to vomit.

“Please. Please let me die,” I whispered.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed. Maybe seconds. Maybe minutes. The pounding in my head had calmed, and I no longer felt nauseous. I grabbed the toilet and pulled myself off the floor. Ander would not be happy if I appeared in a wrinkled dress that he'd spent ten grand on. My brow furrowed. Fuck Ander. He was the reason I was starring in this horror movie in the first place.

I leaned on the counter and stood in front of the mirror. My hazel eyes were usually light and flecked with gold, but now they were also empty, haunted, and I no longer recognized the woman who stared back at me. I'd said goodbye to her when I was just an innocent kid, and a stranger took her place.

Swaying, I attempted to smooth my long black hair before I joined the party. Losing my balance, I gripped the counter and steadied myself as my vision blurred and the *thump thump* of my heartbeat in my ears. Ander would be pissed if I wasn't by his side soon. I was mad, too, but not because I was late for the celebration. I was furious and terrified that my suicide attempt had failed. Next time ...

Before I lost my nerve, I flung the door open, and my brows shot up. My hand flew to my chest as my attention landed on the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen. It wasn't just the rare color. It was the story they hid in their depths. The man with dark blonde hair and piercing green eyes commanded power and exuded a strong gentleness all at the

same time. Before I could say a word, my world turned black,  
and peace cloaked me as I tumbled to the floor.

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## One Year Later ~ Zayne

Vaughn Reddington, a co-worker and one of my best friends, plopped into the brown leather recliner in our boss's living room. He offered me a lopsided grin as he trained his eyes—one blue and one brown—on me. “What’s up, motherfucker?”

I rubbed my chin, giving him a pointed look from the couch as he grabbed the remote control off the coffee table and turned on the television.

“Sutton and Pierce don’t have any work for you to do around here?” Vaughn stifled a yawn.

I grinned at him. Pierce and Sutton were our longtime friends, and they also owned and ran Westbrook Security, where we all worked.

Although Pierce and Sutton’s contemporary style home in Canada was smaller than their log house in Spokane, Washington, it still had its own elegant charm. The dark wood floors contrasted with the stone fireplace and beige walls, the kitchen was large enough to easily accommodate all of us when we visited, and the four bedrooms allowed everyone to stay here instead of renting a condo we would rarely inhabit. I

wasn't even sure how it had all fallen into place, but one day Pierce announced he'd found us a place to live. Since then, Vaughn, Claire, and I had lived with them when we were in Canada. Back in the States, Claire and Vaughn had their own house, but I packed and moved wherever there was a bed available. I hadn't put down roots again since high school ... since her.

“Just getting ready to go back home for my next assignment.” I stretched my long legs in front of me, then shifted my weight on the couch, searching for a more comfortable position. Although I loved visiting Pierce and Sutton's place, I was eager to return to Washington.

“Shit, I want Claire and me to stay here forever. It's peaceful, and I'm not constantly on high alert. In the States, where people know where we live ...” Vaughn stared at me, a hint of fear flickering in his intense gaze.

I looked at my longtime friend. “I know, man. Dillon Montgomery has a long reach.” Although Montgomery Senior was in prison for sex trafficking and the rape of minors, his son Brandon had made one hell of a fucked-up return into our lives when he'd had his little bitches crash Hendrix and Gemma's wedding. It had left scars on all of our hearts.

Vaughn rubbed his stubbled chin, then placed the remote on the arm of his chair. Even though I'd known him since high school, his heterochromia still occasionally caught me off-guard. His mismatched eyes weren't a common occurrence, so it was easy to forget until he looked at you. I absently wondered what eye color his and Claire's baby would end up with.

My phone chimed, and I leaned forward to fish it out of the back pocket of my jeans. I tried to suppress the smile that



pulled at the corner of my mouth when I saw my notification, but it was useless.

Vaughn snapped his fingers, then pointed at me. “Gotta be Brynn. No one else makes your lips do that funny thing.”

“It’s called a smile, asshole.” I returned to the message that lit up my screen. I’d met Brynn through my work at the company her friends owned, and I was eager to see her again.

*Can’t wait to see you when you return.*

I heard light footsteps enter the room. “Hey, guys.” Sutton strolled to the wingback chair, settled in, and rested her hand on top of her pregnant belly. “What are you two grinning about?” Her blue eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“Z-man has it bad for Brynn.” Vaughn tilted his head in my direction.

Before I addressed Vaughn and his overactive mouth, I texted Brynn.

*Same. Not sure when I’ll be free, but I’ll let you know.*

I glanced up from my cell and shot him a pointed *fuck you* look. “We’re friends,” I grumbled, staring at the screen like a teenager in love as I waited for Brynn to respond.

“Keep feeding yourself that line of shit.” Vaughn chuckled, clearly enjoying fucking with me.

Sutton crossed her legs and drummed her fingers on her jean-clad thigh. “So, you started as Holden’s bodyguard six months ago, then became River’s, then fell for one of their best friends?”

“It’s not like Brynn was a fucking client.” I set my phone in my lap, irritated with the line of questioning. I hadn’t broken any rules, unlike Vaughn when he’d fallen in love with

Claire. But Brynn ... my cock stirred as I recalled her blue eyes and legs for days. Brynn's confidence was quiet, but from what I'd overheard from Chance and Jace, she was wild in the bedroom. One thing was for sure: I was ready to find out.

Sutton's blue-eyed gaze narrowed briefly with concern. "Hon, you know that Chance is in love with her, right?"

Sutton might as well have thrown a brick at my head and knocked me out. *How the hell had I missed that?* I massaged the back of my neck, wracking my brain for the clues I'd missed. But I was mostly with Holden, River, and Brynn. I hadn't spent as much time with Jace and Chance. Plus, when Brynn had gotten sick ...

A sharp pain ricocheted through my chest. She and Chance had spent weeks in Portland with doctors, which meant I hadn't been in their space during those weeks. I didn't see the two of them interact often during that time. I swallowed over the tightness in my throat, then reminded myself that at least Brynn was all right now.

"Jace and Chance are both very close with Brynn. It probably looks like more than it is." *I could only hope.* It wasn't my place to tell the world their business concerning the kind of relationship they did or didn't have, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Zayne, I haven't seen you excited about someone in a while, and I want you to find a special someone who deserves you." Sutton leaned forward, her gaze burning a hole through me. Sutton and I had been friends for years, and she always managed to disarm me with the intensity of a single look.

Rubbing my chin, I realized I'd better listen up. Sutton had always wanted what was best for me. Hell, Pierce and Vaughn, too. We weren't blood-related, but they were my family. After

I left the military, Pierce hooked me up with a security job in his dad's company. When Pierce lost his father, he'd inherited the business. Once Sutton entered his life again, she had a safe place to use her hacking skills for good and Westbrook Security became one of the top companies in the industry.

I blew out a sigh and folded my arms across my chest. I probably wasn't going to be too keen about what Sutton had to say.

"After River returned home, we got together a few times. River didn't go into detail, just that Brynn was physically doing well, but she was concerned about her emotional healing. River mentioned that Chance was in love with Brynn, but that she wasn't interested in settling down yet. She wanted to play, which ..." Sutton tossed her hands up in a shrug. "I get it. I would do the same." Sutton tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, compassion coasting across her face. "River thinks Brynn is deflecting and is in denial about how she feels about him."

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Although I ensured my stoic expression remained intact, my heart dropped to my toes and flipped me off on its way down.

"Chance, Jace, Holden, and Brynn are like us. They've been best friends for years." I laced my fingers behind my head, glancing at Vaughn. Disappointment had registered across his features as he adjusted the waistband of his black basketball shorts. He knew how hard it was to find someone to settle down with in our line of work.

"That's another reason I think you should back off, Zayne. You're a grown man and can do what you feel is right, but I would hate to see you get hurt. I don't think Brynn would intentionally drag you into the middle, but it sounded as

though there's more than just friendship between her and Chance. At least, more than you may think." Sutton leaned back in her chair.

*Shit.* My brow quirked slightly. "Those guys are my friends. The only ones I have outside of our group. Don't worry, I won't step on Chance's toes or make it difficult for Brynn to figure out who she wants. I'll come up with a reason to gently back away from dating her. She's been through enough, and I don't want to lose her as a friend, either."

I knew I had to do the right thing and move out of the picture. Besides, if Brynn was into Chance, I would only be delaying the obvious and dragging my own heart through the mud. No thanks.

"Maybe Holden can hook you up for a night of fun," Vaughn interjected. "In his line of work, he knows a ton of ladies."

"That's not a bad idea. Whether it's to blow off some steam for an evening or date for a while, it might be good for you." Sutton rose from her chair and strolled over to me. She cupped my chin in her small palm and forced me to look at her. "One of these days, you'll find someone who sees how incredibly amazing you are." She dropped her hand, then winked at Vaughn before she left the room.

"Sorry, man. I know the situation sucks, but I'm glad Sutton said something. If you'd hooked up with Brynn, it could have caused a shit show."

"Yeah, I get it, but it's still messed up. She's the first girl I've been interested in since ..."

"I know." Vaughn stood and stretched, his eyes never leaving mine.

Uncomfortable with the memories, I stared at the ceiling and watched the fan spin, refusing to look at my best friend. I wasn't sure how well I was hiding my feelings, and I didn't want to let him see how fucked up I was at that moment.

"The chick you saved at that party. I'll never forget the haunted look on your face after you gave her CPR." Vaughn smoothed his burgundy polo shirt, then popped his neck.

"Doesn't matter. The past is the past. Not to mention, she's married." This conversation had taken a turn I wasn't interested in. "I need to pack. We only have a few hours before we leave for the airport."

"Same. I need to wake up Claire, too. The morning sickness has been kicking her ass. I should make sure she has some 7 Up and crackers on the plane in case she needs them."

"And a barf bag." Sutton's voice reached us before she walked into the living room again, searching for something. "I've already made sure there's ginger ale, crackers, applesauce, and 7 Up. When she's not sick, I am." Sutton placed her hands on her slender hips, frowning. "Has anyone seen my phone?"

I shook my head. "Nope. You didn't have it with you when you sat down to chat."

My cell pinged with an incoming message, and I stared at my screen. I chuckled as I read it. "Pierce said to tell you if you're looking for your cell, he found it on your nightstand."

Sutton rolled her eyes. "I'm never this scatterbrained, and I sure as hell don't forget my iPhone. I always have it with me." Sutton huffed and once more walked out of the room.

"Pregnancy," Vaughn mumbled as a bewildered expression drifted over his face.

“At least Sutton and Claire are pregnant at the same time. It might help when they’re both waddling around and have to prop their feet up.” I smacked him on the back. “Good luck, dude.” My laughter echoed through the house as I left my man standing alone and headed for my bedroom.

Closing the door behind me, I leaned up against it as I took a deep breath. The place was empty of any personal touches, holding only a light-colored king-sized bed, plus a matching tall dresser and nightstand. It was definitely for guests only, but it was my place to sleep when in Canada.

I needed a fucking minute to digest the new information about Brynn. Disappointed didn’t even begin to describe what I’d felt when Sutton told me about Chance’s feelings. Fuck, what guy wouldn’t fall for Brynn? She was smart, kind, and gorgeous, a fighter with a quiet, determined strength. When she entered a room, the space around her lit up. *Goddammit*. I hadn’t felt like this in fucking forever. Not even with Vicki after I’d finished serving in the Army.

*There was one other*, a voice in the back of my mind whispered. “Not really. I saved her life, then found out she was married,” I muttered. I barked out a laugh. Hell, I was answering voices in my head.

I removed my suitcase from the closet and tossed it onto the bed. The sound of the zipper filled the space as I opened it. I flopped the bag open, realizing it wouldn’t take me long to pack. Most of my clothes were black slacks, khakis, and a variety of polo shirts with the Westbrook Security logo over the left pec. As much as I loved my jeans, they were only worn on the occasional day off. It was nice to lounge around in an infrequent T-shirt, too, especially ones sporting the logos of

my favorite football teams, the Dallas Cowboys or Seattle Seahawks.

Even though I'd tried to force the memories away, flashes of that evening Vaughn had mentioned bombarded my mind. The owner of the striking home had invited Pierce and Sutton to an elaborate party, and Vaughn and I had gone as their bodyguards. Since Claire and Vaughn were together, it made sense that Sutton wanted her sister along for the evening as well.

It had been a perfect opportunity for Pierce and Sutton to rub elbows with the wealthy and land more business. Claire and Vaughn had just announced their relationship to the rest of the world, and although Claire had come a long way, she stuck to Vaughn and me like glue. When she'd had to use the bathroom, the ones located on the main floor were already in use, so I accompanied her upstairs.

My heart skipped a beat as I recalled the stunning woman with the haunted, light hazel eyes stumbling out of the restroom and dropping to the floor—dead until I worked furiously to bring her back to life.

I shook off the unwanted feeling, angry that a stranger from a year ago had triggered the nightmares I'd fought so hard to leave behind. I shoved my fingers through my short hair and heaved a sigh. Maybe it was time to make some changes and finally close the door on those dark memories that continued to drag me to hell.

**Giselle**

“Hi, sis,” Donovan said, slipping his arms around my waist before I could duck away from his grasp. He nuzzled my neck with the tip of his nose and planted a kiss on my damp cheek. “How was your run?” His sinister chuckle filled the kitchen as he stepped away. It wasn’t far enough.

“Fine.” I glowered at him as I patted my face dry with a dish towel. “It’s going to be unusually hot today, so I squeezed in my workout early.”

“A toasty 107 degrees. Spokane is breaking records.” His heated gaze traveled the length of my body, and I quickly turned away from him, suppressing a shudder.

“I don’t remember it ever reaching that high of a temp in all the years we’ve lived in Washington.” I busied myself at the sink and washed my hands, hoping my adopted brother would get distracted by anything other than me. Maybe if I kept him busy with small talk, he would leave me alone.

Donovan collected the coffee pot and poured himself a cup, then grabbed the milk and added a splash.

Turning, I leaned against the tan granite countertop and studied him. He was a highly successful businessman, and



with his bright blue eyes and rugged jawline, no one saw the shark in him until it was too late. From the way women behaved when he was in the room, I suspected their panties were wet as soon they saw him, and men fought for his attention and company everywhere he went, but I knew his other side.

I reached for a mug while offering him the most genuine smile I could muster. The few girlfriends I had who pretended to care were jealous of my life, unaware of the secrets that were neatly folded and tucked away behind the happy woman I portrayed to the world. Those acquaintances only knew about the jewelry, designer clothes, and spur-of-the-moment trips. But none of it was my choice.

I poured the steaming dark roast brew into my mug and turned on the television for the morning news. We had a TV in every room, including the ensuite baths for both of the master bedrooms—mine and his. Donovan watched the stock market and daily events like a hawk. His network of connections and keen awareness of when to make strategic moves in his business were almost scary.

“Westbrook Security will be here shortly. I want you to meet them.” He smoothed his navy blue Brioni dress shirt and took a few calculated steps in my direction. Fear crept up my spine as he stood still, hawk-like attention trained on my chest. He removed the mug from my grip and placed it near the sink. Quickly turning me away from him, he slid one hand around the front of my neck. The other gripped my waist, pulling me into him as he pressed his erection against me. His warm breath brushed against my ear and his fingers dug into my flesh. Anxiety hummed beneath my skin as he tugged my black Nike running shorts down with one rough jerk. With a few quick movements, his slacks were undone, and his hard,

thick cock slapped against my ass. Then, his hand moved from my neck to my scalp, grabbing my hair with brute force and controlling me.

He pushed me forward, forcing me to bend over the counter and flattening my cheek against the cold and unforgiving granite. I slammed my eyes closed as the sound of the condom wrapper filled the room, then he brutally shoved himself inside me. My hands balled into fists as the pain shot through me. Donovan didn't give a shit if I was ready for him or not. According to him, anytime he wanted to fuck, I was fair game. In his mind, since I was inferior to him in every way, I owed him my body. As the pain continued to spike through me, I thought briefly of telling Father, wondering what he would do if he knew this had been a regular occurrence since puberty, only to remind myself that telling Father would jeopardize more than just my safety. I had to find another way to break free.

He jerked my head back and pain shot through my neck. "Stupid little bitch, you could at least pretend you like getting fucked."

His hand slid underneath my shirt and into my sports bra. The bastard pinched my nipple so hard I bit my lower lip to stop from crying out. If I did, it would only get worse.

I began counting backward in my head. It was the best trick I'd learned when my ex-husband was in a mood. Who knew I would have to mentally check out with my pig of a brother as well? Even though I had no choice but to endure him physically, I refused to be present mentally. At least, I tried anyway.

The doorbell rang, and I grimaced at the sound of Marty, our butler and Donovan's accomplice, opening the front door.

Male voices carried into the kitchen while Donovan continued.

“Stop,” I whispered, frantically trying to pull away from him, but he was too strong.

“Right this way,” Marty said. The footsteps grew closer and closer as Donovan’s body tensed, then shuddered. He loved fucking me when other people were around. It was fun for him. A sick, twisted game that often went beyond just the possibility of being seen. Donovan was all about control.

The second he withdrew and stepped back, I pulled up my shorts and bolted out of the kitchen.

“Giselle!” Donovan barked.

Horrified at the idea of being caught brutalized and helpless, I ran up the stairs two at a time and straight to my bedroom. I wasn’t sure if our guests had seen me vulnerable and half-naked, but I knew I couldn’t look at them yet.

Closing the door softly, I quickly shed my running clothes and headed to the shower. I had to wash Donovan’s stench off before I joined him and our company in his office. Plus, I needed to compose myself.

Ten minutes later, I swept my hair into a neat bun on the top of my head. A light dusting of makeup gave my face a natural, sun-kissed glow—an appearance of innocence, a devoted sister and daughter—and covered any errant bruising from Donovan’s latest attack. Maybe nobody would notice the dead look in my eyes, but I did. I’d lost the will to live a long time ago. The white silk blouse accentuated my tan skin, and the black, slim-fit slacks hugged the curve of my ass, displaying my legs. If I’d had my way, I would have worn a baggy sweatshirt and loose jeans, hiding my body, but Donovan would never allow it.

*Dancer's legs.* My heart jumped into my throat as I swallowed the grief. I stuffed the unwelcome emotion into the dark corner, where I contained all the memories of my past. The happy ones were harder to digest than the hell I lived in now, so I refused to acknowledge them until they forced their way into my thoughts like a tidal wave, wrecking me in the process.

I squared my shoulders and tipped my chin up. Before leaving, I gathered the broken edges of my armor and tightly pulled it around me. Once I descended the stairs, Donovan's deep voice reached my ears as he offered the guests a drink. Inhaling deeply, I entered the room with a soft smile in place. I'd had years of experience perfecting the right one. My stomach clenched as Donovan offered a sickly-sweet grin. Keeping my gaze steady, I approached him.

"There she is. My beautiful sister." Donovan stood and extended his hand to me as though he hadn't just raped me in the kitchen.

"Hello, darling." The heels of my black pumps clicked against the cherry wood floor as I strode to him and dutifully kissed his cheek.

"I would like to introduce you to Pierce Westbrook and Zayne Wilson. Zayne will be your new bodyguard."

I turned to offer them a warm welcome. "I'm so sorry I'm late, gentleman. I hope you can forgive ..."

My gaze landed on the well-built man with dark blonde hair and a pair of green eyes that speared my soul. Donovan's hand tightened protectively around my waist.

*Holy shit.*

**Giselle**

“Hi, I’m Pierce. It’s nice to meet you.” The voice tore my attention away from the other man. A tall, breathtakingly gorgeous guy stood and held his hand out to me. His brown eyes were sharp while he assessed me in a non-intrusive way, and his charming smile instantly put me at ease. One thing I’d learned over the years was to read people. Typically, I could identify what kind of person they were within minutes. On occasion, I was wrong, and when I was, I was horribly wrong. Donovan and Ander had taught me to listen to that quiet inner nudge, and over the years, it had become a survival instinct.

“I’m Giselle. It’s so nice to meet you.” I shook his hand, maintaining a strong, firm grip.

My breath stuttered as Zayne approached me.

“Zayne Wilson.” His eyes connected with mine again, and butterflies scattered inside my chest as a heated sensation traveled through my belly. God, he was gorgeous. His presence alone was powerful in a quiet way, mesmerizing me. Confused by my reaction to him, I scolded myself. *What in the hell are you thinking? This man saved your life and chained you to the pits of hell.* If Donovan had any inkling what I had just thought about Zayne, he would punish me. One thing was

for certain: Zayne Wilson wasn't worth it. Locking away my attraction, I threw away the key and reminded myself of how much I hated the bodyguard that had saved my life.

Anger rose inside me and burned the back of my throat. Had he recognized me? Did he realize I was the same woman that he'd resuscitated after I'd died in front of him a year ago?

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand, then quickly pulled away as if his touch had burned me. He'd singed my soul, marked mine with his own when he hadn't left me for dead. Rage sizzled beneath the surface, battling with the ever-present sorrow and disappointment that I was still alive. Zayne Wilson might have thought he'd saved me, but he was sadly mistaken. And here he was again.

I checked myself before I glared at Donovan. The evil bastard had known precisely what he was doing when he sought out my new bodyguard. Lighting Donovan on fire and watching him burn slowly would be the best Friday night movie ever. If only.

"Giselle, Zayne will accompany you full time unless I'm with you. Pierce assures me his security firm and men are top-notch."

I didn't need protection from anyone except Donovan, but that's not why Zayne had been hired. My brother had been furious when I'd attempted suicide, and not because I'd nearly died, but because I'd found a way to escape him. If I was going to leave this world, it would be by Donovan's hand and nobody else's.

"I thought Zayne would be the perfect man for the job since he saved your life last year." Donovan's calculated gaze connected with mine. "I can trust him to value your safety as much as I do."

I'd assumed correctly. Donovan never made a move unless it was strategically planned out, and controlling my life and death was what he thrived on. Reminding myself that I had manners, I said to Zayne, "Thank you for your help that night."

Donovan turned to the men and offered them a pleasant smile. "I don't know what I would do if I lost Giselle. She's my world."

Bile swam up my throat and my stomach flip-flopped. No matter how often I'd witnessed Donovan's lies and manipulative charm, it still sickened me. *He* sickened me. I wasn't a goddamn *thing*. I was a grown-ass woman with a fully functioning brain in my head, but any time I attempted to break away from Donovan, he laid claim to me and ensured that the world knew.

As the men continued to discuss me as though I wasn't even in the room, I stepped behind Donovan's chair and placed my hands on the high back. The cool-to-the-touch leather was soothing, but what I found even more comforting were the thoughts of sliding my fingers around Donovan's neck and choking the life out of him. The mere idea of watching as the light slipped from his dark eyes was thrilling.

"Giselle?" Donovan's clipped tone reached me, breaking me out of my trance.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said." I squeezed his shoulder, ever the dutiful sibling.

"Pierce was explaining that another bodyguard named Jaxon would fill in for Zayne when he takes time off. I assured him that we were comfortable with his choices. His reputation has preceded him, unlike the last security guy I hired. The one job he had was to keep eyes on my sister, but apparently, it

was too difficult for him.” Donovan steepled his fingers together. “He stopped showing up for work about a week ago. No call. Nothing.”

I didn’t know what had happened to Randy. Honestly, I didn’t care. For all I knew, Donovan was lying and had fired him in order to hire Zayne.

“Thank you, Pierce. I appreciate you and Zayne planning ahead. I’m sure your men need an occasional day off.” I shifted from one foot to the other, my heels pinching the shit out of my toes. My gaze landed on Zayne, who had remained quiet while his boss spoke with my brother. I wondered what he was thinking. Did he really know who I was? Did he have any clue of what a filthy snake Donovan was? Surely not. If he had, he would have done me a favor and left me dead in my ex-husband’s home.

After I’d woken up in Sacred Heart Hospital, my mother and father each held a hand and cried, kissing my knuckles and speaking to me in French about how much both of them loved me, while Ander stood near my leg, doing the same. Once my father realized I would live, he pulled Ander into the hall and berated him for allowing this to happen. For allowing his beautiful daughter to become so distraught that she tried to end her life. Before I left the hospital, Father had men pack my things and move me into Donovan’s house. Not only was my marriage over, but he’d also fired Ander from the family business.

At first, I thought I’d found sanctuary from my husband and would move back in with my parents, but then I learned about my new living situation. Donovan was worse than living with Ander any day of the week. I was being punished and lived in constant fear, forced to reside with my wicked adopted



brother. Father had no idea that Donovan was a monster, and Donovan had made it clear what would happen if I breathed a word to anyone.

Pierce and Zayne stood, and I watched as Zayne's powerful hands buttoned his black suit jacket. Donovan walked the gentlemen to the door, then Zayne and Pierce stepped outside to chat business before Pierce left. Curiosity bubbled up inside me, and I speculated on what they might be discussing. I assumed Donovan had given them plenty of details about my life and why he thought I needed a bodyguard. I wondered how much of it was the truth, though.

Before I could ask Donovan what he'd said to Pierce when he hired the firm, he grabbed my arm and dug his fingers into my skin.

"Jesus, seriously?" I snapped. "Let go. You're hurting me."

Donovan slammed my back against the wall, and the air whooshed from my lungs. "Don't even think about saying a word to these men about the business. I don't give a shit who is babysitting your pathetic ass. You still answer to me. And if you give me any problems," Donovan leaned down, his warm breath fanning my cheek, "I'll make sure you suffer the consequences."

My stupid body betrayed me, and I trembled beneath his gruff hold and the threat I knew, without a doubt, Donovan would follow through on. His dark chuckle grated over my skin and filled the foyer as the door opened and Zayne strolled back into the house.

I tipped my chin up, projecting an air of confidence that I didn't have. My brow arched slightly as my attention landed on Zayne. I smirked when I realized there wasn't one fucking thing I liked about the bodyguard in front of me except that he

was gorgeous. A soft voice whispered in my head that maybe he could save me a second time. Since my suicide attempt, Donovan had to figure out a new way to control me, and now I had something I was forced to live for. What if Zayne showing up in my life again was a sign? A way out?

My hatred for him intertwined with a shred of hope, but I would have to proceed carefully. First, I had to find out if I could trust him or if Donovan had Zayne in his back pocket like he did so many other bribable men.

My emotions flip-flopped until anger won again. I had business to take care of as soon as Donovan left us alone. Before this shit show even began, I would tell Zayne Wilson exactly how protecting me would play out.

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**Zayne**

**N**ot many things unnerved me, but the second that Giselle stepped foot into Donovan Lambert's office, and I saw those light hazel eyes again, my blood gelled in my veins. *Holy. Fucking. Shit.* The woman I'd saved nearly twelve months ago was my next assignment.

As soon as Pierce and I had gone outside, I released a groan. Concern creased Pierce's forehead as I explained that Giselle was the same girl who had dropped dead in front of me the year before. I felt I wasn't the right guy for this job. But Pierce patted my shoulder, apologized for the shock, and stated that I was the perfect person for this assignment *because* of what had happened in high school. He also reminded me not to let my past interfere with what needed to be done—protecting Giselle with my life.

When Giselle had overdosed at the party, Pierce and Sutton had been in a meeting and missed all the excitement. Neither of them had any idea what Giselle looked like or her name. Afterwards, I looked into her to follow up and see if she was okay. I became well aware who the mystery woman was, but once I learned that she was married, I stopped digging. Pierce hadn't known of my efforts and probably didn't feel the

need to mention anything about her. Donovan was the client, not Giselle.

“Giselle, it’s nice to see you again.” I offered her a smile, but she sent an angry arched brow my way instead.

“I can’t say the same,” she snapped. “I don’t need a bodyguard. This is all a mistake.”

It was clear that she didn’t appreciate my presence in her space, but that was too fucking bad. Folding my hands in front of me, I calmly met her gaze. I was here and it was my responsibility to protect her. According to Pierce, when Donovan hired Westbrook Security, he’d mentioned that he was concerned his sister would run away or attempt suicide again, but Donovan hadn’t ever supplied her name. I had to ensure neither of those happened, although it seemed an odd decision to hire a bodyguard and not a therapist. However, Pierce and I suspected an underlying reason for her protection, so Pierce accepted the job.

“If it makes you feel any better, I had no idea that you ... that you lived here. Last I knew, you were married to Ander Pierre.”

If possible, she managed to tip her chin even further up, eyes blazing at me. “How would you know those details about me?”

I cleared my throat, not wanting her to think I was a creeper, but I didn’t want to lie either. “After the incident at the party, I looked into you. I wanted to reach out, see how you were, but when I learned you were married and I’d actually attended your anniversary party, I didn’t feel it would be appropriate.” *But I couldn’t get you out of my head.*

Indifference settled on her beautiful features and her chin dropped. “Ander is my ex-husband now, and as my only sibling, Donovan kindly offered to take me in.” She must have thought my look of surprise was tied to their relationship and not the slight sneer behind her words.

“He was adopted as a baby, which is why we don’t look anything alike. My parents were contacted when an infant was left on the doorsteps of a church, and the rest, as you Americans say, ‘is history.’”

The realization slowly trickled through my system and finally smacked me on the back of the head. *Giselle is no longer married.* I was in the perfect position to learn more about who she was, what made her tick, and why the hell she’d attempted to end her life. Finally, I could have answers to the questions that had been swirling in my brain the last twelve months. Her walls were firmly in place, but I suspected I would find out why soon enough.

Giselle pursed her lips into a thin line and walked away, but I closed the gap she desperately tried to put between us with one long stride. *Fine.* I could still do my job if she didn’t want to talk. I would ask Donovan the questions instead. If Giselle had a stick up her ass about my position with her, that was on her. Regardless of how rude she was, I took my assignments seriously—I took protecting a life seriously. I ignored the voice in my head assuring me that, no matter how professional I wanted to be, Giselle Lambert would be a thorn in my side.

Giselle stiffened, her shoulders visibly tense as I followed her into the large, marble-floored foyer and up the wide staircase. A hint of a soft, floral perfume tickled my nose as I walked behind her. Goddamn, she was beautiful. My attention

traveled up her toned legs, sculpted ass, and slender shoulders. Wisps of hair escaped her bun as she hurried down the hall. She was clearly a woman with a purpose, and I wanted to find out more about her in spite of myself. Even if we hadn't started on a positive note, I was intrigued by her beauty.

I realized that the ornate wood banister curved to the left and quickly counted eight additional rooms located on that floor, then made a mental note to ask Donovan to show me the rest of the house and property later so I could understand the full layout. At this point, it was evident that Giselle hadn't planned on doing anything other than escaping me. Still on her heels, I caught up with her just in time for her to slam a door in my face.

“Boundaries, bodyguard!” she yelled.

I blew out a sigh and parked myself in the hallway.

*Shit.* Pierce and Donovan had made it clear that I was to stay with her at all times, even while she was home. It wasn't uncommon for me to stick close, but not giving her even a little bit of privacy was a bit over the top. When I had objected, Pierce reminded me that Donovan and the rest of her family feared she might attempt suicide again. I wanted to object, explain there was a big-ass difference between a bodyguard and a glorified babysitter. I knew better, though. Pierce had mentioned his instincts were telling him something was off about the situation and that was why he sent me in.

I had raised my fist to knock on the door when footsteps caught my attention.

“She's not on board with the idea of you being here, Zayne. My apologies.” Donovan toyed with his cufflinks, not meeting my gaze.

I lowered my hand. “Does she know why I’m here?” There wasn’t any reason to bullshit him.

“She knows. The family is concerned about her safety and mental health. We want her alive. Is that too much to ask?” Donovan folded his arms across his chest, pinning me with an intense stare and clearly playing the alpha male role.

I swallowed the words that danced on the tip of my tongue, then said, “I’m not a therapist.”

Donovan chuckled. “I’m well aware of who you are.” He shoved a hand in his pocket, the corner of his mouth kicking up into a dry smile. “Army Ranger honored for the most kills in combat while you served, savior to the many women and children you rescued from the enemy, loyal friend. Unmarried, and close to Holden Alastair and his group.”

A chill slithered down my spine as a strong distaste for Donovan brewed to life inside my chest. Wealthy clients always wanted to know about the bodyguards they hired, but this prick had just shoved it in my face that he’d checked on me. “My life is an open book. Seems to make my clients more at ease.” But some secrets would remain buried. I’d ensured it with the help of Pierce, Vaughn, and Sutton.

Donovan knocked. “Open up, Giselle.” A heartbeat of silence, then the sound of her doorknob turning caught my attention.

The door cracked open and hazel eyes sparking with hatred peered out at the two of us. “You’re being ridiculous, Donovan.”

A hint of a European accent clung to her words. I hadn’t noticed it before, but then again, she’d been in control of her

emotions when we were introduced. Not so much at the moment.

Donovan shoved the door open, grabbed her arm, and forcibly pulled her into the hall. The hair on the back of my neck bristled as I held myself back from knocking him to the floor with a quick punch to his fucking nose. Giselle didn't deserve to be treated that way. Fuck, no one did.

“Apologize for being rude.” Donovan stared down at her with a smile, but it sure as hell wasn't a kind and genuine one.

Giselle glanced at me, her gaze cold and void of emotion. “I'm sorry for wanting some space.”

I would have chuckled at her insincere apology, but Donovan dug his fingers into her flesh, and a whimper escaped her.

My hands clenched into fists, itching to put a dent in his face. Pierce's earlier suspicions thumped me on the head and reminded me that if I stepped in now, I would blow any chance of learning more. I gritted my teeth, promising myself that I would deal with the son of a bitch later. Getting rough with a woman was on my shit list, and if this little prick was treating her this way in front of me, I wondered what was occurring when no one was around. One thing was for sure, Donovan had garnered my attention, and I would find out what was really happening here. Unfortunately, I had my orders to stay out of shit, but that didn't mean I couldn't defuse the situation.

“Donovan, I should see the rest of the manor.” I stepped toward him, ready to snap his fucking neck.

“Let's show Zayne the house and property. Since you can't seem to behave, I'll accompany you.”



Giselle cleared her throat and a calm, careless expression slipped into place. I'd seen that look more times than I cared to count. A wave of righteous anger roared up inside my chest. Shit, I had to watch my step and figure out how to protect her from not only herself but this fucking prick. I just wasn't sure how to win her over and prove that I could be trusted. Whether she realized it or not, I was here to help her, no matter who the monster was. Even if it was her brother.

Over the next hour, the two of them led me around the eight-thousand-square-foot home and additional property. Clearly, Donovan enjoyed flashing his gawdy red and cream Victorian furniture, oversized crystal, and ten vehicles in the five garages. His pores oozed greed.

Pierce had mentioned that Donovan was a high-profile businessman, but he'd forgotten to mention he was a piece of work. A pompous ass was more like it. I'd dealt with men like him a million times, and it never failed to leave a bitter taste in my mouth. Pierce and Holden were wealthy, but they weren't assholes.

Stopping at one last room, Donovan placed a protective hand on the small of her back, then opened the door. "This is Giselle's."

Glancing at her, I saw a flash of something I couldn't identify flicker in her eyes. Without a word, she stepped into the large space filled with wall-to-ceiling mirrors. Her heels clicked across the wood floor as she gestured to the area. "This is Donovan's way of trying to—"

"Giselle." Donovan's tone was sharp and held an undercurrent of a threat.

"I was just going to explain to Zayne that it was your way of trying to give me some of the same happiness I had when I

danced professionally.” She dropped her arms, her palms smacking her thighs. “I was a ballerina.”

Donovan kept his intense gaze trained on her. “She was the best her ballet company had ever had the privilege of witnessing. Giselle is incredible on stage.”

Her hazel eyes connected with mine. “Was.” That one word was laced with a heavy sadness.

Before I could ask what happened, she took a few steps, then leaped up, performing the splits mid-air. Her move was effortless, and her body floated in the air, suspending time for a breathtaking moment. Astonished, I realized talking about dance might be an excellent way to connect with Giselle and break down her walls. I made a mental note to text Claire later for some tips.

Donovan rubbed his hands together. “I have a meeting that I need to head out to. Giselle, your dinner is ready in the refrigerator. I made sure Gretta portioned out the size of your protein and loaded the plate with vegetables. I’ve noticed you’ve put on a pound or two,” Donovan tsked.

What the actual fuck was he talking about? Giselle was an adult, for Christ’s sake. She’d earned the right to eat whatever she wanted. Why in the hell would he track how much food she ate?

I’d been wrong. Giselle wasn’t going to be the pain in my ass. It was her fucking brother. The son of a bitch would test my limits as I tried to stay professional, but it wouldn’t stop me from daydreaming about beating the shit out of the weasel. I reminded myself that I had to remain calm if I wanted to learn what was behind Giselle’s cold façade. Donovan hadn’t hired me to dig into his family, but the first time he was rough and aggressive with Giselle was the moment he’d fucked up.

After I saw firsthand how he treated her, all bets were off. I wanted to know everything. Game on, motherfucker.

“I don’t dance anymore, brother, so stop monitoring my food intake.” The corner of her full lips twitched as she held her ground.

Respect for her standing up to him accompanied my fear for her safety. My training kicked into gear, and I maintained a neutral facial expression before I did something that I would regret. Pierce’s words bounced around in my head, reminding me that the only way to learn what was happening to Giselle was to stay cool. But who in fuck’s name treated his sister like a child?

He stalked over to her and peered down. “Do as you’re told or else,” he ordered, his voice dripped with authority.

The muscle in my jaw tensed as I struggled to restrain myself from choking the life out of Donovan. When this assignment was over, I was going to make sure Pierce gave me first crack.

“Of course.” Giselle folded her arms across her chest, and a sweet smile slipped into place. I suspected she wasn’t in this situation because she wanted to be, but rather because she wasn’t sure how the hell to get out. She was strong and determined. There had to be something more holding her back from leaving. I just had to figure out what it was.

Donovan roughly cupped her chin and kissed her goodbye on the cheek before glancing at me. “Call if you need anything, Zayne.”

“Will do.” I watched as he left, but my attention soon drifted back to the beautiful woman in front of me.

She wiped her face off with her hand, disgust evident on her features. “How much is he paying you?”

*That was an odd thing to ask.* “He’s not. He’s paying Westbrook Security, then my boss pays me.”

She huffed, irritated with my response. “How. Much.” She formed the words as though I was reading lips and couldn’t understand her question.

“A lot.” It wasn’t for me to discuss the financial agreement with anyone other than Pierce. “You can talk to my boss if you need that information.”

She placed her hands on her dainty hips, then approached, slowing to a stop only inches away from me.

When she spoke again, her words were so soft I thought I’d misunderstood. Astonishment and confusion pulsed through me, but after what I’d just witnessed with Donovan ...

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

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**Giselle**

**D**esperate people made desperate choices, and I fell into that category. I trusted no one, not after what I'd lived through. Donovan was certified vicious, and maybe Zayne had waltzed back into my life for a reason. Still, I couldn't even begin to entertain that possibility unless he proved that he was an honorable man and on my side.

Zayne's unreadable expression remained in place. My hands itched with a burning desire to slap it off him while anger brewed in the pit of my stomach. We'd only spent a few hours together, and he was already pushing my buttons.

Maybe he needed a little help responding to my question, because he heard what I'd said. "Speak softly when you answer. Although there aren't any cameras in here, Donovan has ears everywhere."

He stared straight through me. "Killing your brother isn't in this job's description."

I shrank inwardly, fearful he might see past my careful veneer and into the dark recesses of my soul. My lips pursed, and my brain sifted through his words again, my attention clinging to what I was desperate to hear in what he said.

Maybe, just maybe, there was hope that I could escape my hell. “In *this* job’s description? So you’ve killed someone before?”

Without batting an eye, Zayne responded, “As a former Army Ranger, I’ve taken a few people out, but that’s beside the point. Murdering Donovan won’t happen.” The man folded his hands in front of him, his gaze unwavering from mine.

Infuriated with his response and lack of emotion, I paced the length of the room, my short heels clicking against the hardwood floors as I sifted through this new information. Zayne Wilson had a dark side; I could feel it in my bones. I just needed access to that part of him. But first, I had to ensure that I could trust him. Since my brother was technically Zayne’s client, I held very little say about his orders. Unless I could sway Zayne to honor my request, I was stuck.

If there was one thing I’d learned over the last few years, though, it was that the art of seduction held enormous power and I had it down to a science. I’d been trained to serve men in and out of the bedroom from an early age—Donovan had embraced the role as teacher, for sure. Other than dancing, it had been my only job, but I sure as hell couldn’t put it on a resume.

I turned my back to Zayne and seductively peeked over my shoulder in his direction. “Are you going to tell Donovan that I asked you to end his pathetic existence?”

Zayne shoved a hand in the pocket of his dark slacks, his green-eyed gaze never leaving my face. “Not unless you give me a reason to.”

“I won’t.” I’d just laid out a test for Zayne, hoping he would pass. If he mentioned my request to Donovan, I would undoubtedly find out. I rubbed my wrists, remembering the

last time I'd pushed Donovan too far. The scars had faded, but my heart would never heal from his constant abuse.

I strolled across the dance floor, then pirouetted from one corner to the next. Dancing was my safe space, but I hadn't allowed myself to let go and enjoy it since I'd moved in with Donovan a year ago. I had to remain on guard, watching Donovan's every move. Maybe Zayne could offer a bit of protection against my evil brother. If I played my cards right, the odds might be in my favor. My anger and hatred for Zayne wouldn't change, but it didn't mean I couldn't use him, too.

"Tell me about yourself." Not only did I want to know who would be following me every minute of the day, it was important that I learned whether he was under Donovan's thumb or not. The only break I would have from my new bodyguard was when I was with Donovan. Even though I despised Zayne for being here, I would take him over my brother any day. First, though, I had to crack his hard-ass exterior and force myself to try and get to know him. I shoved my intense dislike for him into a dark corner of my heart and sucked it up. I'd been forced to do much worse than try to win Zayne Wilson over for my benefit.

"Not much to tell." Zayne rocked on his heels, then moved closer to the room's entrance.

"Do you have any hobbies?" I leaned at a calculated angle against the ballet bar with my back to the mirrors, my gaze raking over his incredible body—dark blonde hair, broad shoulders, and muscular thighs and long legs shown off by slacks that hugged in all the right places. I rarely found myself attracted to someone, but Zayne was certainly sexy as hell. Hate sex might look damn good on him.

“Don’t have time.” He angled himself in the doorway and looked down the hall. “Is anyone else in the house besides us?”

My brows creased with his question. “Marty, our butler, and we have some additional staff, but that’s it. Why?”

“Just checking. Learning the layout and security processes that are in place,” he said without looking at me.

“Didn’t Donovan let you and Pierce know that others would be in the manor?” I crossed the room and joined him.

“Yes, but the footsteps I just heard didn’t belong to the man who answered the door. These sounded different. Possibly a small woman. They tend to take heavier steps.” His gaze darted from the hall to me. “Except you. You walk lightly, but I understand why now.”

I stared at him, unsure what to say, but it was apparent that Zayne paid excruciating attention to detail and his surroundings. Skirting around him, I peeked down the hall toward the foyer, but I didn’t hear anything. “Gretta is in the kitchen, and you haven’t met her yet. We have an alarm system, so it will beep if anyone enters or leaves the house. I wouldn’t worry too much about someone waltzing in unannounced.”

Zayne glanced down, his expression flickering with curiosity. “I never said I was concerned, but is that something you’re worried about?”

“I’m always—”

Zayne’s phone buzzed, and I took the opportunity not to answer as he stepped back.

“Sir?” Zayne’s deep voice rumbled from behind me.



I held in a sigh, then left the studio, realizing he was hot on my heels. Of course he was. I officially had a shadow, even in my own home. Irritation swept over me as I climbed the stairs.

“Understood.”

I looked over my shoulder as I entered my room, wishing I could slam the door in his face again, but I suppressed the urge. It wouldn't get me anywhere.

“Giselle, you're welcome to have some privacy, but first I have to search your bedroom and bathroom,” Zayne said.

I spun around as my hands balled into fists. “You will do no such thing,” I snapped, each word laced with hatred. Spittle flew from my mouth, but I didn't give a fuck. This guy was out of his damned mind.

“The orders are from Donovan. I don't have a choice. You can make this easy for both of us, or we can do it the hard way.” Zayne remained still in the doorway, most likely hoping I would allow him to do his job. “He thinks you're suicidal again. It's why I'm here.”

“So you're violating my privacy even more for what exactly?” My tone was sharp, accusatory.

“Pills or anything that you could use to inflict harm on yourself.” Zayne's voice wavered, appearing unsure for a moment.

Anger pulsed through me, and my nostrils flared as I sat on my king-sized bed, rumpling the lilac duvet. I folded my arms over my chest and glowered. If I refused, Donovan would discipline me, and I wasn't interested in experiencing his way of handling situations that made him unhappy.

“Fine. Hurry up.” I snapped at him.

I watched Zayne as he searched the bathroom first, removing any bottles with a prescription label that he found. There were only a couple—Xanax and muscle relaxers. He pocketed both containers, and I released a loud groan, scrambling for a plausible lie. “What am I going to use when my anxiety is off the charts? The muscle relaxers are for after intense dance workouts. There are maybe five pills left between the two of them. Look for yourself. My doctor keeps me on a tight leash, so I don’t have the ability to overdose again.” If he only knew the truth behind those prescriptions, he would be offering to get me more.

Zayne fished out the bottles and read the label indicating the medication was only for a few pills at a time. I also had to call the doctor’s office for a refill, which meant he monitored how often I needed the meds.

He grunted his acknowledgment, then shoved them in his pocket again. “I’ll let Donovan know.”

I clenched my jaw, willing myself not to say a word. Donovan already knew, but if it made Zayne feel like he was doing his job, fine. It wasn’t about the medication anyway. It was Donovan’s reminder that his reach was far and wide, and whether he was with me or not, he controlled my every move.

Zayne continued to search every nook and cranny available: my dresser and nightstand, under the mattress, the closet, even my shoe boxes. It took him well over an hour to investigate my room. He removed everything with care and respect, then put it back in its proper place. He wasn’t being a total dick and throwing shit on my floor for me to clean up later, like Donovan had so often before.

As I watched him, I couldn’t help but wonder how he’d learned to be so thorough. Even if he hadn’t meant to share his

feelings, I caught a glimpse of sadness in his gaze as he did his job. Everyone had darkness in their past, and I was pondering what he was hiding from the world. Once I'd shut up about him being in my space and started paying attention to him beyond his job title, I pondered what Zayne's secret was and questioned if he was trying to run from something. Maybe we weren't so different after all.

My curiosity quickly flipped to irritation at his presence, though, then a fit of intense anger roared up inside me. Memories of my last attempt to end my life flooded my thoughts. The vodka and the pills, the music from the party. Staggering down the hall to the bathroom and distrusting that my plan had worked, only to ultimately see a gorgeous man with green eyes before I dropped to the floor. If he'd left me alone, I wouldn't still be living in hell and praying to a God I doubted even existed. Damn him.

Before I could catch myself, I blurted out what I'd wanted to say to Zayne the second he'd strolled into my home.

"I fucking hate you," I said through clenched teeth. "I fucking hate you for saving my life."

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Zayne

**M**y military training had molded me into a man that rarely showed emotions. Truthfully, I'd morphed into that guy right after ... I slowed my trip down memory lane and focused on what Giselle had said.

I understood she was fucking pissed that Donovan had me search her room. I would've been, too, but suicide wasn't a laughing matter. I was exiting her walk-in closet, which was half the size of her large bedroom, when the corner of her lip curled into an unfriendly smile, and the words meant to cut me filled the air.

She hated me for saving her.

That was fucked up on too many levels.

"I'm sure you do hate me. You'll probably hate me even more soon. There's nothing I can do about it." I shoved my hands through my hair, wanting to apologize for invading her space, but I knew she would mistake it as a sign of weakness.

She stood and glowered at me. "You don't care why at all, do you?" Giselle approached, her jaw tense and her hazel eyes blazing. God, she was beautiful. Rude, arrogant, and condescending, but breathtakingly beautiful.

“It won’t change anything.”

“It will make *me* feel better. The night you saved me ... you think you did me a favor.” She barked out a spiteful laugh. “All you did was send me back to a foul, disgusting life. So, if you have a hero complex and want to swoop in and save me from killing myself again, then by all means, give it your best shot. You. Won’t. Win.”

I quickly learned that this petite ballerina was strong-willed, but regardless of her words, she was my responsibility. I’d fucked up before, and the situation had nearly broken me. Unable to run from the pain, I ran to the military instead. In some ways, being an Army Ranger saved my life. In other ways, it nearly finished me off. Pierce and Vaughn had rescued me from precisely what Giselle had tried—suicide. If she were bound and determined to succeed, she would, and there wasn’t a goddamn thing I could do to stop her, but I could make it more difficult.

What I didn’t understand was why she wanted to die. What was driving her to end everything? Was her brother hurting her even more when I wasn’t around or was what I’d already witnessed the extent of it, and he was a dominating punk with an ego problem?

“I realize this is none of my business, but I hope you’re in therapy.” *Bold move, dude.* As soon as I spoke, I wondered if there were cameras in Giselle’s bedroom as well as other areas of the house. She’d said there wasn’t one in her dance studio, but I didn’t trust Donovan. Considering how controlling he was of her, I wouldn’t be surprised if every space in the mansion was bugged, and I doubted she would be aware of it if he had installed one.

Giselle snorted. “You’re right. It’s absolutely none of your business.” She turned her back on me, then scooped her phone off the dark-colored nightstand. As impressive as the size of her bedroom was, there were no personal items anywhere—no pictures of her with friends or family, no artwork on the walls, not a single glimpse into her life. It was cold and empty, just like I assumed she had felt when she’d attempted suicide.

“How long did you dance?” I stood in the doorway, attempting to allow her some space yet learn more about her, trying to soften her stance toward me a little.

Her anger appeared to lessen, and she said, “I was selected for the ballet company when I was sixteen and danced for eight years before I blew out my knee. In a matter of seconds my career was over. It’s been two years since I’ve performed on stage.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult that had to be. How did you hurt your knee?”

Her left eye slightly twitched as she stared at me.

Ignoring my question, she said, “What do you want? We’re not friends, nor will we be. Asking about my life won’t change the fact that I hate you for saving me.”

“What if it did, Giselle? What if you found a passion that set your soul on fire again, something to live for?” I sure as fuck wasn’t her counselor, but I’d had more than my fair share of dealing with the same issue. Maybe there was a chance I could reach and save her. *You can’t fix her. Stop trying.* I mentally gave the inner voice a quick fuck-you.

She blinked at me, shock registering briefly in her features before her walls slipped back into place. “I don’t know how to answer that because no one has ever asked me before.”

The beep of the alarm system reached my ears and the sound of Donovan talking alerted me he'd returned. Footsteps traveled in our direction, and I positioned myself in the hall near the door.

Giselle rubbed her arms as though she was fighting a chill.

"Giselle?" Donovan called to her.

"You're back early," she said, stepping out of her room.

"Short meeting." His steely grey eyes landed on me. "My schedule has changed, so I'll be with Giselle for the rest of the day and night. You're free to take the evening off, Zayne."

Giselle visibly tensed, her shoulders hiking up before she forced them down again.

"What time would you like me here tomorrow?" Mentally, I was already making plans.

"Ten is fine. Have a good night." Donovan said, dismissing me.

I nodded, then walked past Donovan and Giselle. As I strolled toward the stairs, I heard Donovan speak in a hushed tone and glanced over my shoulder at him. His smirk was cocked and charged like a loaded gun. Moisture filled Giselle's hazel eyes, and my pulse stuttered. Why did Donovan hold so much power over her? It was clear that she was terrified of him, and I promised myself that I would find out why.

I removed my cell and sent a quick text. By the time I'd reached the manor's front door, my phone had buzzed with a response. Beautiful. I had plans, and I couldn't wait to unwind.



I'D OPTED for a nice pair of jeans and a blue button-down for comfort since I wasn't working. It was nearly eight that night when I spotted the entrance of 4 Play. When I arrived at the back of the line, I quickly discovered the corded-off section and Mykel, one of the bouncers I'd met when on assignment for Holden and River.

As I approached him, a grin split his face. Rolling my sleeves up to my forearms, I returned his smile. The weather had turned out warmer than I'd anticipated.

"Z-man." Mykel Vandenberg slapped me on the back. "Good to see ya."

"You, too. Is there room for one more inside?" I nodded to the club.

"Holden and River let the staff know that if you show up to let you in and call them. If they're not here, they'll be on their way."

I rubbed my hands together, excited to hang out with my friends. "Sounds great. I'll be at the bar."

Mykel lifted the rope and let me in. Waltzing through the front door, I eyed the area. It had been several months since I'd been here. I'd headed to Canada for a while once my assignment with Holden and River was finished, taking a bit of time off but helping Pierce and Sutton with the business in order to stave off serious boredom. Now that I was back in the States and on a job, I was happy to connect with friends before my new assignment got too hectic.

The bass thumped through the club as the purple, blue, green, and red strobe lights lit up the dance floor. Quickly glancing around, I identified the bouncers and security as I reminded myself that I was off duty for the evening. I never



fully relaxed unless I was with Vaughn, Pierce, and Sutton, though, and even then, I was still alert to my surroundings.

The second I spotted Brynn sitting at the bar, my attention landed on her long red hair and black jacket.

Once Donovan had given me the evening off, I'd texted Brynn and asked if she wanted to meet. Even though I intended to chat with her concerning Chance, I also wanted to catch up with her while waiting for Holden and River.

Brynn glanced over her shoulder toward the entrance, her smile lighting up the room when she spotted me. She slid off the barstool, revealing that her silver top was tucked into her dark wash jeans.

“Hey, Zayne.”

I pulled her in for a quick hug, slightly confused that I hadn't had my normal reaction when I saw her—that of feeling completely immersed in her presence.

Puzzled, I released Brynn and smiled. “You look well. How are you feeling?”

“Good. All the tests have been clear so far.” She knocked her knuckles on the wooden bar top. “That's a part of my life I would love to leave behind forever.” She slid into her seat, and I sank into the one beside her.

“No shit. I want all that insanity to be over as well.” I raised my finger, flagging the bartender and gave her my drink order.

“Food and alcohol are on the house for you, by the way.” Brynn placed her hand over mine and squeezed it. “It's really good to see you.”

Instead of her touch making my dick jump to attention, there wasn't anything at all. No spark of attraction, no heat, just a caring friendship. *What in the hell is happening?* Just a few days ago, I'd had every intention of starting a relationship with her, but once Sutton had talked to me and then I saw Giselle again ... Inwardly, I hung my head. When I had first found out Giselle was married, I had buried all the attraction and intrigue she stirred in me. Married or otherwise, committed women were off my radar, but Giselle's circumstances had changed.

Glancing down the bar, I realized it was packed. "You, too. I'm glad you're feeling better. I'm excited to hang out with everyone while I'm here. I just don't know how much time I'll have around this new job."

The bartender slid a drink to me, and I wrapped my hands around the frosty beer mug, the chill offering something else to focus on other than returning to Giselle. To my surprise, I was looking forward to seeing her again.

*It can't happen, dude.* That inner voice was a little bitch, but I knew it was correct. I had to keep my interest in check while I was Giselle's bodyguard. I saw how that shit went down with Claire and Vaughn when they were hiding their relationship, and I didn't want to fuck up the same way.

*Good luck with that.*

Brynn leaned closer to me, then said, "What is it, Zayne?"

I gazed at her, giving her a gentle smile. Brynn had made it clear that she was interested in more, and this conversation wouldn't be easy. I leaned back in my chair, feeling like an ass because I was about to tell her nothing would happen.

She held up her hand. “Wait. We need to have this conversation somewhere else.” She collected her cocktail and slid off the barstool.

I joined her, and she led me to the elevator. Without a word, she hit the penthouse button, then took a sip while she stared at the wall.

The chime alerted us that we’d reached our destination. Brynn stepped out and continued down a hall until we neared an exit. I’d been in the new 4 Play only a few times, but I knew all the ins and outs well.

I grabbed the bar on the door of the rooftop entrance and pushed it open for Brynn. Spotting a large rock to the left, I secured it between the door and frame, stopping it from closing. It might sound crazy, but it just made me feel better. Maybe I’d watched too many movies when I was younger where some dumbass got stuck on the roof during subzero temperatures.

Brynn strolled across the open area, then sat on the brick wall that allowed a full view of downtown Spokane.

She patted a spot, and I sat beside her. The inky black sky was filled with twinkling stars, and the scent of summer air riding in on the river made me smile as it brought back fun memories with Pierce, Vaughn, and Sutton when we were younger. A siren broke the silence, and I watched as the police cars headed north.

“I didn’t want us to have to yell at each other. I thought this would allow us to talk.” Brynn tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “What were you saying at the bar?”

**Zayne**

I cleared my throat, appreciating the warm early summer breeze and daring myself to own my truth. Brynn and I were friends first and foremost, and we were in similar situations. “There’s someone else.”

A weary expression ghosted over her beautiful face. “I don’t understand.”

Her question was fair, and I wanted an open and honest conversation with her. She deserved to know.

“You, Holden, River, Jace, and Chance are the only good friends I have outside of work. I mean, Hendrix, Cade, Gemma, and Mackenzie are included in that group, too, I guess, but I can’t afford to lose any of them.” I chuckled. “I’m smart enough to realize that true friends are hard to find.” I placed my hand over my chest. “They’re family.”

She nodded, attentive.

“What’s the other reason, Zayne? We’ve flirted with each other, texted for months, it felt like we were both ready to give *us* a chance.”

I winced at her choice of words.

Her brow arched slightly. “Oh ... you know about Chance?”

I nodded. “Yeah. What you have with Jace and Chance is special. I think you need some time to heal and figure out what you want, but if there’s even a remote possibility that you’re in love with Chance ... you owe it to yourself to find out. You and Chance are my friends, and I care about both of you. I can’t be the thing that stands in the way of happiness.” I paused, trying to sift through my feelings around my situation as well. “Also, about a year ago, there was someone that I was interested in, but the timing was off. Her situation has changed, and soon I might be able to explore what that looks like. Who knows? What I’m suggesting to you may end up being what I need to do as well.” *What if Giselle doesn’t care about you in return?* I told my brain to shut the fuck up, I was aware of the limits. I was her bodyguard. She was my job.

Brynn’s blue eyes glistened, and she stared out over the city. “I do love Chance. I love Jace and Holden, too. They’re my people and I can’t imagine ever living a day without them. River is the best female friend I’ve ever had. Hell, I’m a little bit in love with her too.” Brynn peeked at me, giggling. “She’s just taken, so all I’ve gotten is a goodbye kiss when I thought I wouldn’t see her again.”

She glanced down at her lap. “Honestly, I’m afraid to fuck anything up. I can’t lose Chance if we don’t work out.”

I reached over and placed my palm on her back. “I can’t see that happening, so what’s the real reason?” I’d spent enough time with Brynn to read her pretty well. She was good at hiding her emotions but not good enough that I hadn’t caught it.

Brynn responded with silence and crossed her legs before turning to me, her gaze locking with mine. “Because if Chance knew what I’ve hidden from my friends for years ...”

I held up my hand. “Don’t say anymore. I understand all about keeping secrets.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she quickly wiped them away with her fingertips. “I thought if I was with someone outside of our tight circle that maybe I could forget for a while.”

Jesus. No wonder we understood each other so well and had felt a connection so quickly. “Come here.”

Brynn looked out over the city again, then scooted next to me. I slipped my arm around her while she leaned on my shoulder.

“I’ll always be here for you, Brynn. Always.” At one time, she could have walked away with my heart if I’d let her. But until that evening, I hadn’t realized each of our hearts already belonged to others, and both of us were allowing our pasts to cloud our futures.

Brynn placed her hand on my thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you, Zayne. For everything—for being an amazing man, for finding River, and for being a good friend to Holden. Whoever you end up with will be a hell of a lucky girl.”

I wasn’t sure she was correct, but I kept the thought to myself. Whatever Brynn was hiding, I didn’t doubt that she would find the light in her darkness. I just wasn’t the right man for her.

“We should get back downstairs. I know Holden and River were going to meet me, too.” I climbed off the wall, then held

my hand out to her. Deep down, I'd always had a quiet understanding that it wouldn't work between us, but I was grateful to have her in my life as a friend.

My cell buzzed, and I removed it from my back pocket. I grinned as I read the message from Holden. "Everyone is here, including Chance and Jace. Let's go spend some time with our friends."

"Sounds good." I didn't miss the flash of eagerness laced with regret in her intense gaze.

I escorted Brynn into the building, then secured the door behind us. Brynn asked about Vaughn, Pierce, and Sutton as we rode the elevator to the club's main level. She had met Vaughn at the original 4 Play, and Sutton and Pierce, along with the band members of August Clover, at the new club's grand opening. I assured her everyone was doing well, then the doors opened, and our conversation was drowned out by the thumping bass of a song I didn't recognize. Bodies gyrated on the dance floor, and Brynn and I headed to the bar again. I spotted the back of Holden and his fiancée, River, next to him, and Jace and Chance were laughing as we approached.

"Hey, man! Good to see ya." Holden gave me a bro hug.

"You, too. It's been too long!" I shouted at him over the music. My gaze landed on River, a sweet smile easing across her face.

"My favorite bodyguard in the world." She pushed up on her tiptoes and threw her arms around my neck. "Miss you! When are you coming back to work for us fulltime?"

I chuckled as we released each other. "I'll let you know if I ever need the job." Turning to Jace and Chance, we shook hands. I didn't miss Chance's quizzical expression. He must

have seen Brynn and me exiting the elevator together. Maybe she would fill him in on our conversation. I didn't feel it was my place. However, as a friend, I might be able to encourage him to give Brynn some space but not give up on her.

“Let's head up to the conference room, and I'll order food and drinks. If you've got a night off, we need to take advantage of it.” Holden slapped me on the back, then took River's hand.

The group filed into the elevator, chatting and laughing. It felt good to see them again. The last time I was with them, the mood had been a hell of a lot more serious. It seemed as though some healing had taken place for everyone.

Once we reached the fourth floor, Holden led us to the conference room, and we settled in. Brynn had situated herself between Jace and Chance, exactly where she should be. She'd never made it a secret that she was with both of them sexually, and she loved them both. In my gut, I was well aware that I'd made the right decision, but seeing her face light up when she was with the guys was all the confirmation I needed. Instead of the stab of pain in my heart that I'd anticipated, I felt lighter, free to move in the direction that was best for me. I just had no fucking clue how dark that path would turn out to be.



### Giselle

**D**onovan's lust-filled gaze landed on my chest, and I adjusted my navy silk blouse in an attempt to block the view of my cleavage. Once I'd stopped dancing, breast implants had been forced on me by Ander.

"Where are we going?" I stared out of the back of the limo, watching as we passed the buildings on Division Street.

"Dinner." Donovan glanced up from his phone. "I want you on your best behavior."

"Aren't I always, brother?" Sarcasm dripped from my words.

He shot me a stern look. "I don't need to answer that."

"Your idea of good behavior is me on my knees, sucking your cock whenever you want it. And not fighting when you bend me over any surface and raping me." I glared at him, hatred for my adopted sibling again springing to life inside me.

"After your little suicide stunt, Father gave you to me. In case you've forgotten, I own you, Giselle."

I snorted, his words crawling over my skin, leaving a trail of pure disgust in its wake. "Father did *not* give me to you. He

has no idea that you're a despicable excuse of a person. And I'm a woman. A human being, not anyone's property." I clenched my teeth, attempting to remain composed.

An evil grin slipped into place. "Tell yourself whatever you have to, but we both know the truth."

"Agreed. That you're a descendent from Satan himself." I cocked my head, daring him to disagree with me. Of course, he didn't.

The limo slowed as it pulled into the parking lot of the Davenport. A jolt of reality zipped through my limbs, and my stomach clenched as I realized why we were here. There was only one reason Donovan ever brought me to the hotel. My heart ceased beating while panic blossomed in my chest.

"Did you ...?" My voice trailed off as the driver parked and turned off the vehicle. Seconds later, the back door flew open, and a hand extended to me. I shrank away as if his touch would burn me.

Donovan gripped his phone, glowering at me. "You'll find out soon enough. Now get out of the car before I forcibly remove you myself."

Donovan climbed out of the back seat and hurried to the other side. He buttoned his blue suit jacket before adjusting his cuff links, his eyes narrowing. "Don't make me treat you like a child, Giselle. Get the fuck out of the goddamned limousine. You're making me look bad."

"Fuck you." I slid away from him, refusing to go.

Donovan leaned in, grabbed my arms, and jerked me out. "Stop it right now."

A couple with concerned faces strolled past us, and Donovan flashed them a warm smile.

“Good evening.” He placed his arm around me, displaying a loving and protective man to the world.

“Evening,” the other guy said, tightening his hold on his significant other. They continued to stroll by us, but the lady glanced over her shoulder in my direction, worry etched into her pretty features.

The woman was a stranger, someone that Donovan wasn’t controlling or paying, and I realized it was my chance to get help. My lips pursed, and before I could stop myself, I folded my thumb into my palm and closed my fingers over it. I pretended to cough, hoping she understood the signal for help. My heart dipped and flipped as she turned away and entered the hotel. The woman hadn’t recognized what I was trying to tell her—that I was in danger because of the man next to me. My stomach churned.

“We’re late. Behave yourself and let’s get moving.” Donovan slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his side, digging his fingers into my ribs.

Realizing I had no other choice but to go with him, I knew I would have to try to run before the horror started. Donovan understood that I would never willingly accompany him, so he hadn’t provided any details. He knew I would figure it out, but by then it would be too late, and he could simply force me into the building.

One way or the other, I had to escape Donovan for good. Unfortunately, I had nowhere to hide and no money.

*Zayne could help.* Although Zayne might be an option in the future, though, there wasn’t even a remote possibility that he could save me from my fate this evening. I also still had to make sure I could fully trust him—Donovan’s reach was wide.

Once I had a plan in place, I couldn't afford to fuck up. It wasn't just my life on the line anymore.

As Donovan walked me to the elevator, we waited along with a few others.

“Dinner first,” he said, rubbing my back and continuing his charade of a caring, doting brother.

“Of course.” I offered him a shy smile for the benefit of the people around us.

Thoughts of Zayne tickled the edges of my mind again, and I wished that he was here to witness the horror that was called my life. If he knew ... if he really knew, Zayne Wilson would be pleading with me to forgive him for bringing me back to life.

The group entered the elevator, and a quick ride later, Donovan and I walked down a long hall. Donovan knocked on a door, then it swung open. The blood in my veins froze. On instinct, I stepped away.

“No,” I whispered to my brother. “No.” I scurried back, my eyes never leaving the monster sneering at me while my heart slammed against my chest.

Ashkov Butricks's features were hard and sharp enough to slice me in half. His tongue darted over his lip as he looked me up and down. I hadn't ever met him before, but his reputation preceded him.

Donovan's upper lip curled in contempt right before he grabbed my wrist and tugged me into the room, then Ashkov closed and secured the only way to escape.

Donovan slapped his hand over my mouth and forced me against the wall. “You will cooperate, Giselle.” Pure evil

twisted his face as his breath fanned against my cheek. “If you don’t, you know what will happen.”

I would rather have been punched and kicked in my stomach than hear those words. Donovan rarely used them, but I knew I had to surrender. If I didn’t—the consequences—I would never be able to forgive myself. Bile surged up my throat just thinking of what he would do.

Ashkov shot me a sinister smile and winked as he watched Donovan undo the buttons on my navy blouse, revealing the black lace bra underneath. “Do you understand me?” Donovan trailed his hand down my chest and roughly twisted my breast, sending pain ricocheting through me. A reminder that he could do much worse to hurt me. I was well aware there was much more to come, but I had to keep my wits about me, or Donovan would follow through with his threat.

“Before I release you, promise me you won’t scream or try to run.”

I stared into Donovan’s dark eyes and nodded. He and Ashkov had me cornered with nowhere to run.

“If you hurt her, I’ll fucking kill you,” I whispered.

Donovan laughed, then forced me to my knees. While one hand wrapped itself in my hair, the other unbuttoned and unzipped his khaki slacks, freeing his dick. “Open your pretty little mouth, sis.”

I did as I was told, and my gaze followed Ashkov while he sank into a chair and watched, his soulless dark eyes glinting with lust. Ashkov shelled out a lot of money for his victims, but once he beat and raped the women, they were often discarded and left for dead. Unfortunately, the one thing that would ensure I would remain alive was Donovan. There was

no way he would let me go. I was too valuable to him. I knew for a fact he charged a lot of money for a night with me. And the rougher someone wanted to be, the more they had to pay.

Donovan thrust his disgusting dick into my mouth, gagging me. His body shuddered as his come hit the back of my throat. Once he was finished, he pulled out and cupped my chin, wiping the corner of my lip with his thumb. “Be a good girl, Giselle. I’ll see you around eight in the morning.”

Shit, I would spend the night with Ashkov. Hell, with any luck, he would use and kill me. At least that thought gave me something to look forward to—a way out of Hell. It would be better than carrying around the scars his abuse would leave behind.

Donovan jerked me into a standing position and smoothed my hair before he stepped away. I wasn’t sure where Ashkov had disappeared to, but before I realized what was happening, Donovan spun me around and a cloth slipped over my mouth and nose. Seconds later, my entire world faded to black.

**Zayne**

**T**he time with my friends was exactly what I needed. As we hung out in the conference room, laughter filled the air, reminding me that taking an occasional evening off was good for my soul.

Holden's fingers drummed against the tabletop right before he stood from his chair at the head of the table and approached me. "Do you have time to chat privately?" Concern twisted his expression.

"Always."

I took a moment to tell everyone goodbye, then followed Holden as he led the way to the elevator. Once the door was closed, he pressed the button for the penthouse. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, clearly stressing.

The chime broke the silence, and the elevator opened. We exited, and I followed Holden into the hall. He paused before the little square box on the wall and held still as the green light scanned his eye. The lock clicked open, then we entered and secured it behind us.

"I wanted to make sure there wasn't anyone around." Holden slid his hands into his pockets and walked through the

living room to the black leather sofa.

I remained quiet, allowing him to gather his thoughts. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the Spokane River, and I made my way to them, my tennis shoes squeaking against the white marble floors with each step. Leaning against the glass with my shoulder, I stared below as the water rushed by. The city lights bounced off the waterfall's foam, holding my attention for a moment. Water had always been my peaceful place. If I'd realized that sooner, I would have ended up a Navy SEAL instead of an Army Ranger, but I'd still served my country with pride.

“Have you heard anything from Brian at the FBI lately?” Holden finally asked.

I turned slowly, understanding Holden's anxiety. Brian was an FBI contact who occasionally worked with Pierce. The last case that Brian helped with was Holden's when River had been kidnapped. That entire situation took a crazy-as-fuck wild turn, not to mention that Holden's sleazy father, Tim, had been involved. Holden had refused to let his father get away with withholding information that put River's life in jeopardy. So, he dealt with him after River was safe.

“No, but Pierce might have. It would look suspicious if I asked. Are you regretting what happened with your father?”

Holden smirked. “Not one fucking bit, dude. Even if shit went south, I made the right choice. And when we find the others responsible for hurting River ...” Holden's jaw clenched, his hands fisted together.

“As far as I know, there's nothing leading the FBI to us. Besides, Tim is missing, that's all.” I raised a brow at him. “I told you I had your back, man. I know how to pull shit off without leaving a trace. You should call Pierce and see if they



have any updates on your family. He'll talk to you, especially since River was taken and he knows you guys are going to be on edge until everyone involved in her kidnapping is found." I blew out a sigh. "How's River doing? I realize it hasn't been a year since she was rescued, but she seems to be doing well."

"She's in therapy twice a week, and she doesn't even go to the bathroom without security hot on her heels when we're at work or in public." Holden shook his head, disbelief registering in his expression. "It's weird as shit to realize that half my family is fucking twisted, and the other half ... I didn't understand how special they were until I almost lost everyone."

"I'm glad things are better for you and River. You both deserve all the happiness in the world." I meant every word I said.

Holden's smile lit up his face. "Yeah, she's amazing. I'm one lucky son of a bitch." His dark brow arched. "Are you dating anyone, or do you need a few nights of fun while you're in town?"

I chuckled, realizing Holden was changing the topic. "I might take you up on the offer. There's no one I'm interested in at the moment."

"Bullshit." Holden barked out a laugh. "We all know you're into Brynn. As soon as you two get anywhere near each other, the fireworks start exploding. It's like you have your own electrical storm brewing."

"Can't happen, plus the situation has changed, and she and I have already talked about it. It's best for everyone, but I only see her as a good friend. Besides, she's in love with at least one guy, maybe two. Even if we did go out for a while, it

wouldn't end well. Not to mention, it's clear that Chance is in love with her, and I won't step on his toes. He's a good guy."

"So, you know about Chance?" Holden stretched out his arm along the back of the sofa, then crossed his jean-clad legs in front of him.

"I didn't until Sutton told me what was up. As soon as she explained that she thought Brynn had feelings for him too, I was out. Everyone's friendship is too important to me." I didn't want to go into detail about what had happened with Giselle at the moment. It could wait for another day.

"You're a better man than me. I would have swooped in and tried my hardest to make someone fall in love with me." A playful grin slipped into place.

"I can appreciate that." I sank into the recliner, the soft leather bending with my weight.

"Hell, it's what I did with River. She was terrified of me when we first met, but I just kept showing her the man I was. Now, we're discussing a date to get married."

I couldn't help but smile. "That's awesome, man. I can't wait to see you two hitched. I'm sure it will be one hell of a wedding."

"You'll have to let me know what you think afterward."

My forehead creased in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Holden leaned forward, a hint of seriousness filling the air. "As one of my groomsmen, you'll have a front row seat."

"Yeah?"

"You're one of my closest friends outside of Jace and Chance. I would be honored if you would join us."

I stood, grinning. “I’m in, dude. Just tell me when and where.”

“Thank fuck.” Holden rose from his spot. “River would have kicked my ass if you’d said no.”

I chuckled. “I would actually pay money to see that.”

Holden gave me a quick hug, then an ornery expression slipped into place. “I’ll let her know you’ve accepted. But there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?” I folded my arms over my chest, bracing myself for his next request. From the glint in his eye, I wasn’t sure I would like it.

“Dude, you have got to learn to dance.”

I threw my head back and laughed my ass off. “Deal.”

“It sounds like you have a few friends who can help you out. I hear Vaughn and Claire are quite the pair on the dance floor.”

“They are. I’ll talk to them. After all, I better get started learning, so I can show off for your bride.” I playfully smacked Holden on the arm. “It’s good to see you happy.”

“Thanks. I am.”

A beat of silence hung in the air as a twinge of envy stabbed me in the chest. Out of all of my close friends, I was the only one still single, and the unattached nights of wild sex were getting old. Funny how quickly the door with Brynn had closed for me. However, I had no fucking clue of the shit show behind the one that was about to open, putting me center stage as the darkness unfolded around me.

**Giselle**

**S**harp tingles pierced my arms and legs as the room blurred in and out. I blinked furiously, attempting to clear the clouds from my thoughts and orient myself to my surroundings. The light blazed bright, making me squint. My wrists stung as I struggled against restraints, the wide leather pinching my skin. I glanced down, realizing I was naked and spread-eagled, suspended a few inches above a cracked concrete floor, my limbs stretched as far as they could go without snapping me in two.

Somewhere in the room, a fire crackled, and the scent of burning wood caught my attention. Since I couldn't see a fireplace, I assumed it was somewhere behind me.

“Ah, you're awake.” Ashkov's rich Russian accent broke through the fog.

I looked up, registering that a nude Ashkov sat in front of me. I focused on the unclothed woman next to his chair as her stringy and unkempt dishwater blonde hair fell from her ponytail. Her blank eyes stared at me, unseeing, and her body jerked back as he pulled on the chain attached to the collar around her neck. Cuts and bruises dotted her fair skin, and my stomach clenched. Any hope that the rumors weren't true, that

Ashkov wasn't as harsh and evil of a man as I'd heard, faded away. I tried not to retch at the realization.

“Donovan charges a high price for your company, I hope you don't disappoint me.” Ashkov gripped his short but thick cock with his other hand and stroked it.

I clenched my teeth, wondering what time it was—how many hours I'd already spent with this piece of shit. Maybe Ashkov would kill me by accident, and I would be free from being sold to depraved, insane men.

Ashkov jerked the chain, then forced the girl's mouth down to his dick while his dark gaze coasted over me from head to toe.

I swallowed, fear scraping my throat as I mustered up the courage to ask Ashkov a question. “How did you learn about me? I was never supposed to be offered to you.” At least that's what Donovan had said, had *promised*, but he was a lying bastard, so I wasn't sure why I ever believed a slick word that slithered from his mouth.

Ashkov grunted as the girl sucked him, the slurps of her work echoing through the small space. I would have been repulsed at one time, but when you've been sold by your brother to the highest bidder since you were sixteen, not much bothered you anymore. Although I was talented and deserved to dance with the company that had accepted me, I'd eventually learned that Donovan had bought my way in, using my body as payment to Ander. He'd secured my place as a prima ballerina behind my father's back. Once Ander tired of me and needed money, he continued in Donovan's footsteps.

“A confidant contacted me and mentioned that you would be listed on the dark web for sale. Of course, I had to find out what all of the fuss was over the golden-eyed girl. You're just

a stupid bitch with another cunt,” Ashkov said in a matter-of-fact tone, a smirk tugging at his features. “But my curiosity got the better of me. From what some of my friends have told me, you’re worth every penny.” He rubbed his hands together. “I can’t wait to make you scream, Giselle.”

I glowered at him, hatred seeping from my pores. This was what Zayne Wilson brought me back to life for—to be raped and tortured, sold to the highest bidder for a night. Over and over.

Ashkov stood, throwing the girl to the ground. She whimpered as he walked toward me, dragging the chain and her behind him.

“You have a short dick,” I said with a snort. If he were going to do his worst, I would at least speak my mind. At this point, I had nothing to lose. “Is that why you have to buy women? Because once they see your little nub, they laugh and leave?”

He raised an open hand and slapped my cheek, forcing my neck to snap back. I closed my eyes, allowing the sting to carry me away from this hell for a fleeting moment. A gasp escaped me as my pussy was gently touched, sending slivers of pleasure coursing through me. Glancing down, my attention ended up on the girl while she peered at me, her tongue lapping at my sensitive flesh. She was priming me for him.

She spread my lips apart, and my sex responded without permission. My chest heaved while she skillfully played with my body as though she’d owned it herself.

I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood, unwilling to cry out as my orgasm uncurled in the pit of my stomach, and I tensed and trembled with bliss. The worst part of being raped was the guilt ripping through me if I unwillingly gave way to

the pleasure. That only happened if the sick fucks wanted to play with my head, too—screw with me mentally.

Ashkov laughed as he walked behind me and spread my ass cheeks. He first dipped his fingers in the juices of my orgasm, then shoved one in my puckered hole, causing me to suck in a breath as pain shot through me.

“Ever hear of lube, motherfucker?” I’d officially lost any sense of self-preservation. Ashkov was right. There was nothing special about me—except that I had fight and fire.

“Lube is for the weak, my little ballerina.”

My nostrils flared with the sound of the pet name. I hated being referred to as ... a scream filled the air as a sharp wave of sickening agony speared me, and the skin on my lower back pulsed with heat.

Ashkov moved a knife in front of my face, the blade burning a bright orange. The tip neared my nipple, and I sucked in a breath. “Please don’t. I’ll do anything you want, but don’t burn me again.” My body trembled against the restraints as Ashkov strolled in front of me like nothing was wrong, as if he hadn’t just burned my back with a hot blade. Sweat beaded on my spine and slicked between my breasts. My pulse whirred with fear. I gasped for air, struggling not to vomit from the horrible throbbing sensation at the base of my spine.

“My beautiful ballerina, you have the most amazing scream I’ve ever heard. I want to hear it again and again as I carve up your perfect body, lick the blood from your skin, then rub my cock in it before I fuck you over and over. But before you take me inside that tight cunt of yours, I have something special, just for you.” The tonelessness of his voice petrified me as he looked in the distance.

I followed his gaze, and tears streamed down my cheeks. “A gl-glass soda bottle?” I choked out.

“I promise to make you come again. After all, I’m a gentleman and always take care of the ladies’ needs first.” His soulless laugh filled the air as he pierced my skin, then dragged the tip of his knife between my breasts, blood seeping and creating a thin line down my stomach.

“Oh yes.” He ran his tongue over the cut, grunting as the girl on her knees massaged his balls.

The restraints barely moved as I jerked my body in desperation, trying to escape his knife while he made multiple cuts across my skin. He dropped to his knees as he carved into my flesh and my screams of horror tore through me. If I lived through this, I swore that I would hunt Ashkov down and kill him ... slowly.

Black dots danced before my eyes, the pain excruciating as he continued. Dull razor blades slicing my skin open would have felt better. I clung to that vision of him dying, begging and pleading for mercy as I ended his life.

He walked away, only to return mere seconds later, his tongue licking over his lips in a salacious manner. Without warning, Ashkov shoved the bottle inside me, scraping my inner walls and stretching me beyond what I thought imaginable. As he raped me, I struggled to find something to use as a distraction, to connect with any thought that might help me keep my sanity. But only one man’s face came into my mind. As much as I loathed Zayne Wilson, he was becoming the salvation for my scarred soul. Yes, I hated him with every fiber of my being, but there was also something else. As hard as I’d tried to ignore it, from the moment of our introduction, I knew he was different than any other man I’d



been around. I just couldn't trust him yet, but something kept drawing me to him.

As my consciousness teetered on the edge of oblivion, I tapped into my imagination and brought my bodyguard to the forefront, desperate not to be mentally present while Ashkov hurt me.

Agony ripped through me, tearing me away from that guarded place with Zayne. Screaming again, I was no longer able to focus. Unable to remain coherent, I welcomed the darkness when she cloaked me in the safety of her arms.

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**Zayne**

**T**he gloomy morning that had settled over Spokane didn't help my mood one bit. After I'd seen my friends, I couldn't push the negative thoughts out of my head about Giselle. Donovan was a piece of shit, to say the least, and his treatment of her made me want to poke around into who that douchebag really was. Other than having a hot spot for assholes who manhandled women, something continued to nag at me about the whole situation, but I couldn't put my finger on it yet.

I pulled the company-owned Mercedes into Donovan's driveway and parked in front of the garage. Having Westbrook Security provide a car for me wherever a job was made being rootless even that much easier. After ensuring that I had my phone, wallet, and keys, I climbed out of the car and locked it. My distrust of this man was bone-deep. Smoothing my black company polo shirt and khaki slacks, I went to the mansion's entrance and rang the doorbell, fully expecting Marty to answer.

The door swung open, and my gaze landed on Donovan. His concerned expression piqued my interest. "Good morning." Donovan adjusted his navy tie. "I apologize. I

didn't realize what time it was, and I should have called you sooner. Giselle has fallen ill, and I need to take care of her."

*Was this guy for real?* "Are you sure? I've been around plenty of sick people. My immune system is pretty good." I folded my hands in front of me, eyeing Donovan behind my sunglasses.

"I suspect it will be a few days. I'll call when it's okay to return. I would feel bad if you came down with whatever she has. The doctor will check on her today, so I'm sure she'll be better soon."

Unease peppered my skin. Donovan was lying. The first few minutes that Pierce and I had spent with him, I spotted his tell—he fiddled with his tie, then the cuffs of his shirt. He would make a horrible poker player unless he wore a T-shirt.

"Okay. I'll wait for you to reach out."

"Of course. Again, I'm sorry that I didn't call before you showed up. Hopefully you'll enjoy the time off." Donovan glanced at his watch, attempting to disguise the unsettled look that had registered on his face.

I nodded, and Donovan closed the door on me. Although it wasn't in my job description, I needed to find out what the hell was going on behind closed doors.

Turning, I strolled to the car with a renewed purpose. I unlocked it, slid into the driver's seat, and started the engine. The Mercedes purred to life, and I headed away from Donovan's place.

The day Pierce had brought me to meet Giselle and Donovan, we also assessed the property before we met them, looking for any weak areas that allowed unauthorized access. It turned out that, for someone dedicated to his sister's

security, Donovan had several places around the perimeter of his estate that were ideal for someone to sneak through and keep eyes on any activity.

I drove up the road, then turned right. Parking the car, I turned off the engine and climbed up the steep hill to the back of the estate. No other homes were on that side, so I didn't have to worry about some bored housewife catching sight of me.

Within seconds, I skirted around the manor and hid in the trees. Donovan had a hell of a camera system outside, and the last thing I wanted to do was call attention to myself. When he and Pierce had discussed the job, Donovan had shared the security measures he currently had in place, which were top of the line. It was most likely why he didn't give a fuck that Pierce had shared his concern about the entry points to his acreage. Donovan didn't see a threat.

In my opinion, Donovan's overconfidence was his weakness. Plus, he hadn't ever dealt with me, so he had no idea what he was up against. I was highly trained to sneak in, make a kill, then retreat before anyone knew what had happened.

Sneaking around the edge of the land, I stilled, realizing I'd found the perfect place to take cover and keep an eye on the entrance. I crouched down, spotting the camera on this side of the house as it scanned the area.

"Stupid fuck," I muttered. Donovan hadn't mentioned that the cameras swept an area. It wasn't a bad idea, but you needed additional coverage for the wide-open spots.

Minutes ticked by, then the sound of tires on the driveway caught my ears. I remained still as I trained my attention on an approaching black Escalade.

Once the car had parked, a burly man dressed in black climbed out and walked around to the passenger's side. He opened the door, leaned in, then straightened and headed to the house ... with a limp Giselle in his arms.

*What the fuck?*

My experience told me Giselle was alive, or Donovan wouldn't have risked bringing her home. No wonder the bastard was nervous when I showed up this morning. He didn't want me to see this. But what was wrong with Giselle? Had she tried to hurt herself again?

Beads of perspiration dotted my forehead, but I refused to move. My eyes cut to the corner of the manor. The camera was facing away from me, so I slowly wiped my sweat-slickened skin with the back of my hand. I could ask Sutton to hack the camera system, but I couldn't make the request over a suspicion. I had to have a stronger reason than Donovan lying to me. People lied all of the time, and sometimes even for good reasons.

Minutes later, the burly dude strolled out of the house and got back into the car. Once he turned the vehicle, I made a mental note of the license plate as he drove away.

Just as quietly as I'd entered the property, I left without being detected. I slid down the hill, maintaining my balance as I stumbled onto the paved road. When I served in the military, I quickly developed the skill to slide down even the most treacherous hill on my feet. Even though I was no longer in combat, it was still valuable.

Jogging to my car, I used the key instead of the fob to unlock the door. If anyone was around, I didn't want the beep of the Mercedes to alert them to my presence.

After I secured myself in the front seat, I started the car and eased the gear shift into drive. Glancing in my rearview mirror, I was confident that no one had seen me.

I pushed the button on the steering wheel, then gave the order to call my boss. Hopefully, he and Sutton could help me learn what was going on with Giselle. Afterward, I planned on heading over to Vaughn's to chat with him and Claire.

The rest of the crew had flown in yesterday, including Hendrix, Cade, Franklin, and their significant others. It would be good to catch up with everyone since I suddenly had some time off.

"What's up?" Pierce's voice broke through my thoughts when he answered.

"Are you and Sutton home? I would like to swing by."

"Aren't you supposed to be working right now?" Pierce's confusion carried through the Bluetooth speaker.

"Yeah, that's what we need to chat about. He gave me some time off, but I have a bad feeling, man. Something isn't right with Donovan."

"We're here. Head on over." Concern dotted Pierce's tone.

One thing about Pierce, we'd known each other since we were kids, and we always had each other's backs. When one of us had an uneasy suspicion about a situation, the others listened. It was one of the things that made him such a good boss and friend.

"See you guys in fifteen."

"Later," Pierce said, then the call disconnected.

I flipped my turn signal on, made a right onto Highway 395, and headed out of Spokane. I felt there was something

sinister going on that Donovan didn't want me or Westbrook Security to learn about. *Too bad, motherfucker.* Sutton was a fucking genius at digging up information on people. If something awful was happening, then I was bound and determined to find out exactly what he was hiding.

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## Giselle

I peered through the darkness at the red glowing numbers of the alarm clock on my nightstand. It was nine-thirty in the morning, but I wasn't sure how long I'd been sleeping. My head throbbed as I struggled to sit up.

"It's good to see you awake." The voice was low and sultry.

I jumped before I spotted Donovan in the corner.

"What day is it?" My tongue was thick, and my throat scratchy and raw. I closed my eyes as the memories of Ashkov punctured my soul. The emotions and heartache from the torture surrounded me like a toxic fog, killing me slowly in the process.

"You've slept for the last twenty-four hours. I suspect you're not feeling too well. There's water, Advil, and an OxyContin near your clock. You'll find a pack of crackers there, too. You shouldn't take the medication on an empty stomach."

*How fucking noble of you to sell me, then play nurse. I hadn't ever had anyone be kind or respect me, so I knew better than to fall for his bullshit. Tears pricked my eyes as I leaned*



over and wrapped my aching fingers around the glass. I sipped it slowly, recalling the times I'd gulped down the soothing liquid only to have it come rushing up minutes later. If Donovan were closer, I would happily vomit all over him.

As I struggled to rip the cracker package open, Donovan rose from his seat and sat on the side of the bed, the mattress giving way to his large form. He held out a hand, and I shoved the food at him. With ease, he ripped it open, then gave the packet back to me.

"You're being terrifyingly nice," I murmured. I nibbled on the cracker, the dry texture forming a paste in my mouth. Sipping the water again, I leaned against the headboard.

"It's my job to tend to you after you're out for an evening."

I barked out a laugh. "Is that what you call this? More like protecting your property," I sneered. Sadness enveloped me. I was a person, a human being, but between the ballet world and Donovan's twisted abuse, I would never be seen as one. Maybe it was time that I realized that I might not have been successful in my suicide attempt but I'd died a long time ago. "You make me sick. How much did Ashkov pay you for me?"

"Three million." Pride oozed from Donovan as though he personally had carefully crafted my body for Ashkov's pleasure.

A horrified gasp escaped me. I had no idea that he was pocketing *millions* off my pain and humiliation. Ignoring the thrum of pain coursing through me, I slapped Donovan across the cheek. "I will dance on your grave when someone puts a bullet through your skull." Venom dripped from my words.

Donovan grabbed my wrist, causing my drink to slosh over the edge of the glass and onto my lilac comforter. With his free

hand, he rubbed his face with the other, laughing. “He must have done a number on you, sis. Your lame-ass attempt to hurt me barely even stung.” He held my hand up and examined the cuts beneath my arm. “Make sure you wear long sleeves until these are healed. The cuts aren’t deep, but he marked you everywhere, all over your body.”

I jerked away from him as though he’d just seared my skin. “He’s a sadistic, sick fuck. You’ve heard the rumors, you were the one that told them to me. He tortures his victims, then murders them. He’s worse than any other man you’ve sold me to. I’ve never been raped with a goddamn soda bottle! How could you sell me to him?” I spat.

A sharp breath rushed from my lungs as he wound my ponytail around his fist and jerked. “Watch your tone, Giselle, or I’ll sell you to him again.”

A suffocating anxiety reared its ugly head, and I gripped the bedspread as fear twisted my stomach into knots. The mere thought of being tortured by Ashkov a second time forced my mouth closed.

“That’s a good girl. Take your medicine and get some sleep, darling. I’ll be right over here if you need anything.”

Disgust tightened my chest as he sank into the chair across the room. I understood that Donovan had no plans of leaving me alone anytime soon.

He nodded to the oxy and kept a constant eye on me while I behaved like a child and took the fucking pill. I wasn’t sure why he found it necessary to babysit me. It wasn’t as though I was able to run after Ashkov’s abuse.

It turned out that the drug dosage was higher than what was typically provided to a patient recovering from surgery. It

knocked me out in minutes, and if I wasn't dreaming about Ashkov, I was dreaming about my bodyguard, which at least was a better alternative than reliving every second with the devil. Donovan had sold me to sick bastards before, but Ashkov took it to a whole new level.

Zayne's face flickered through my thoughts, and I focused on him to try and mentally sidestep the physical and emotional pain. My drug-addled imagination drifted, and I entertained the idea of what it might look like to be more than just the girl Zayne had saved. Then I reminded myself that my growing interest in him would never work. If he knew what I was—a disgusting sex slave—he would run in the other direction. Guilt and shame seeped into my heart, coating it with self-hatred and loathing. Once again, I wished my life would end.

Tears brimmed in my eyes as I snuggled beneath the blankets, hiding from Donovan. I refused to let him see that he'd finally broken me. One thing was clear, though. I needed help, and there was only one possibility I could think of—my bodyguard. Fear gripped me, my stomach rolling with unease. If I asked for his help, and it backfired, not only was my life on the line, so was ...

I sank my teeth into my lower lip, muffling the cry that threatened to escape. If anything happened to her, I would never be able to forgive myself. I would rather live in this hell than make a wrong decision and have it affect the only other person on this planet I cared about.

Closing my eyes, I silently cried onto my pillow as I wrestled with the idea of trusting my bodyguard. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a read on him. Even when Donovan was a total ass, Zayne's expression and body language never changed.

The oxy started to blur my thoughts as I scrambled to form a plan. It would only take a few times to test him and determine what Zayne was made of. Was he another monster, or was he the man I needed him to be? Only time would tell, and it was running out.

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Zayne

“**Y**ou know I can’t do anything based purely on suspicion. I’ve had my own concerns, but we have to have something concrete. If we turn Donovan over for abuse, he’ll be released from a night or two of jail, then go after Giselle. It might end up causing her more harm,” Pierce said, rocking back in his office chair, his brown eyes capturing mine. He tapped his pen on top of the stack of papers on his desk.

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking your wife.” I peered over at Sutton, who sat in the leather wingback chair next to mine. She was scribbling away on the notebook she’d brought with her to the meeting.

“I do believe you, Zayne. If you think something is off, then we need to discreetly dig and make sure that Giselle isn’t in danger,” Pierce assured me.

“I understand, boss. If I stay silent around someone long enough, either they fill it with confessions, or I’ll be able to hear what they’re trying to hide,” I said. “I suspect Giselle is no different.”

A beat of silence hovered in the air before Sutton spoke. “Are we even sure that Donovan is his real name? If he’s at all

shady, then I'm guessing it's an alias." A crease dented the smooth skin in between her eyebrows as she finished her question.

Pierce steepled his fingers together, appearing deep in thought. "As always, we looked into him as a potential client when he reached out to hire us, but if there's some underlying shit going on, we don't normally learn that until one of the guys is in the middle of a shit storm."

I rubbed my chin as I stared out of the window behind Pierce. The green leaves of the hardwood trees swayed in the summer breeze, and I tilted my head slightly, imagining I could smell the fresh air. Once Pierce and Sutton had located the property to build their log home, Sutton had planted hundreds of saplings so that she would have amazing fall foliage in front of her.

My attention returned to the conversation. "Donovan lied to me this morning. Whoever brought Giselle to the house ..." Doubt lingered in the back of my mind. Pierce was right. All I had was my suspicions. What if the guy was her friend, and she'd gotten sick while out?

"Zayne, trust your gut, hon. You gave me a license plate to run, so that's a start." Sutton gave my forearm a gentle squeeze.

I patted her hand. "I realize there are a lot of possibilities, and maybe it's nothing, but I have to make sure. One thing I do know, Donovan is rough with his sister." I cleared my throat. "He's actually adopted and not a blood relation. Giselle offered those details on her own in ways that sounded like she was looking for distance. Also, did Donovan mention that she was once a prima ballerina for some big ballet company?"

Pierce leaned forward in his seat, clasping his hands in front of him. “No, he didn’t. Which may not matter but does make it clear that he’s withholding information. Did Giselle mention when Donovan was adopted?”

“When he was only a few weeks old, he was abandoned on a church’s doorstep. I know there are laws where someone can drop off a little one without fear of being prosecuted, but I have no clue what the laws are in France. Guess he was one of those instances. Giselle’s parents opened their home for him immediately. I’m not sure how long it took to officially adopt him. In a nutshell, he’s been in her life since he was a baby.” I laced my fingers behind my head.

“From the application that Donovan completed before hiring us, Giselle is almost a year older than he is. Other than why he wanted a bodyguard, he didn’t provide a lot of information about her. When I asked, he was pretty tight-lipped, which always piques my concern. Now that you are in the house and around Giselle, let’s see what we can learn.” Pierce added, “Sutton, let’s look into Giselle’s story to determine if it matches any articles. Find out what company she danced for as well. Maybe at one time she had a different last name other than the ones we know about.”

“I’ll start there and see what I can pull up from the license plate, too.” Her eyes filled with compassion as she glanced at me. She set her pen down. “Are you okay, Zayne?” Her tone was soft, consoling. “If anything is going on, we will get to the bottom of it, but ... this assignment has got to be bringing up your past.”

I dragged my hands down my face. I had wondered when the topic might pop up. Although I loved Sutton like a sister and appreciated her checking on me, I wasn’t ready to talk

about it. I quickly pivoted the conversation and took control without her realizing it.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I spoke with Brynn last night.”

Sutton sat straighter in her chair. “How did it go?”

I gave her a half-shrug. “Better than expected. She was cool with me backing away. Hell, she practically admitted she had feelings for Chance ... and Jace, and River.” I chuckled. “She needs some time to figure shit out. One thing is clear, I’m not the guy for her. It’s fine, though. All that matters is that she’s happy.”

“Your happiness is just as important, Zayne,” Sutton said, crossing her ankles and rubbing her pregnant belly.

I grunted my response. She was wrong, but I didn’t want to correct her. Glancing at Pierce, I realized he was staring a hole through me. Pierce was always upfront with us, though. He would talk to me privately if he had a concern.

He sighed. “Let us know if you learn anything else, and of course we’ll do the same. Since you have a few days off, maybe Sutton will have something before you return to Donovan’s. Until then, will you be crashing here or at Vaughn’s place?”

“Here unless we’re drinking. I’ll text you guys.” I rose from my chair.

“Your room is ready. I made the bed and restocked the towels in your bathroom after we came home.” Sutton gave me a sweet smile.

I held my hand out to bring her close, then tightly hugged her. “Not sure what I’d do without you guys.”



Sutton pulled away and squeezed my shoulder. “We’re family. You don’t even have to ponder that question.”

Pierce stood, his dark brow arching. “Seems like you’re holding my woman a little too long there, dude.” Pierce’s laugh rang out through the office as he approached me. He gave me a quick hug and patted me on the back. “I know this case is difficult on you for multiple reasons, so we’ll be checking in more often than normal.”

“I understand ... and thanks. I’ll wait to hear something. For now, I’m heading over to Vaughn and Claire’s.”

I showed myself out, then climbed into the Mercedes. Once the engine started, I rolled up to the gate and waited to be scanned. When Pierce and Sutton had the house built, Sutton had designed a top-of-the-line security system, including the main gate and an eye scanner to enter. Later she added the exit feature so she could log any concerns and time stamps after what Vaughn and Claire had lived through.

Before I was off the property, a tug of war between my heart and head began to play out. A heavy sigh slipped from my lips, and I rubbed my clean-shaven jaw. Flashes of Giselle dropping dead danced before my eyes, and my pulse kicked up. I pulled the car over at the bottom of the private road and white-knuckled the steering wheel.

*Screams pierced my eardrums as I dialed in the scope of my weapon, bullets flying through the air, zinging past my ear. I crouched and hid behind the old building, just one among many in the residential area. I sucked in a breath, watching as civilians dodged their military’s rapid fire. I couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of here.*

“Son of a bitch,” I said into the comm to my team. “Are you bastards covering me or not?”

*“Copy, take your shots! I repeat, take your shots,” my commander yelled.*

*With a steady hand, I unloaded the clip of my M4A1 rifle, bullets spraying in every direction, the bodies of our enemy dropping like flies.*

*“Goddamn! That was a hell of a fucking show, Wilson,” one of my teammates said, his way of congratulating me for more kills to add to my record.*

*Once the dust had settled, I peered out of my hiding place and froze. “Fuck! Fuck! How the hell did ...” I ensured my path was clear, then I hurried to the body, my finger ready to pull the trigger again at any sign of danger. I removed the face covering, and my entire world crashed down, wrecking me in the process. Dropping my gun onto the dusty road, I rolled the small figure over and started CPR.*

*“Let it go, Wilson. We don’t have time,” Captain Ryan said from behind me. He tugged on my arm, but once he realized I was determined to save ...*

*My body jerked backward, my commander suddenly nose-to-nose with me. “Soldier, you did your job. Now do your fucking job again, pick up your weapon, and walk away. That’s an order!”*

*My gaze landed on the still figure, a pool of blood accumulating beneath her. My ears rang with additional shots, kicking my ass into gear. With one last look at the lifeless girl, I swore that I would protect women and children even if it meant my own life. This was the second time I’d failed, but the first time I’d pulled the trigger. Never. Fucking. Again.*

PTSD was a real fucking bitch.

Sweat trickled down the side of my head as I finally jerked myself out of the gut-wrenching memory. My breaths came in short gasps, the realization of what I had to do sucker-punching me in the face.

“Son of a bitch!” I smacked the steering wheel with the palm of my hand and sent a sting of pain up my arm, but I didn’t give a shit. What I was about to do would hurt a hell of a lot more, but if I wanted to be able to move forward, I had to close the door on the past. And in order to do that, I needed Pierce’s help.

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**Zayne**

**N**early three hours later, Jeffrey Stafford met me at the airport in Portland, Oregon.

“Good to see you, man.” I bumped fists with the retired security guard who was now Pierce’s right-hand guy. Jeffrey ran a smooth operation and brought a lot of experience and expertise to the table from the years that he’d worked with Pierce’s father, something Pierce lost when his father passed away.

“How’s Spokane?” Jeffrey offered me a wide smile as we climbed into the company car.

“We’re starting my favorite season,” I said sarcastically, buckling my seatbelt.

“Summer?” Jeffrey started to wind through the airport and headed to Pierce and Sutton’s penthouse at the edge of downtown.

“Fire season. Fucking hate it.”

“I’m glad we don’t normally have that in this part of Oregon. The summer here is pretty tame. You should ask Pierce to give you some assignments down here. I could always use some more guys in the area.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. I’m actually here on personal business today.” I massaged the back of my neck, my chest tightening with stress.

“I wasn’t sure. Pierce just said to pick you up, give you a company Mercedes, then drive you to the airport when you were ready to fly back.” Jeffrey flipped the turn signal on, the soft *tick tick* filling the silence in the car.

“I have a day or two off from a job, so I figured it was as good a time as any to take care of a few things.” *Like I could take care of this in a few hours.*

“Let me know what you need or if you’ll be staying at the penthouse. The guest room is ready if you want it.” Jeffrey glanced at me before he merged onto the four-lane highway.

“Thanks. I’ll keep you posted. I’m not sure where today will lead me.”



VEHICLES WHIZZED past me as I drove. As soon as Jeffrey and I had arrived at the penthouse, he tossed me the keys to another company Mercedes. Yeah, my boss had a thing. Not interested in wasting time, I hopped in, thanked Jeffrey, and headed out.

Since no one else was in the car with me, I jammed to my tunes. Although I didn’t have many opportunities to listen to a lot of music, I loved it when I could. My fingers tapped the steering wheel to “First Class” by Jack Harlow.

I intentionally relaxed my shoulders and neck, trying to get some relief from the knots of tension already thickening with my decision. It had been a long-ass time since I’d made an

effort to visit the old neighborhood. Once I was out of Portland and in the military, I rarely returned. Too many dark memories still had the power to break me. I'd worked too fucking hard to keep my shit together. It wasn't worth the risk of visiting ... until now. The flashbacks and PTSD would kill me if I didn't, and I was no good to Giselle or anyone else if I was a goddamn mess.

Taking the exit, I turned left, then meandered down a side street. My heart pounded so hard in my ears that I felt it in my veins. I fought the urge to turn around but forced myself to keep driving.

The bungalow-style homes had been upgraded since I'd left, but then again, it had been almost ten years. After I joined the army, my parents moved to the East Coast and Pop died not long after. Even though I tried, Mom and I weren't that close, but I still called her every few months to check in. She also knew that if there was an emergency, I would hop on the first plane to her.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered as I finally found what I was looking for. Glancing in the rearview and side mirrors, I made sure there weren't any cars approaching before I pulled into a driveway.

Turning off the car, I stared at the overgrown yard and dilapidated house with black scorch marks scarring the wood. Half of the roof was gone, and the other half was in the process of falling in. It was a far cry from the well-cared-for home with three bedrooms, two baths, and a remodeled kitchen that I remembered from high school. *What in the fuck happened?*

I hopped out of the vehicle. The weeds brushed against my knees as I stood still for a moment. Since the house was at the

end of the street, maybe it was easier for the neighbors to ignore the mess. Wiggling my fingers and trying to ignore the tingles of fear, I slowly walked to the front door that was still standing. The long grass flattened with each step, and I pushed up my sunglasses, which had slipped down my nose.

Shadows gathered in my thoughts, swirling with memories of how many times I'd tried ... I clenched my hands into fists, determined to not allow my past to consume me, but the cold, hard truth crushed my lungs, and I struggled to catch my breath. It should have never fucking happened. I should have been able to stop it. Tears clouded my vision, and I looked away from the home, my heart splintering into a thousand shards all over again.

My cell buzzed in my back pocket, and relief flooded me as I welcomed the distraction. I shoved the nearly debilitating heartache to the side as I glanced at the screen. Shaking my head at the timing, I answered Mom's call, then headed to the car.

"Hey, Mom. How are you?" I slid into the driver's seat and started the Mercedes, the Bluetooth connecting within seconds. I placed my phone into the cup holder and backed away. I'd seen enough. Walking down memory lane wasn't going to help relieve the pain.

"Hi, honey." Mom's voice was laced with sadness.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I headed down the street away from the ruined home and lot. As soon as I was finished talking to Mom, I would let Jeffrey know I was ready to fly back to Spokane. It had taken me a hell of a lot less time than I'd anticipated.

"Zayne, Chelsey's father passed away last night. It was unexpected from what I understand—a heart attack." Her

sniffle filled the line.

Hearing her name again was a punch to my gut, and I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding "Shit." I shoved my hand through my hair. "How's Linda? I can't imagine she's doing okay."

"I talked to her this morning. She's numb and in shock, which is to be expected."

"Mom, you're probably the best person to support her since you've been through the loss of a spouse."

"I'll do what I can from here, but the distance will make it more difficult." A hint of loneliness dotted her words.

That was one problem I could fix. "I'll pay for your plane ticket. Go see her. Just let me know the dates."

"Zayne, I can't ask you to do that. You've already paid off my house. I'm not calling to ask you for money."

"I know, Mom. I do this because I love you." And I did. Paying for the things she couldn't afford was my way of showing her. "But I'm not asking. Call her and tell her you're flying in. I'll have a rental car set up, and I'll transfer some extra cash into your account. Stay as long as you want to. She needs you." A growing ache reverberated in my chest. I wasn't offering to do this just for Mom. It was my way of soothing my own heart as well. I hadn't kept in touch with Linda and Jacob after ... I swallowed over the emotions lodged in my throat, forcing them down.

"Will you ... will you call her, Zayne? I think it would mean the world to her to hear from you."

Even though Mom couldn't see me, I shook my head. "She doesn't need to talk to me. It will only make things worse." My stomach churned at the idea of hearing her voice after all



this time—years after I bailed and joined the military. It was a miracle Linda and Jacob didn't hate me. God knew I hated myself for what had happened.

“I understand. One of these days I hope you find the strength to stop blaming yourself. No one else blames you. Forgive yourself, son. I want you to be happy.”

My jaw clenched, anger rising as the lie danced on the tip of my tongue. “I am happy,” I said between gritted teeth. When would she learn to stop pushing me about my past?

“How? You've never dealt with her—”

“Enough, Mom. This isn't up for discussion. Let me know about the plane ticket. If Linda needs the cost of the funeral covered or any medical bills ... whatever she needs, I can help. But it's the best I can do. I can't talk to her.” I was a little surprised that I'd admitted that to Mom, but she would keep pushing if I didn't say something to appease her. Every time we talked, this always happened. My eyes narrowed as silence filled the line. One of these days, Mom would finally understand why we weren't close. It wasn't that I didn't love her or want to spend time with her, but she insisted on bringing up shit that I wanted to keep buried.

“Mom, I'm driving, and the traffic is brutal. I need to focus. Let me know the days and times of your flight, and I'll book the trip for you. I love you.”

“Love you too. Take care of yourself.”

Her words rang in my head as I disconnected the call.

“I'm fucking trying to take care of myself, Mom. I'm trying.” Without hesitation, I called Jeffrey and told him I was on the way back to the penthouse and that I would be ready to return to the airport. The palms of my hands itched with the

urge to get the hell out of Portland. It had been a bad idea to come back.

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**Giselle**

**A** week had passed since Donovan had sold me to Ashkov. The cuts were mostly healed, but the burn on my back still hurt like a son of a bitch.

Checking myself in the bathroom mirror, I smoothed my red blouse and denim shorts. After I pulled my hair into a low ponytail, I quickly applied a coat of mascara. My eyes—so light, they almost appeared gold—were the first thing most people noticed about me, and making my long lashes look even fuller was the last step in putting on my mask for the world.

Over the last several days, I'd battled with the idea of confiding in Zayne when he returned. Each time I talked myself out of it, the memories of that evening with Ashkov returned in my nightmares, wrecking me with a potent mix of terror and desperation. It was a constant reminder that I had to find a way to escape my prison with Donovan or continue to suffer at the feet of men like Ashkov. Donovan had made sure that suicide was no longer an option. Although the cuts had healed and the burn on my back was getting better, I doubted I would ever recover mentally or emotionally.

My hands trembled while weighing the pros and cons of leaving Donovan. I didn't care that my life was at stake. I didn't give a shit. I would gladly sacrifice myself to protect her. *That's not the only thing that makes your stomach flip-flop with nerves.*

I caught myself before I rolled my eyes. "I'm not falling for my bodyguard," I muttered, irritated with the idea. I was in a life-and-death situation, not shopping for a relationship. Plus, Donovan would never allow it, so even if I was catching feelings for Zayne ... I shook my head, dismissing the idea. He was gorgeous, but more than that, kind. Zayne treated me differently than any guy I had spent time with since ... forever. More than anything, I felt that Zayne actually cared about and respected me as a person. My thoughts drifted back to the first day we met. *What if it did, Giselle? What if you found a passion that set your soul on fire again, something to live for?* No one had ever viewed me as worthy of having a passion unless it made them money—except for Zayne.

Irritated that the bodyguard was breaking down my walls in the short time he'd been around, that I actually looked forward to seeing him, I squared my shoulders and refused to give in. There was no way that Zayne would want a used woman like me.

The sound of the doorbell pulled me away from my thoughts, and I tossed my makeup in the drawer.

I entered my bedroom just as the door flew open, startling me. I scurried backward and landed flat on my ass. Donovan chuckled, probably getting off on the idea that he'd scared me. The son of a bitch thrived on my fear in any form he could get it.

My brow arched as Zayne slipped past Donovan and approached me. “Are you okay?”

His deep voice did funny things to my insides. No one had asked me if I was all right in a long time.

Zayne held his hand out, and I took it, the warmth of his touch mesmerizing me. Glancing at Donovan, I noticed him assessing our interaction. *Fucking asshole.*

“I’m fine, thank you.”

He pulled me into a standing position, his green eyes flickering with concern.

My heart skipped a beat as I witnessed the single sign of emotion from him. Even though he cared, it would take more time to earn my trust.

“I’m leaving for the office, Giselle. I’ll see you tonight.” Donovan strutted through the room, grabbed my chin, and kissed me on the mouth. Then he whispered, “Be a good girl ... or else.” He nodded at Zayne before he left.

Horrified at Donovan’s display of ownership, I glanced at Zayne, but his stoic expression had slipped back into place and cloaked what he may have thought. My nostrils flared, anger laced with bitterness pulsing through my veins. I wouldn’t be in this damned predicament if Zayne had let me die.

“I need you to take me shopping today.” My tone was dismissive as I gathered my Hermes handbag and phone from the top of my dresser.

“Sure.”

I rolled my eyes at his short answer, then marched past him and into the hall. My brows arched, and I glanced over my shoulder, wondering why he was just standing there. “Any

day, bodyguard.” I hurried down the first half of the stairs, muttering under my breath about how such a gorgeous man could be so irritating. A yelp escaped me as pain shot through my hip, and I grasped the railing to keep myself from spilling down the rest of the steps.

With a quick move, Zayne grabbed my waist and steadied me with his arm while I found my footing.

“Giselle, you’re not okay. Talk to me. Are you still sick?” Zayne quietly asked.

“I’m fine,” I gritted out, attempting to manage the lingering pain.

“Don’t waste my time lying to me. It won’t work.” Zayne released me but stood on the same stair. “Have you eaten?”

My head snapped up. “You’re not my babysitter, Zayne. Leave it alone.”

His forehead creased with my demand. “All I asked was if you’d had some food.”

Zayne’s green eyes locked on mine, and I realized he wasn’t going to back down.

“No.” Zayne continued to help me while I grasped the handrail and continued my descent of the stairs. Before I could reach the front door, Zayne opened it, then escorted me to his Mercedes. Although he waited near the front passenger’s side of the car, gripping the handle, I huffed before I opened my own and climbed into the backseat.

Once settled, he slipped on his sunglasses, then glanced at me through the rearview mirror. “You can talk to me, Giselle. I’m not the enemy.”

What the actual fuck was happening? I leaned forward in my seat and glared at him. “Don’t be stupid. Why would you think anything was wrong?” I held up my finger and placed it over my lips, hoping he would understand to shut up. “Take me to the mall downtown.” My tone was bordering on rude, but Zayne couldn’t say another word, or he would get us both killed.

Silence filled the space over the next twenty minutes, and the fight between my anger at where Zayne’s actions had left me and the flicker of hope that maybe he wasn’t the enemy after all took me on a wild rollercoaster ride. It was time to find out where his loyalties lay.

He clearly hadn’t said anything about me asking him to kill Donovan. I wouldn’t be walking out of the house today if he had. Regardless of how I felt about Zayne, he might just be my ticket to a new life, but ... a sheen of sweat coated my palms, and I wiped them on my shorts. Donovan would have scolded me for acting like a child by rubbing my palms on my clothes, but he wasn’t here.

Zayne parked the car at a meter on a downtown street, and I hopped out before he did. Once I was a few vehicles away from him, I stopped and rummaged through my purse for a piece of paper and pen. Scribbling furiously, I felt Zayne’s presence behind me. I spun around and grabbed his wrist, practically dragging him with me. After we were at the end of the row, I nervously scanned the area, my stomach dipping to my toes. My hand visibly trembled as I deposited the note in his palm.

*Fuck, what am I thinking?* We were out in the open, and anyone could have seen what I’d just done.

Panic ripped through me as I watched him read the note. If he said a word to Donovan ...

“Goddammit,” Zayne muttered as he crumpled the paper. “Let’s go.” He put a protective hand on my lower back, and I flinched. Zayne immediately stopped touching me, and his lips pursed into a thin line as he led me up the sidewalk, then to the underground parking garage of the mall. The moment we were out of sight, Zayne spun around and shook the crumpled note at me.

“Do you want to tell me what the fuck this is about?” he growled.

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**Giselle**

I stepped away from him, realizing I'd screwed up. Zayne wasn't on my side at all. My breath stuttered in my throat while I attempted to come up with a good answer, but the threat in his voice said it all. Zayne was in Donovan's pocket. *Fuck!* How could I have been so stupid? Just because he was gorgeous and occasionally kind didn't mean that he wasn't my enemy.

Before I could run, he grabbed my arm. "I'm not going to hurt you, Giselle. I didn't mean to scare you. Please tell me what this is all about," he said gently. He dropped his hand and waited to see if I would dart off like a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching car driving sixty miles an hour.

I gulped, searching for a lie to feed him, but my brain refused to cooperate. I reminded myself why I'd slipped the note to Zayne in the first place, to see if I could trust him.

"I overheard Donovan talking on the phone when I was ... sick." Looking at my feet, my tongue darted over my dry lower lip, wetting it before I raised my gaze back to his. "He's bugged your car and he planted a tracker in it as well. This is the first time I've had a chance to tell you, but you were about to say something we would both regret later. Not that it was

the wrong thing to say, but because he would hear.” I tipped my chin up, a shred of confidence stirring in my chest. Regardless of how terrified I was, I couldn’t allow Zayne to see my vulnerability. Everything I did was for *her*, and I needed answers and fast. Could Zayne help me or not?

He removed his sunglasses, his green eyes flashing with anger. “Why?”

I shook my head, still scared about how this would play out. “He tracks my every move. It’s not personal against you, but for Christ’s sake, under no circumstances can we have a conversation in the house or cars.”

“Or what?” he probed.

I smashed my lips together, refusing to answer his question. He slipped his sunglasses into place, then removed his cell from his back pocket. I watched him as he placed a call.

“Hey, I’ve got a situation that I need your help with.” He paused. “There’s a fucking tracker and bug on the goddamn Mercedes. We can’t remove it, or it will tip Donovan off. Can you hook me up with a scrambler?”

My pulse raced faster than a horse at Arlington Park with the possibility that Donovan would figure out that I’d told Zayne.

“She’s with me. We’re at the mall downtown. I’ll move the car into the parking garage so you can work your magic.” Zayne stared at me, clearly still pissed. “You’re the fucking best. I’ll see you in a few.” He hung up, then pocketed his phone.

Zayne began to walk in the direction of the street, then looked over his shoulder. “No fucking way am I letting you

out of my sight. Come on.”

I hurried to catch up with him. Apparently, when Zayne was pissed, his stride was longer, and I hightailed it to keep up.

After moving the vehicle into the garage, he signaled me to get out. We walked over to a cement wall at least a football field away from where he'd parked his car. Sighing, I sat on the edge while Zayne remained standing.

“Sutton will be here soon. She'll need to talk to you.” He kept his eyes on the entrance as he spoke.

“Are you going to say anything to Donovan about your car being bugged?” I wrung my fingers, my nerves getting the better of me.

“Donovan may be my client and, in a way, my boss, Giselle,” Zayne placed his hands on his hips, “but pulling that shit with me won't fly. I won't say a word.”

I breathed in as deep as my lungs would allow, trying to believe that he was being honest with me. Little did he know, my tests were far from over, but somewhere inside me, I was beginning to think that maybe ... just maybe, there was more to this gorgeous man than I'd anticipated, and I warmed to the possibility. The moment the thought occurred to me, though, my anxiety about Donovan finding out what I'd done gave me whiplash.

“Thank you.” As I started to pace while logic bitch-slapped my hope and fucked with my head, I hoped like hell I hadn't made a mistake. What if Zayne was lying to me? He owed me absolutely nothing. I was playing Russian roulette, praying to the universe that people wouldn't die while I kept trying to find out if he was on my side.

“There’s Sutton.” He nodded at the blue Audi that pulled up next to us. The blonde-haired beauty with a baby bump who climbed out of the driver’s seat appeared to be all business as she approached me. She removed her sunglasses, and surprised blue eyes penetrated mine before she looked up at Zayne. “You’re fired, dude. Pierce too. I haven’t finished my homework yet, so I had no idea who Donovan’s sister was.” She shook her head in awe. “You’re *the* Giselle Lambert.” A smile graced her lips.

I extended my hand to her. “I am. You’re a ballet fan?”

“No. I mean, yes.” She chuckled slightly. “My sister is a dancer, and we used to watch your televised performances together. You’re magical.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your kind words.”

Sutton glanced at Zayne again. “Fired.” She shook her head, exasperation on her beautiful face. “I’m sorry. I’m here on business, and my excitement got the best of me. It’s clear that Zayne has no idea he’s guarding a worldwide celebrity.”

“Sometimes it’s nice not to be recognized,” I admitted, already liking this perky, warm woman. “Hopefully it won’t change how Zayne perceives me now that he knows I’m a somebody in the dance world.” I swore Zayne nearly cracked a grin before he responded.

“It won’t,” he stated before Sutton could respond for him.

“Honestly, you’re not the first famous person we’ve been hired to protect. We’re close friends with a band, and the guys guard the members when they travel.”

My eyes traveled to Zayne’s, and a jolt of heat shot through me, reminding me that I was still alive. Donovan hadn’t taken everything from me, including my growing

attraction to the man in front of me. As hard as I tried to fight my growing feelings, Zayne was working his way into my heart. “Oh? That would be way more interesting than traipsing around shopping with me.”

“We both know there’s more to it.” He shifted his weight, his attention trained on me like a bird dog on its prey.

“I have to agree that most clients don’t track and bug their bodyguard’s car. It’s strange that Donovan would do so. Do you know why?” Sutton asked.

I mustered up an innocent shrug. No way would I admit the truth. “I have no idea.” *Liar!*

“Since you told Zayne, I’m going to go out on a limb and trust you, Giselle. Don’t make me regret it.”

Straight and to the point. How could I not like Sutton? “I won’t.” She had no idea how much I needed her bodyguard. Baby steps, though.

“Where do you go most often? The gym? Mall? Friend’s house?”

“I don’t have friends, so that last one’s a no.”

Surprise flitted across Sutton’s features, but she didn’t pry. I finally saw that she held an iPad in her hand when she flipped it open and began typing as I talked.

“I shop here, go to the gym, not many other places. Most of what I need is at home.” A lump formed, clogging my throat. *Because home is a prison.* I coughed, attempting to pull myself together.

“Favorite restaurants?” Sutton asked.

Finally, we managed to come up with the top ten places I frequented, including my favorite grocery and wine store.

Zayne remained silent but alert to any cars driving in or out of the garage.

“Okay, I’ve programmed the scrambler to show that you’re in one of those areas when you’re actually not. You have a hundred-mile radius, so if you want to have a picnic or hike, then you’ll be fine. This should give Donovan what he wants without tracking you and Zayne. Do not have any important conversations in the car, though. If I tamper with the listening device, Donovan will know. Can I see your phone?”

I fished it out of my purse and handed it to her. After a few minutes, she gave it back to me. “I’ve connected your phone with the scrambler as well so he can’t track you that way, just in case he has in the past. I didn’t see any signs that he’d tampered with it, but moving forward you should be okay. Besides, you’re at the mall, so it wouldn’t have alerted him that anything was off. A listening device could be a hidden app, though, so I’m not going to look for one since we can’t do anything about it.”

“Thank you.” Tears pricked my eyes, and I looked away. I sank my teeth into my lower lip, realizing for the first time that I was free to go where I wanted without consequences.

Kindness filled Sutton’s gaze, and I resisted the urge to throw my arms around her and hug her. I wasn’t sure how she’d cracked my walls so fast, but she had. Allowing me to make at least some choices for myself again was a huge gift. In fact, fuck shopping. I knew exactly where I needed Zayne to take me.

Zayne

Pissed didn't even cover what I felt for Donovan. The motherfucker was off the charts controlling and visions of pummeling him until he was a bloody mess on the floor flooded my thoughts.

At least I had Sutton, who was a godsend with her technical knowledge. The girl was a fucking genius.

"Zayne, I'll talk to you later. I need to run a few errands, then get back to the house. If you have any more problems, let me know. Giselle, it was nice to meet you." Sutton closed her iPad cover, signaling she was ready to leave.

For the first time, a genuine smile graced Giselle's lips and my pulse stuttered. Over the short time I'd worked for Donovan, I understood that Giselle wasn't happy, but when she'd smiled and chatted with Sutton, I saw a peek of the woman hiding, and she was ravishing. I couldn't pull my gaze away from her.

"Zayne?" Giselle's voice reached me, breaking my trance.

"Yeah?"

"I need to make sure I understand. Sutton installed a scrambler that will basically lie to Donovan about where the

car is, correct?” Giselle nibbled on her lower lip while she waited for my response. “I’m free?”

I was glad that my sunglasses hid my reaction to her question. *Has she been monitored every second that she’s lived with Donovan? Maybe even earlier?*

I kept my voice steady as I answered, even though I had to clench my fist so she wouldn’t see that my hands were trembling with fury. “Correct. You can go wherever you like in or around Spokane without him knowing.”

A combination of fear and excitement lit up her hazel eyes.

“Can you take me somewhere then? But Zayne, you can’t tell Donovan. Please.” Fear flashed across her face.

I folded my arms over my chest. “If I wanted Donovan to know where we went all day, then I wouldn’t have called Sutton. The only time I need to report to him is if your life is in danger. It’s one of the conditions of my employment.” I briefly studied her. “To answer your question, it depends. Where you want to go ... will you be in jeopardy?”

Giselle hesitated a second too long, which gave me the truth. She would be at risk.

She tucked a stray of dark hair behind her ear, her gaze bouncing from the garage entrance to me. “The only way I’ll be in danger is if Donovan finds out.” Giselle tipped her chin up. I’d quickly learned it was her sign that she was scared shitless but trying to convince everyone else that she wasn’t. My guess was it took her a lot to ask me to kill Donovan and tell me about the tracker.

I stifled a grin as I realized she’d been setting me up since day one to see if she could confide in me. She first asked me to



kill him and now wanted me to take her somewhere she wasn't supposed to go. Giselle was seeing if she could trust me.

"Then I won't tell him where you go." I cracked my knuckles, wishing it was Donovan's skull. The more time I spent with Giselle, the more red flags popped up. I met her first when she'd tried to commit suicide, I'd seen Donovan be rough with her, and just now she admitted to Sutton that she had no friends.

Although I was speculating, all the signs seemed to suggest that Giselle was a prisoner in her own home.

Giselle reached into her handbag and produced another piece of paper and a pen. She wrote something down, then gave it to me again. "This is where I need to go." She glanced at her watch. "I only have a small window of time, so we should leave now."

I looked at the address, not registering where it could be in the area. The street didn't look familiar, and I knew Spokane pretty damn well.

Escorting her back to the car, I opened the back door for her. Instead of climbing in like usual, Giselle shocked me by slipping past me and into the front passenger seat. "Come on, bodyguard. The clock is ticking," she whispered.

"I have a name," I grumbled as I hopped into the driver's side. Since it still wasn't safe to talk about anything important, I turned some music on. "Be Careful What You Wish For" by Nine One One played softly as I pulled out of the parking garage.

"I wouldn't have guessed that you listen to this kind of music," Giselle said, her fingers fidgeting in her lap.

It took everything inside me not to place my hand over them in a reassuring manner. The last thing she needed was to be scared of me. Donovan, however, sure as hell needed to be terrified of me.

“I have a variety of music tastes, but I’m not into country. I like Chris Stapleton’s voice, but that’s as far as I’ll go into that genre of music. What do you like? I can change it.”

A soft laugh escaped her, then she slammed her mouth shut and briefly closed her eyes.

“What?” I didn’t want to say too much to her while Donovan might be listening.

She shook her head, sadness creeping into her expression. I made a note to keep us out of the car and house as often as I could without raising suspicion. This woman needed to fucking breathe without Donovan on top of her. I ground my molars together, thinking about that bastard. His kiss goodbye had turned my stomach sour. Donovan clearly wasn’t keen on me asking if Giselle was all right after she’d fallen, and that move was definitely one of marking his territory, which was sick shit coming from her brother, adopted or not.

I shook my head, attempting to clear the dark thoughts that were quickly accumulating in my mind. I had a hell of a lot of questions for Giselle.

Giselle pointed at a street sign, and I flipped my turn signal on and turned up the music so “Castle” by HAYZ thumped through the car. Hopefully it would cover our voices when we talked. For now, I watched her hand signals as she directed me to the address. It was beginning to make sense why she chose the front seat this time.

Minutes later, she indicated for me to park the Mercedes. My gaze narrowed behind my sunglasses. *What the hell?*

Giselle opened the door and hopped out, and I did the same. Although she was wearing sunglasses, she shaded her eyes with her hand, peering at the kids playing on a school playground.

I watched as her face lit up and she jogged to the fence. She waved frantically, but there were too many kids to see which one she was signaling. Giselle hurried toward the gate, her short legs moving quickly. Although I gave her a little space, I stuck close to her while I kept watch for any potential threats.

I slowed my pace as a young, dark-haired girl around the age of eleven or twelve ran over and flung her arms around Giselle. Even though I wanted to ask a million questions, I knew it was time for me to just shut up and observe.

Giselle took the girl's hand and walked her back to the playground where a teacher was signaling for them to return. Giselle and the young girl clung to each other, their smiles infectious as they talked. The teacher hugged Giselle, then gave the two a little privacy.

Giselle threw her head back and laughed, tugging at my heartstrings. She'd been sullen and rude since I'd met her, but at that moment I saw something different—happiness. The only things that had changed were that she'd taken a chance of trusting me and the scrambler had been installed. But Sutton and that scrambler had given her a taste of freedom. Freedom from Donovan.

I scanned the area as thoughts of Donovan took place front and center in my brain. Shit was starting to add up, but somehow, I had to break through Giselle's walls and

encourage her to open up. Otherwise, I wasn't sure how to help. More than that, I *wanted* to make her happy. My job was to protect and help her, but my heart was a different story.

The shrill sound of the school bell rang, then the teacher blew her whistle. The little girl hugged Giselle one more time before she ran across the playground and joined her classmates. Giselle stood still, wiping her cheeks, and I realized she was crying. Whoever the girl was, she meant the world to her.

Giselle's shoulders slumped as she walked toward me, and all I wanted to do was help her smile again.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Before we get near the car again, I have to ask who that girl is. The more you're willing to tell me, the better I can protect you." It was a shot in the dark, but I had to try.

Giselle's body tensed. "It's none of your business, bodyguard. You gave me your word that you wouldn't tell Donovan. I'm clearly not in harm's way by visiting her." She held her arms out as if to emphasize that last point.

"Where else would you like to go?" I knew when to not push.

"Home. Donovan likes to surprise me with a visit during lunch sometimes. We left several hours ago, and I don't want to raise any suspicions."

"All right." Little did she know she'd raised a lot of suspicions, but not with Donovan. With me.

**Giselle**

**M**y heart twisted into painful knots, and a sharp ache spread through my chest as we left the school. I quickly tucked the sweet moment into the corner of my mind. I would cherish it and hold onto the visit when I needed something to soothe me.

My emotions—fear, apprehension, desperation—raced a million miles an hour as Zayne drove me back to the house. What if he outright told Donovan or slipped up and said something on accident? My plan of laying out tests to see if he was trustworthy was royally fucking with my head.

*But you adored Sutton.*

It was strange for me to like someone so fast. Most of my life, I had to be on guard, and trust was a luxury in my world, not the norm. But Sutton was different. Reminding myself that she was Zayne's boss calmed my worries. Surely, someone like Sutton wouldn't have unreliable people work for her. Plus, my instincts were rarely wrong. If that were all I had to go on, I knew I would confess everything to Zayne without a second thought. But on the off chance I was mistaken ... it would cost me everything.

My decisions to confide in Zayne about the tracker and allow him to see me at the school were giant leaps. Unfortunately, anxiety dug her claws into my heart, and I wondered how many Xanax remained in the bottle Zayne had taken from my bathroom. Donovan didn't realize I knew where he had ultimately hidden the medication, but taking even one would be too risky. Maybe a few stiff drinks, but I hated drinking when Donovan was around. It lowered my defenses and left me too emotionally vulnerable.

Zayne parked his car in front of the garage and I quickly got out and hurried up the front walk, hoping I'd beaten Donovan home. I wasn't entirely sure he would stop by for lunch, but I would rather be safe than sorry. If he did show up, he would immediately question why I'd been gone so long.

I practically ran to the entrance and into the house, immediately disarming the alarm. Zayne closed the door behind me.

"Ahh, there you are, darling." Donovan's brown dress shoes slapped against the marble floor as he approached us.

"Hi, we got stuck in traffic and for some reason the lines at the mall were long. Most likely due to the sales."

Donovan's gaze bounced from me to Zayne. "Go home, Zayne. I'll be with Giselle the rest of the day." His tone dripped with anger.

My legs began to tremble, and I wondered if Donovan knew what I'd done today. My mouth grew dry as the fear clogged my throat.

Zayne removed his sunglasses, his green eyes landing on Donovan. "What time do you want me here in the morning?"

Donovan slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me against him while he shoved a hand in the pocket of his slacks. “I’ll message you later. I’m not sure yet.” He dug his fingers into my side, all the while smiling as if he weren’t inflicting pain.

*Oh God, he knows that I was at the school. He must have someone tailing me. How could I have been so stupid?*

Zayne nodded. “Okay.” He glanced at me before he left.

The second the door closed, Donovan fisted my hair and jerked my head back. “You’re late.”

“I wasn’t even sure you would be here this afternoon. The shopping just took longer than expected.” I grabbed his arm for balance, my knees threatening to fail me.

“Then where are your bags?” He growled.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* “Crap. I must have left them in Zayne’s car. I was in such a hurry to get home in case you were here.”

Donovan sneered. “I’ll text him to bring them back.” He released me and removed his phone from the inside of his suit jacket. His fingers flew across the screen. Each second that I waited to see how this would play out was torture.

Donovan’s cell buzzed with an incoming message. His brow arched. “Zayne said he’s on his way back with your packages.”

I attempted a smile. “See, I told you I just forgot them.”

He eyed me skeptically. I hoped like hell he wouldn’t ask where I’d shopped. I had no clue how Zayne would pull this off, but if he did ... if Zayne backed me up on this, he would be my hero and definitely prove that I could trust him.

Minutes later, the doorbell rang, and Donovan quickly answered.

My attention landed on Zayne, but he didn't look at me. "Sorry about that. Giselle was in a hurry to get here, and it slipped both of our minds that we'd locked her purchases in the trunk," Zayne said, holding up a Nordstrom bag in one hand and a Bath and Body bag in the other.

I strolled up to Donovan and slid my arm through his. "I'm sorry you had to make a trip back, Zayne. I'll try not to be so forgetful next time. I appreciate you returning." I held my hand out for the packages, but Donovan snatched them from Zayne's grasp and peered inside.

Staring at Zayne, he gave me a slight nod.

"The top isn't a good color on you, but the lingerie can stay. You can keep it." Donovan shoved the bags at me. "The watermelon lemonade candle is a nice touch, too."

"I wasn't sure about the shirt, but I assumed you could help me with that." I was about to vomit all over Donovan, but I had to de-escalate the situation and suck up to his arrogant ass.

"Have a good afternoon, Zayne," Donovan muttered before he closed the door on him.

Donovan's cold stare landed on me. "Put the lingerie on."

I gulped. What if it wasn't my size? I had no idea who the clothes belonged to. The thought of wearing another woman's garments wasn't appealing, but it was either that or getting beaten within an inch of my life.

"Of course. I'll be right back." I strolled across the foyer, then hurried up the stairs, my heart pounding in my ears with each step. I wanted to text Zayne about the clothes and how



he'd pulled it off, but I didn't trust that my phone wasn't tapped.

Before I entered my bedroom, I glanced back down into the foyer. Donovan was staring upward, watching my every move. My stomach dipped and flipped as I chided myself for visiting the school when I knew better. Not only had I jeopardized my safety but also hers. *Giselle, you idiot!*

Tears burned the back of my eyes as I headed to my bathroom to change. I rifled through the bag and withdrew a black lace see-through bodice and G-string. My brain shifted into overdrive when I realized that I had a similar set with the tags still attached in my top dresser drawer. I always shopped at Nordstrom, so the switch should be easy to pull off since Donovan hadn't removed the items to see what the lingerie looked like. He would have no idea I'd swapped them out.

Hurrying to my closet, I stuffed the sacks behind the row of shoes, then located my lingerie. Wearing Zayne's girlfriend's clothes made me twitch with hygiene issues. Not that he would date a skank, but I didn't want to take a chance. A stab of jealousy pricked my chest at the idea of Zayne dating someone. My heartrate spiked, and my breathing became labored as butterflies scattered in my stomach. In my desperation to escape Donovan, it hadn't ever occurred to me that Zayne could be seeing someone, but he must have bought the lingerie for a special girl.

"Focus, Giselle. Donovan is waiting, you can get jealous another time," I whispered.

Once I was dressed, I took a glance in the bathroom mirror before grabbing the silk robe hanging on the hook near the shower and slipping it on. I wasn't interested in baring my body to Marty or Gretta. Besides, I knew the drill.

Anxious that I'd taken too long, I rushed down the stairs and across the main floor, my feet barely touching the marble. A set of steps under the main stairway led to the lower level, and I nearly stumbled down them. Once I arrived and knocked on the closed door, as per protocol, I then entered.

The sound of the lock clicking into place behind me reminded me that there was no way out. Donovan had installed a keypad with a combination that needed to be used to leave his sex dungeon. I'd tried to run from him a few times, catch it before the latch engaged, but the beatings the last time had landed me in bed with broken ribs, and that was one of the kinder things he'd done to me.

Terror pulsed through my veins when I spotted Donovan. He'd removed his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up, revealing his muscular forearms, and slapped a bondage whip into the palm of his hand, focusing on me with a devilish glint in his eye.

"Donovan," I whispered, pleading with him. "I'll never be late again. I swear."

My heart stood still, the world spinning in front of me. Surely, this wouldn't be my punishment just for being a few minutes behind schedule. There had to be more.

Donovan nodded to the bondage chair. "Bend over."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I disrobed and obeyed; attempting to resist was futile.

I bent over, my ass in full view as he cuffed my hands in front of me, then secured them to the bar.

I heard the whip fly through the air before it landed on the back of my thighs. A cry escaped me, but no one would hear it

since the room was soundproof. Pain ricocheted through me as he continued to strike me.

“Donovan,” I whimpered. “Stop. Please.”

“Being late isn’t an option, Giselle!” He hit me several more times, then tossed the whip to the side. “You’re getting soft, darling.”

The sound of the salve container opening echoed through the large space. I wondered why he always used it after he beat me, but it did help ease some of the pain.

He gently applied the cream, rubbing it in. “If only you hadn’t disobeyed me, Giselle. You know you are to be home for lunch every day.”

I was tired of apologizing to the son of a bitch, but I catered to his ego anyway. “I’m so sorry.” I sniffled for extra effect. It didn’t take much effort by this time.

He walked around and uncuffed me, then massaged my wrists. The scary thing about my brother was that he could be an animal one minute, kind the next. It was all part of the mental aspect of his abuse, keeping me on my toes to ensure his control.

“Stand.”

I straightened, the flesh on the back of my thighs and ass stinging as I did. Donovan waltzed around me, his hands in his pockets. With the pain, I’d almost forgotten my fear of him finding out where I was today.

He tightly gripped my chin, pulling me so close we nearly touched noses. “You serve me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” *I fucking hate you!*

“Lay down.” He nodded to the king-sized bed in his playroom. “Show me your pussy like a good little girl.”

My eyes slammed shut briefly, then I complied with his order. After I was situated, I gave him what he wanted.

His heated gaze darkened as his tongue darted across his lower lip. He crawled onto the mattress, dipping his head between my legs. “You make me crazy.” Donovan bit the inside of my thigh, and I sucked in a sharp breath. He glanced up at me, a calculating glint in his eye right before he slapped my pussy. I jerked away, tingles of pain dancing through me.

“You will *always* belong to me, Giselle. The only other men allowed to touch you are ones that I sell you to.” He smacked me again, and I dug my fingers into the black comforter.

“You can’t hide it from me, I know you like the pain. You get off on it. Your cunt is dripping wet. Admit it, you’re all ready for me, sis.”

“I’m not your sister,” I bit out.

“My cock gets so fucking hard when you talk back.” He backed off the bed and unzipped his slacks, freeing his long dick. “You’ve been talking shit and getting me off since you were twelve, and here you are spread apart, still serving me.” He wrapped his fingers around his shaft and stroked. “I love fucking my sister. You’re my dirty little secret, aren’t you?” His mouth parted slightly as I watched him.

I squirmed on the bed, hating him with everything inside me. After all these years of abuse, Donovan knew my body better than anyone, and he could make me orgasm in seconds no matter how hard I fought. Fighting seemed to make him even happier with the achievement.

Turning my head, I focused on the wall of sex toys, trying to block him out.

“Look at me.” He returned to the bed, then lowered his head between my thighs and ran his tongue up my slit.

I gasped, despising myself for letting him know the effect that move had on me.

“That’s it.” He dove in, licking my sensitive skin and worshiping my clit. He slid a finger inside me, his sadistic enjoyment evident as I writhed beneath his skilled mouth.

“I hate you. I hate you.”

He groaned, then dug one hand into my hip, pulling me closer and sucking on my bundle of nerves as he massaged my G-spot.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. My body had completely taken over, leaving my heart and mind in the ditch. I closed my eyes and allowed Zayne’s face to flicker through my mind. Maybe I couldn’t escape Donovan and his twisted games physically, but mentally? Donovan couldn’t control my thoughts. I focused on Zayne, visualizing him between my legs, coaxing an orgasm from me. *Oh, God, that’s better.* I allowed myself to imagine that it was Zayne’s mouth, his hands. I bit my lip, willing myself not to whisper the bodyguard’s name. I couldn’t allow Donovan to know I was thinking about Zayne.

Unable to withstand it any longer, I jerked and tensed with my unwilling release as I cried out, Zayne’s face and muscular body at the forefront in my imagination.

“I will always win,” Donovan said as he stood on his knees and flipped me over as though I weighed nothing. He lifted my ass in the air, then he ran the tip of his cock over my soaking

slit. The sound of him ripping open a condom reached my ears. With a quick, hard shove, Donovan entered me. However, instead of pummeling into me, he took it nice and slow, hitting the sensitive places deep inside my slick walls.

“So tight and wet for me, sis.”

*Zayne.*

I bet he treated his women right in the bedroom. Securing my thoughts to my bodyguard again, I escaped the monster raping me.

Donovan picked up his pace, and the sound of our bodies slapping together echoed through the area. The heavy scent of sex reached my nose, and my stomach rolled. As hard as I was trying to imagine Zayne inside of me, it was difficult, but I continued my attempts. Before I realized it, I came again, despair and self-loathing following in its blissful wake.

Donovan slammed into me, slapping my ass cheek. He pulled out of me, then forced himself into the other hole. “I’ll claim your cunt and your tight asshole.”

This time when I bit my lip, I drew blood. This was the rest of my punishment, anal without lube. I would be sore and torn up for days. Donovan had upped the consequences for being late, and I wasn’t sure why.

“Giselle,” he barked, his word vicious and cold. “Tell me what you are.”

The tears returned as he slammed into me. “I’m your dirty little whore,” I whispered.

“Keep going.”

“I love fucking my brother, especially when he shoves his dick into my ass.” I choked on the words, wishing I were dead.

Not even Zayne could save me.

“You’re a dirty little bitch.” Donovan panted. “No one will ever own you like I do. Say it!”

“N-n-no one will ever own me like you do,” I stuttered from the pain, tears pouring down my face.

Donovan pulled out, removed his rubber, then shoved his cock into my pussy again. He pumped with fast, hard thrusts until he jerked and tensed, pouring his seed into me.

Disgust with what he’d just done to my body ripped through me. It was the latest humiliation—the bastard hadn’t used a condom like he usually did. Thank God I was on the pill and tested for diseases regularly. There was no telling who else the twisted son of a bitch had fucked.

*No one will ever own me like you do.*

His words rang in my head. Donovan was right. What had I been thinking? Zayne would never be able to help me. Even if I were physically away from Donovan, he would always be in my head. There was no getting away from the monster, no matter how hard I tried. Frantic to escape Donovan’s control, I knew I would have to search for not only a way to escape, but also how to hide from him for the rest of my life.

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Zayne

**M**y tennis shoes smacked against the hardwood floors of Vaughn and Claire's living room.

I blew out a heavy sigh and laced my hands behind my head as horrible thoughts ran rampant through my mind.

"Dude, you're going to wear holes in my brand-new floors," Vaughn said from the kitchen.

Fresh garlic bread baked in the oven while my man whipped up his fabulous chicken fettuccine alfredo from scratch. Even though it smelled like heaven, I was too stressed to eat.

"You didn't see Donovan. He was pissed. As far as I can tell, when Giselle said she'd been shopping, he'd called her out on it and asked where the bags were. He'd already told me to leave, but then he texted me saying Giselle had left some items in my car. Thank God you'd asked me to pick up Claire's online order at Nordstrom a few days ago and the tags were still attached. It was still in my trunk, so I turned around and took it to Giselle. Her face was pale, and I knew ... Vaughn, I *knew* it wasn't going well. I gave her the clothes and candle, man. Promise, I'll get it all back when I see her again.



*If I see her again.*” I slapped my palm against my forehead. “Fuck! The shithole has been rough with her in front of me, and I don’t like where my brain is going with this, Vaughn. It’s dark.” I scrubbed my cheeks with my palms before stopping to stare out of the windows overlooking the back of the property.

Vaughn banged the wooden spatula against the pot, startling me. As he approached, he wiped his hands on the dishtowel tucked into the waist of his red and black basketball shorts.

“Talk to me. Let’s discuss what you’ve seen.” He reached for his laptop on the glass coffee table before he plopped down on the sofa.

I shook my head, reviewing the day’s events and Pierce’s suspicions one more time. “Giselle told me that Donovan had put a tracker on my goddamn car. It’s still bugged, but if I tamper with it, he’ll know.”

“And Sutton took care of the tracker with the scrambler. I assume she tested it before she left.” Vaughn glanced in my direction.

“Yeah, she was on it, as always.” Pacing again, I searched my brain for any clues I’d missed, but I was coming up empty.

“How long have you been on this assignment? A week and a half?”

“Yeah, but half of it she was sick.” I supplied air quotes when I said the last word. I knew Donovan had lied about that. I eyed Vaughn, wondering where he was going with his line of questioning.

“And she’s asked you to kill her brother—”

“Adopted brother,” I corrected, disgust peppering my skin at the thought of him kissing her earlier that day.

“Adopted ... regardless, she asked if you would kill him on the first day. Today she mentions the tracker, and the second Sutton works her magic, she asks to go see someone.” Vaughn’s fingers flew across his keyboard. “It’s a private school, by the way. They won’t release the names of the students because they’re minors, but someone is forking over a shit ton of money for whoever the girl is.”

“Maybe it’s her daughter.” A ball of vomit crawled up into my throat, and I forced it down. “Maybe it’s her and Donovan’s daughter.”

“Hang on a second.” Vaughn gave me the T sign with his hands. “Let’s back up before we make crazy-ass assumptions.”

He was right, but I knew damn well something was fucking wrong with Donovan.

“Z-man, there are three things that are pretty clear. First, Donovan controls Giselle’s every move. He’s got tabs on her for damn sure. Second, she’s trying to break away from him. Third, she’s testing you.”

“Yeah, I know she’s testing me, but I’m trustworthy. Hell, I never said a word to the fucking prick about her asking me to end his sorry life,” I growled.

“I’m confused. How do you really feel about Donovan?” Vaughn smirked, his words dripping with sarcasm.

“I can’t even explain to you how badly I want to put that fucker ten feet under. He’s mean, condescending, and he’s rough with Giselle. She’s terrified of him. As soon as he enters a room, the fear in her eyes ... her body stiffens with tension.”

“Then it’s simple. Let’s just take the fucker out. No one has to know. A single shot to the head from a mile away, and it’s done.” Vaughn grinned at me like it was the best idea he’d

had in his entire life. “Seriously though, you suspect Giselle is being abused more than what you’ve already seen, but you don’t have any real proof yet?”

“My gut tells me yes, but catching the motherfucker at it is another story.” I finally sank into the recliner. “I do think she’s trying to see if she can trust me or if my loyalty lies with Donovan.” I snorted. “Like that shit would ever happen.” Suddenly, I realized that it was time I proved to her that she could confide in me.

“He’s clearly under your skin. Just remember, you can’t help her when you’re all fucked in the head. I learned the hard way with Claire.” He stared at me with his mismatched eyes, guilt twisting his expression.

Hopping off the chair, I removed my cell from my back pocket. “I have to check on her, find out if she’s okay. Something is wrong, I can feel it in my fucking bones.”

Pulling up her number, I tapped the screen, then listened. My heart slammed against my ribcage with each passing ring. “Goddammit. She’s not picking up. I’m going over.” Fury pumped through me while I checked my front pocket for my keys. “I’ll catch you later.”

Vaughn jumped off the couch and grabbed my arm. “Zayne, think about this, dude. If you go in too soon, you could blow your chances of helping her. If Giselle is in danger, the best thing you can do for her is to be her bodyguard. You’re already inside her world, but if you don’t bide your time, then it could all be for nothing.”

I glowered at him, knowing he was right, but it didn’t mean I had to like it. He was right. I couldn’t screw this up. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

Claire, Vaughn's fiancée, waltzed into the living room with a deep frown etched into her pretty face. It was clear that Sutton and Claire were sisters. They had a lot of similarities, including their blonde hair and build. "Who are we taking out?"

Vaughn released me, then strolled over to his fiancée as though our conversation were just an everyday occurrence. He tilted her chin up and placed a kiss on her mouth. "We think Zayne's new client might be in trouble. Her brother has been pretty rough with her in front of Zayne, and he's pretty sure that's the tip of the iceberg."

"Oh hell, no. If he's abusing her, count me in. I'll be your distraction while you pull the trigger, babe. We would make a great team." She pointed to herself and grinned. "I'm Bonnie and you're Clyde. I have no patience for a man who hurts children or women." Her blue eyes flashed with eagerness, and she drummed her fingers on the top of her very pregnant belly.

"Beautiful, I think your hormones are a little out of whack while you're growing our baby. There's no need to talk about killing people." Vaughn placed his hand on Claire's stomach.

A smile eased across my face, even as my chest tightened with a hint of loneliness. They were perfect for each other and balanced one another out. I was close to giving up on finding my person, but a tiny voice in my head told me to hold on a little longer.

Claire patted Vaughn's arm. "Correct, which means you should be careful around me." She giggled, then planted a sweet kiss on his mouth. "Hey, Zayne."

"Hey." I gave her a little wave as she bounced off to the kitchen, then I remembered Holden's request last week. It

would be a good distraction while I was worried shitless about Giselle.

“Hey, Claire?” I shoved my hands in the front pocket of my jeans, suddenly feeling bashful around my friends.

“Yeah?” She opened the fridge and removed a bottled water.

“I need your help.”

Her blonde brow arched as she entered the living room and plopped down in the recliner. “Okay?” She twisted off the cap and took a drink.

I cleared my throat. “I want you to teach me to dance.”

Water spewed from Claire’s mouth and all over her green running shorts and oversized black T-shirt. Vaughn threw his head back and laughed his ass off.

“Really? Is my request that funny?” I asked, irritation in my tone.

Vaughn held his side, doubling over with laughter. “Not you, man ...” Vaughn gasped. “Claire’s face and the water.”

“Fuck it. Just forget it.” I turned away from them, embarrassed.

“No. You’re not going to be like that.” Claire hopped out of her seat, rushed over to me and tugged on my arm, her bright blue eyes staring at me. “It just wasn’t what I expected to fly out of your mouth. I would love to teach you.”

“Me too,” Vaughn added. “But why?”

“Holden asked me to be a groomsman at his and River’s wedding. He mentioned that I needed to learn to dance.”

“Oh, that’s easy. From what I’ve seen, you have rhythm, so we’ll just start now, while you’re here.” Claire pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek.

“Thanks.” I shot a glance in Vaughn’s direction. “Maybe we could begin after Vaughn and I finish talking?”

Claire tossed her hands in the air. “Hint taken. But ...” She pointed at Vaughn, then to me. “If you’re taking someone out, I want in on the action.”

Vaughn shook his head, exasperated. Once Claire had left, Vaughn groaned. “She’s been a handful, man. Like I would ever let her get in on the danger while she’s pregnant.”

I chuckled, enjoying his predicament. It wasn’t mine, so I had room to laugh.

“Okay, where were we before Bonnie interrupted us?” Vaughn grabbed his computer again.

My cell rang, and I practically ripped it out of my back pocket. Static hummed in my brain while I stared at the screen, a growing sense of apprehension nagging at me.

“Shit.” I glanced at my best friend. “This can’t be good.”

**Giselle**

**T**he early morning sun peeked over the horizon, painting the new day with brilliant shades of golds and reds as I leaned against the wall and looked out of my bedroom window. Dread twisted my stomach into knots, and I tried to shut out the black clouds that rolled into my mind.

“Giselle,” Donovan said from behind me.

I didn’t bother to turn around. I could hear him just fine with my back to him.

“Giselle,” he said again, his tone demanding my attention.

“What?” I rubbed my arms, my body aching from his discipline yesterday.

“After you fell asleep, I received a call. I’m headed out of town for the week on business. I reached out to Zayne last night, he’ll stay with you.”

A flicker of hope broke through the numbness, but I pushed it aside, hiding it from Donovan. “Whatever.” I turned slowly. “Have a nice trip.”

With quick, long strides, Donovan closed the gap between us and gripped my shoulders, shaking me. “Do not fucking

push me, Giselle, or what I did to you yesterday will look like child's play.”

I stared up at him, my pulse steady. That time, he hadn't only raped me, he'd also stripped me of any feelings. I'd gone from fear to hate to ... nothing.

“I'm not pushing you, Donovan. I genuinely hope you have a nice trip.” My arms went limp in his grasp.

He released me and straightened his tie, his eyes briefly narrowing. The doorbell broke through the tension, and he left me alone in my room. I crept near the hall, trying to listen to Donovan's conversation.

Zayne's deep voice pricked my ears. Donovan was giving him details of his trip in case he needed to be reached. He also said that he would check in daily, and I nearly barked out a sarcastic laugh. Donovan treated me like a child one moment, his sex slave the next, but I couldn't bring myself to get angry anymore. It was easier to be numb.

“Giselle!”

I smoothed the front of my sleeveless white blouse and adjusted the belt on my jeans. “Coming.” I hurried down the stairs to the foyer, refusing to look at Zayne. Donovan was watching me like a fucking hawk, and even one suspicious sideways glance would have him canceling the trip.

Donovan reached for me, then pressed a forceful kiss to my lips. One of these days, I would spit in his mouth, but it was too risky at the moment.

I squeezed his shoulder, playing it up for his benefit. “Have a good flight,” I said.

“Zayne, take care of her while I'm gone. Don't leave her side. I even want you in her room watching her sleep at night,



but the door has to be left open.”

“Of course.” Zayne’s stoic expression was in place, revealing absolutely nothing of his thoughts or feelings.

Donovan grabbed his suitcase, then Marty escorted him outside to the car. Only when the door had closed did I look at Zayne. I nonchalantly placed a finger over my mouth, reminding him there were cameras in the house. The corner of his lip kicked up slightly, and I hoped he’d understood. My heart raced as my attention swept over him. How in the world someone could make a black polo shirt and black slacks look hot as hell was beyond me, but here he was.

Minutes later, Marty returned and secured the alarm system, then started to talk to Zayne in a hushed tone. I assumed that Donovan had given additional instructions.

I stared through the living room windows, watching Donovan’s Porsche pull away. It was interesting that he hadn’t used a driver. Sometimes he just wanted to get behind the wheel of his sports car, so maybe that was why. Suspicion peppered my skin, causing me to fear the worst. What if he’d lied and was pretending to go away on business when he was actually up to no good? I swatted the idea away, but I would talk to Zayne once we were out of the house.

Then it dawned on me. Since Donovan was driving, he wasn’t paying attention to the video feed, and I took advantage of the situation. Marty was still talking to Zayne, so I snuck away as quietly as I could and made a beeline for my bedroom. I needed to grab the clothes and candle for Zayne while no one was looking ... I hoped.

I located the bags that I’d stashed in my closet. Once I’d removed the candle and slipped it in with the clothes, another idea occurred to me. Pretending to search on the top shelf, I

cautiously eyed the ceiling and corners. Not finding any cameras, I closed the closet door, then selected some of my own shirts, shorts, and jeans I hadn't worn yet. The tags were still in place, so it would be easy to cover my ass if I needed to. Plus, when I shopped, I took out extra cash and stashed it. I didn't have much, but it made me feel better that I had successfully snuck around Donovan's controlling, egotistical self.

If Donovan got a hair up his ass and checked my credit card statement, I would tell him that I had some extra cash left over from the birthday gifts from Mother and Father and bought the top, lingerie, and candle. Once I collected a pair of shoes and a few other items, I stuffed them into the same bag that Zayne had brought me yesterday. I was ready.

Reminding myself to take a deep breath, I collected my purse and emergency items, then hurried to the foyer again. I sighed with relief when I saw that Marty was still talking to Zayne.

"Let's go. I need to return the top from yesterday." I typed in the code to disarm the alarm, then quickly left, ensuring the locks were in place behind us.

Zayne slid into the driver's seat, his concerned gaze cutting over to me before he slipped on his sunglasses. "The mall?"

"Yes. Donovan says the color of the top is all wrong for me." I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, my hand slightly trembling.

"I could have told you that before you ever left the store," he grumbled. "Now we're wasting hours going back."

My head whipped around, drilling a hole into the side of his head. "I'm sorry, bodyguard, I don't recall asking for your

opinion.”

“Maybe you should. It seems that Donovan and I have similar taste. Next time just ask me.”

Furious with Zayne’s tone, I tapped my manicured nails on the armrest of the Mercedes. “I will do no such thing. You need to remember your place.” The words zinged out of my mouth before I had time to think it through, but I swear Zayne Wilson almost cracked a smile.

“And you would do well remembering yours,” he said.

Seething, I protectively folded my arms over my chest. *What in the hell was this guy’s problem?* Recalling that Donovan had called Zayne last night, I suspected by Zayne’s abrupt change in temperament that Donovan had gotten to him.

*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

Zayne turned onto Division Street, then pulled into the parking lot of Home Depot. “I need to pick up an order.”

I frowned so hard I thought I might have permanent indents on my face. The second Zayne shifted into park and turned off the engine, I barreled out of the car, wincing from the pain. My sandals scuffed against the pavement, then a hand gently grabbed my arm.

“Giselle.” Zayne’s voice was gentle, worry saturating the air around us. “I’m sorry. I had to play it up for Donovan. I think he’s going to be listening every chance he has.”

My brows shot up while I jabbed my finger into his pec. “That was for his benefit?” Zayne needed to respond to me carefully, or I would have his balls.

“Yes. I would never speak to you like that. But ...” He removed his sunglasses, his heated, green-eyed stare breaking through my fear. “Are you all right? I called last night, and you didn’t answer. I was worried that Donovan had learned about the scrambler or the visit to the school.”

My stupid legs betrayed me as they began to wobble. I shook my head, swallowing over the lump in my throat. “He never brought either of those up. If he knew, he would have said something.” I covered my mouth with my fingertips, willing the tears brewing to stand down, but it was too late. Zayne had first-row seats to a rare occasion—witnessing me falling apart in front of someone other than Donovan.

“Jesus,” Zayne responded softly.

Before I realized what had happened, Zayne wrapped his muscular arms around me and drew me to him. I sobbed against his shirt, unable to hide the onslaught of emotions I struggled to control.

“Giselle, talk to me. I can protect you.” His large hand felt comforting against the middle of my back, but I knew in my heart that Zayne couldn’t keep me safe. No one could.

I pulled away, embarrassed at my public display. Using my fingers, I wiped the moisture from beneath my eyes. “We won’t ever speak about my emotional outburst. This never happened, bodyguard.”

I spun around on my heel and marched to the store’s entrance.

“Giselle.”

I peeked over my shoulder at him. “What?” I snapped.

“I don’t need to pick up anything at Home Depot. That was just to get you out of the car where we could talk.”

I pressed my lips together. Under different circumstances, I might have laughed. I smoothed a stray hair from my ponytail, my mind whirling. Zayne had staged everything in order to get us away from the Mercedes so he could ask if I was okay? No one had ever checked on me before. *He's different.* My logical side nudged me, reminding me to tread lightly, but Zayne's actions supported my instincts.

Squaring my shoulders, I looked at him. "The bag has extras clothes and shoes with the price tags in case Donovan ever asks again. I'm not sure whose shirt and candle you gave me but thank you."

Zayne held his arm out, motioning me forward. "It's my best friend's fiancée's shirt and candle. I told Vaughn I gave it to you but would get it back. Luckily, he'd asked if I could grab Claire's online order while I was out at one point, and I forgot to give it to her. It all worked out."

I was pretty sure that my sigh of relief was out loud and not in my head. The lingerie wasn't for Zayne's girlfriend, although the information didn't mean he wasn't in a relationship. Still, it somehow made me feel better.

Every minute that I spent with him, I wanted more. I wanted more *with* him. His mind, his heart, and I was genuinely attracted to Zayne. Continually being raped and tortured had stripped me from ever being able to want to be with a man ... until now. When I was around Zayne, I didn't feel numb anymore. I peeked at him, realizing that I'd been honest with myself for the first time since we'd met. I was falling for Zayne Wilson, and I was terrified that he wouldn't feel the same. Especially if he knew the truth about me.

Zayne glanced around. "Let's get out of here."

“I don’t care where we go, just don’t make me return to the house.” I hated that I sounded desperate, but I planned to make the time worthwhile if Donovan was gone for a week.

“Don’t worry, Giselle. I have something else in store for you.”

I tilted my head, wondering what he had planned, then hesitated. “Zayne, before we go. Have you seen anyone tailing us? What if Donovan isn’t really out of town, and he’s spying on me?”

A wicked little grin split Zayne’s face. “I planted a tracker on his Porsche along with his Land Rover and eight other cars before I left yesterday. We can see exactly where he is.”

I couldn’t help it. I full-on giggled like I was losing my mind. “Oh my God. That’s amazing, thank you.” I collected myself and smoothed my blouse. “He could still have one of his men tailing me, though.” My pulse throbbed against my neck and my head ached from the stress.

“I’m always on the lookout for anyone following us, and I haven’t seen anything suspicious, but I’ll keep an eye out. You have my word.”

I was quickly learning that Zayne was all about his word, and I loved it.

### Zayne

I shouldn't have fucking hugged her, there was nothing professional about it. Giselle was a client. But the second tears welled in her eyes, all I wanted was to comfort her. I wasn't expecting her reaction, though. I assumed she would push me away, but she didn't.

*The way she felt in my arms ...* I would have laughed at that stupid little voice in my head if I were alone. Under no circumstances could I allow my emotions to control that ship. Pierce had hard and fast rules about having a relationship with anyone we were protecting. Vaughn got lucky when Pierce found out about him and Claire, but it was only because Sutton went to bat for them ... after she took care of Vaughn herself.

"Let's go." I ushered Giselle in front of me, my gaze sweeping through the parking lot for any signs of danger or someone tailing us. She was right. Donovan wouldn't think twice about tailing her, but I'd already thought ahead.

After we climbed into the Mercedes, I pulled up the Spotify app on my phone. "21 Reasons" by Ella Henderson, the club mix, would drown out any conversation, or so I hoped.

Next, I tapped the app to track Donovan's Porsche. It appeared to be at the airport, like he said. Of course, that didn't mean he hadn't ditched the car and left with someone else, though. More than ever, it was crucial that I remained alert. I handed the phone to Giselle. She nodded and returned it, then grabbed hers. Her fingers flew across the keyboard. I almost chuckled as she gave me her cell.

*Where are we going?* The unsent text read.

Although I wasn't keen on the idea of communicating through texts, normally a software that recorded messages wouldn't gather the data unless the message was sent. At least for today, it would work.

I typed a quick response. *It's a surprise.* I held it up for her to read.

Panic clouded her expression, and I suddenly felt like an ass. I suspected that she didn't have many good surprises.

I began to type again. *Do you trust me?*

Testing the waters with where she was mentally and emotionally, I waited while she stared at the screen. Before she could reply, I typed another question.

*Can you trust me for a few hours?*

If I broke the issue into smaller chunks, maybe she could take a risk and not be so scared. Giselle was terrified in her own home, I sure as hell didn't want her to be frightened when she was with me.

Her gaze suspiciously darted around, then returned to me. She nodded and fastened her seat belt.

I started the car before buckling up myself. She remained quiet, staring out of the passenger's side window, which was



fine. Donovan could think we were still pissed at each other.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into a small shopping center north of Spokane.

“I need to check the tire, feels like I might have a flat. Wait here,” I ordered like a fucking asshole.

Her jaw clenched, but I hoped she remembered we were playing it up for Donovan. I left the car running and the air conditioning on while I hustled to one of my favorite hamburger joints nearby.

Ten minutes later, I returned with two bags of food along with one vanilla and one chocolate shake.

Giselle’s gaze widened when she spotted the items. I handed her the bags, and she placed them on the floorboard between her feet, lifting her cute nose in the air and sniffing.

“Vanilla or chocolate?” I mouthed.

A smile lit up her face, reaching her beautiful eyes. She pointed at the chocolate one, nearly giddy. I watched her take a drink while I set my shake in the cup holder. My heart skipped a beat, witnessing how excited she was over a shake. How could such a simple moment make her so happy?

Her cheeks sank in as she took a long pull from her straw, the thick liquid slowly climbing up the long tube.

*Fuck!* My cock stirred, watching her. Nothing about this was acceptable. *Down, boy.* It had definitely been too long since I’d been laid if a beautiful woman sucking on a milkshake got me hard. Especially in our current situation.

I shifted into drive, my eyes cutting over to her as she continued to devour the sweet treat. If she didn’t end up with brain freeze or a sugar crash, I would be surprised.

I held in my chuckle as she rubbed her temple, then set her drink down. Looking more comfortable, she relaxed in her seat, her fingers tapping to the beat of “I see Red” by Everybody Loves an Outlaw. She didn’t know that I’d added this song to my playlist after I’d dropped off the shopping bags to Donovan the day before. Even though the lyrics didn’t apply directly, I was definitely seeing red after dealing with that bastard.

Returning my attention to the drive, I headed farther out of Spokane. Ten minutes later, I pulled onto a paved road, then a dirt one. Once I stopped, I looked out over the lake. It was calm today, which was perfect. I didn’t share this spot often, but I’d brought my last client’s adult kids, Jagger Whitlock and Ariana Ellison, here. Hopefully the day would turn out better than theirs had.

We both grabbed our drinks and Giselle carried the bags of food out of the car while I stopped by the trunk to collect an army green blanket.

I had no idea if Giselle even liked picnics, but I was about to find out. My plan was to be able to talk freely and feed the girl. Although she was petite, she was on the thin side. After watching her smile, then practically obliterate the majority of her shake, I knew it’d been the right call to go against Donovan’s ridiculous orders for her to lose weight. Hell, I had no idea where she would lose a few pounds. I thought she was perfect exactly the way she was. Beautiful curve to her hips, perky ass, and long legs that she could wrap around my shoulders while I buried my face in her—my dick sprung to life, and I had to intentionally focus on something else before she saw my goddamn boner. *I would like to bone her.* Jesus, ever since I saw her smile when she was at the school with the mystery girl, I was like a teenager all over again.

The gravel crunched beneath our shoes as I led the way to the grassy area beneath a large oak tree. The water looked inviting, but I hadn't talked to her about swimming. My thoughts began to drift again as I pictured her in a tiny bikini. Dammit, this wasn't helping my situation at all. But I couldn't tear my attention away from her. *Breathe, asshole. She needs your help, not your cock.*

After the blanket was on the ground and she sat next to me, bewilderment flickered in her gaze. "You had this planned?"

I opened the bags of food and began removing burgers, fries, and onion rings. What she didn't like, I would eat, but she had first choice. Today was all about her. I had a sneaking suspicion she was rarely cherished and taken care of. To Donovan, she was a possession, and in his twisted way he probably thought he was taking care of her. But there was one thing I could offer that the sorry bastard never would: freedom. I shoved down the growl that almost escaped me just from thinking about the son of a bitch.

"Zayne?" Her soft voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I glanced at her from behind my sunglasses, recalling her question. "Yeah. When Donovan called me last night, I realized it was a perfect opportunity to get you out of the house. My second thought was to feed you something you normally weren't allowed to indulge in." I studied her, not sure how she would take my idea.

Her attention bounced between the lake, food, and me. "It's beautiful here ... and the food. Thank you."

I unwrapped one of the burgers, the crinkle of the foil breaking the momentary silence. "I love this lake. It's one of the spots I visit when I need to think shit through, or I just need a few minutes to myself."

“And you’re sharing it with *me*?” Dismay and curiosity clouded her beautiful features.

I took a moment, swatting a fly away from our lunch. “Yeah. I thought you could use some peace and quiet. You deserve that.” I held up a hand. “The food is growing cold, so pick what you want. One burger has everything except onions. The other is plain, but lettuce, pickles, onions, and condiments are in the bag. We have ketchup, mustard, ranch, and blue cheese dressing for dipping or the burger, your choice. Hell, even both, if that’s what you want.”

Giselle wrinkled her nose in disgust, and my stupid dick took notice again. “I love everything except onions.”

I chuckled and handed it over. “These burgers are to die for, especially when they’re hot.” Before I could ask if she wanted fries or onion rings, she snatched up the fries, grinning.

My palms grew sweaty like a fucking teenager, and I vibrated with excitement. Her smile ... Fuck, I was clearly losing it. “No onions anywhere. Got it.”

To my surprise, Giselle ate all her food. She was either really hungry or stuffing herself because it was all a rarity for her. “If Donovan knew what I’d just eaten, he would force me to work out for hours to burn off that meal, but damn, it was worth it.” She wadded her trash up, then placed it in one of the empty bags.

“He’s not here, so you can choose anything that makes you happy, Giselle.” I grabbed a napkin. “You have a bit of ketchup on your ...” I gestured toward her cheek.

She attempted to wipe it off. “Did I get it?”

Grinning, I pointed to her again. “No.”

Giselle hesitated, her gaze landing on my mouth, and I remembered that she'd never seen me smile before.

“Just get it, please.” Frustration dotted her tone.

I slowly leaned over, gently wiping it off her beautiful face. “Got it.” The scent of her almond and strawberry shampoo tickled my senses, and I fought everything inside me to not inhale as deeply as possible. My dick gave her a full salute, and I hoped like hell she didn't notice the bulge in my jeans. I didn't want to scare her.

“Thanks.” She glanced away, pink dotting her cheeks.

“Do you want to wade into the water? It's really nice this time of year.” I collected the trash and glanced at the lake. If Giselle weren't with me, I would have stripped down and been in the water already.

“What are you doing, Zayne?” She motioned to the picnic. “What do you want?”

*Shit.* She thought I was doing this because I wanted something. Well, I did. I wanted her to trust me and tell me what was happening at home. At the same time, I had to take a step back and try to see things through her eyes. Her perception was the most important.

I wiped my mouth, my gaze never leaving her. My heartrate kicked up a notch, realizing it was time. It was time to tell her the truth. My truth.

**Zayne**

**M**aybe I wanted to tell her everything, but I wasn't sure if she was ready to hear it. Giselle stilled on the blanket, waiting for me to answer.

"I want you to feel comfortable with me, Giselle. I need ..." I wiped my mouth, gathering my thoughts as my head swam. "I need to tell you some things." I glanced out over the water, struggling with where to begin.

"The night at the party, when you died ..." *Fuck, what was I doing?* "I'm sorry that you're angry with me for saving you." I wiped my hands with a napkin before I added it to the rest of the trash. "But I'm glad you're still here."

Her head snapped around, glaring at me. I'd realized that I would be taking a gamble and could end up possibly pissing her off. Her teeth clenched, the muscle ticking in her jaw.

From the heated glare she was giving me, I was right.

"You know nothing about my life, bodyguard." Venom laced her words while her eyes narrowed.

She was right, but I had some strong suspicions. "I'm not trying to upset you, Giselle, but there's something you should know about me."

Her features only slightly softened, but it was a step in the right direction.

“When you collapsed in front of me, all I could ...” I rubbed my chin, Mom’s phone call about Chelsey’s father passing away rushing through my brain. This was fucking hard, but I had to push through. For Giselle. For me.

“What is it?” Curiosity and concern danced across her expression.

I bent my leg and propped my arm on my knee, my mind whirling a mile a minute as the memories slammed into me so hard, I struggled to breathe. I cleared my throat as I recalled the dilapidated structure I’d visited just days ago when I returned to Chelsey’s childhood home for the first time since my world had imploded.

“I was in high school,” I said. “I’d dated Chelsey for three years, and I was in love with her. We had plans to go to college together, get married.” My hand clenched and unclenched, every nerve ending inside me standing on high alert as a rush of emotions unfolded.

“Not many people know this story, so please don’t repeat it.” I looked at her, so she could understand how serious I was.

“I promise,” she said, quietly. Her armor of anger appeared to have slipped away.

“There was no doubt in my mind that Chelsey was the one. She was smart, beautiful, hilarious. No one has ever been able to make me laugh the way she could.” I hesitated. “It was our senior year, days before graduation.” I slammed my eyes closed for a moment.

A soft hand grabbed mine. “Take your time, Zayne. This is clearly difficult for you.”

“It is. I don’t ever talk about it, but it might help if you know.” I took a minute to gather my thoughts before I continued. “Before I went to see her, I stopped by the jewelry store and picked up the engagement ring I’d just bought and had sized for her. Hell, I was so nervous to propose, but I knew my life wouldn’t be anything without her.”

“You’re lucky to have someone that loved you so completely and for so long,” she whispered.

The sadness in her tone squeezed my heart, and I ached to fix it. For the first time, I saw a bit of what was behind Giselle’s fortress. I’d debated all evening whether to share my past with her, but it was serving multiple purposes.

I shifted on the hard ground, my brain sifting through visions of the partially burned home as I spoke. “On the drive to her house, my palms were so sweaty they kept slipping off the steering wheel. I was terrified she would say no. We were young, and had already planned our future together, but she could still say no. In my mind, I wanted the ring on her finger to seal the deal. When I arrived, her parents’ cars weren’t in the drive like usual, but Chelsey’s was parked in front. Before I lost my fucking nerve, I practically jumped out of my Mustang, ran up the stairs to her porch, and let myself in, calling out to her as I did. She was expecting me, I didn’t think anything about just walking through the front door.”

I gulped, reminding myself to breathe. “She didn’t answer, so I hurried up the stairs to the second level where her bedroom was located. I knocked on the door and called her name again. She had a bathroom connected to her room, so I figured she was in there. I let myself in ...”

I hopped off the ground and started to pace, the images coming so fast and hard I gasped for air.



“Zayne?” Giselle grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Look at me.”

I turned slowly, not wanting her to see the tormented expression that was most likely on my face. I’d decided to risk being gut-wrenchingly transparent with her, but it was about to destroy me in the process. I hadn’t talked about Chelsey in nearly ten years, and there was a reason why. It fucking devastated me every time.

“You don’t have to say anything more. It’s tearing you up. Some secrets are better kept in the dark.” A sad smile eased across her face, reminding me of exactly why I was sharing this with her.

“I have to.” I gulped. “When I walked into her bedroom.” I blew out a breath. “Her body was on the bed ... but ... her head was gone.”

Giselle gasped, her hands flying over her mouth as moisture filled her eyes.

“The shotgun was on the floor near her feet, and her brains were splattered all over the wall,” I choked out. “She knew I was on my way.” I stared at the ground, attempting to clear the darkness from my mind. “I don’t know why she did it. There was no note, nothing.” My voice cracked as I curled forward, the agony of the memories weighing heavily on my shoulders. “I should have seen the signs. I should have saved her, Giselle. I missed everything. I failed her, and I’ve never forgiven myself for allowing it to happen.”

Tears streamed down Giselle’s cheeks. “It wasn’t your fault, Zayne. Saving me brought it all back, didn’t it?”

I took a deep breath, mentally and emotionally pulling myself together. My gaze landed on hers and our eyes locked.

“Yeah. And for the record, whatever you were going through and maybe dealing with now, I won’t ever apologize for saving your life. Ever.”

“I’m so sorry that you went through that. I can’t imagine how horrible it was.” Giselle stood and hugged me briefly, then wiped the moisture from her face. “I know you think you saved me, Zayne, but you didn’t. Not the way you think.” She protectively folded her arms across her chest.

It took a minute to realize that Giselle had hugged me. Maybe my honesty was helping her connect with me. “Then talk to me, please. I’ve lived through and seen a lot of shit, and what I see is a terrified woman, screaming for help on the inside. What’s Donovan doing to you?”

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**Giselle**

**M**y brain told me Zayne had just set me up by sharing his story, even as his words reached through my chest and grabbed my heart, reminding me that I still had feelings and cared about people. Inside details of his life in exchange for mine. It was apparent that Zayne loved Chelsey with his entire being, though, and I craved that kind of love for myself. But if I told him the truth, he would never be able to love me like he had Chelsey. I wasn't sure anybody ever could.

“Not today, bodyguard.”

Pain flickered in his green eyes, and I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, then tell him everything. For the first time in my life, I felt safe with someone—with Zayne. If I was the only one the truth would affect, I would be singing like a canary, but I wasn't. Donovan was a sick bastard, and he knew exactly how to control me.

Dread twisted my stomach into knots, until I reminded myself that I was free for a few days.

“Today ... today I need to forget the world I live in. But I will say this. I misjudged you, bodyguard. I thought you were a dick. Who knew you had a gentle side?”

Zayne practically snarled when he said, “I’ll fucking kill someone in a heartbeat if they hurt the people I love and care about.” Zayne’s tone was as lethal as his words.

I stared at him, disbelief pumping through me. Had Zayne just offered to kill Donovan for me or was I misreading the situation? Chills skated over my skin, and I rubbed my arms even though it was almost ninety-three degrees.

“You should try the water.” Zayne turned to me, then held out his hand. Before I could think too hard, I slipped mine in his, and electricity swirled in the air between us. We walked wordlessly to the shoreline while I marveled at how his palm felt warm and comforting next to mine.

I looked at him, confused at the longing and apprehension spinning around in the pit of my stomach. Was he really who he said he was—a genuinely caring man?

The waves gently lapped against the land, and I stepped out of my sandals.

“Is the water normally warm?” I asked before I dipped my toes in.

“It’s nice. You should wade in. Next time you can swim, and I’ll keep an eye on everything from the shore. Thankfully, it’s easy to hear a car travel up the road.”

Taking the suggestion, I held onto him as I stepped on the rocky bottom, the water lapping up over my ankles. “I’ve never been in a lake.”

Zayne’s brow shot up. “Really? Why not?”

“Ballet. It was my life. I constantly trained. It was dance classes, school, sleep. Then, when I was chosen for the company, I was tutored and finished high school at seventeen.”

I gave him a wistful smile, the grief of losing the only thing I'd ever loved even now tugging at me.

“Were your performances ever recorded?”

I nodded. “All the time. I have several from when we performed in Europe. My family is from France, but they moved to the United States when I was seven.”

“I catch hints of your accent on occasion. Well, when you're mad.” Zayne flashed a lopsided grin that turned my insides to mush. “You should let me watch some of your performances.”

His words created a swirl of pride and shock inside of me. “I didn't peg you as the ballet type, but sure.” I stared at him, noticing again his chiseled jawline, full mouth, and gorgeous green eyes. Even though I'd been around him a lot lately, I felt as though this was the first time that I was really seeing him—his heart, his kindness, and his pain. “You should smile more often, bodyguard. It looks good on you.” *What in the hell had I just said?*

“I could say the same for you.” Zayne glanced behind us, his gaze sweeping the area. “We're fine. I'm just checking to make sure we're still alone.”

“I'm still worried that he didn't leave town, that he's following me.” An uncontrollable shiver shot through me, and I winced. I had to be more careful and not allow Zayne to see what I'd worked so hard at keeping from the world.

Concern creased Zayne's forehead, and I scrambled for something to say. Instead, I began to sing “If I Ruled the World” by Tony Bennett.

I took a few more steps along the shoreline, and Zayne placed a hand on my lower back. Gasping from the tender

place left from Ashkov's brutal abuse, my foot slipped on a rock.

In one quick move, Zayne stepped into the water and caught me before I busted my ass.

"I've got you, Giselle."

His words caressed me, and for just a moment, I was able to pretend that Donovan didn't exist. Then reality crashed down on me. Donovan would have laughed, then punished me for being clumsy.

Zayne helped me to my feet, then led me the few steps to land.

I blew out a sigh, trying to cover up my response to Zayne's touch. "I'm so sorry. Your shoes and slacks are soaked."

"It's my fault, I should have just waded in with you. Since you were staying so close to shore, I wanted to remain here in case anyone drove up."

With each step to the blanket, Zayne's shoes squirted water in the air. An uncontrollable giggle escaped me. "I shouldn't be laughing, but you're a bit waterlogged."

"It's fine. I'll dry." He knelt on the blanket and removed his shoes and socks before standing again, placing his hands on my shoulders, and gently turning me away from him.

My world screeched to a halt with his next words. Fear paralyzed me as I struggled to tell my body to walk away. Under no circumstances could Zayne see my back.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I swear. Please let me see." He gently untucked my teal tank shirt from my shorts, but I couldn't fucking move. I was rooted in place, my mind torn

between begging him to see the wound and pleading with him to stop.

Zayne lifted the back of my shirt, then gently removed part of the bandage. A guttural growl escaped him.

The sound broke me from my trance, and I whirled around. My hand flew through the air, slapping his cheek. “Don’t you ever do that again.” Seething, I returned to the water and retrieved my sandals before I stomped off to the car. “Take me home, bodyguard. And remember what you’re hired to do.”

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**Zayne**

**G** *oddammit!*

I'd fucked up and moved too fast with her. But fucking Christ, what I'd seen on her back chilled me to the bone. Although I desperately wanted to convince myself otherwise, it was clearly a fading burn.

I scrambled to collect my shoes and socks, then hurried after Giselle. Stepping in front of her, I blocked the way to the car, planning to talk fast. Hell, if she was pissed at me already, I had nothing to lose.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I had no right to touch you, but your reaction earlier. Did Donovan burn you? I know you're not going to answer me, but at least listen. If he's hurting you, then I can understand why you hate me for saving you, but there's a way out. I swear, Giselle. I can help you get away from the bastard and start a new life. I've tried to prove that you can trust me." I stared at her, but her anger was still firmly in place. "I just needed to say that before we reached the car."

Giselle remained silent and stony as she hopped into the Mercedes and fastened the seatbelt. Her attention remained straight ahead as I slid into the driver's side.



Starting the car, I hoped she would take what I'd said to heart. I wanted her to think it through and let me get her the fuck out of that house and away from that asshole.

The simmering anger rolled into a full boil as I drove us home, Giselle's wound imprinted on my mind.

Half an hour later, I pulled up to Giselle's home. She still hadn't spoken to me, but I hadn't expected her to even if the Mercedes wasn't still bugged. Just because I offered to take her away from her hell didn't mean she would run into my arms and pepper my face with kisses, thanking me profusely. Whatever Giselle had lived through, it had her by the throat, and I suspected that she was more terrified to leave than stay. Regardless, I only had a small window to convince her she could be free of the abuse.

*One week.*

I turned off the engine, then we got out of the car. Giselle walked slowly, then stopped far enough away that the listening device wouldn't hear her.

"It wasn't Donovan," she whispered, her voice trembling. "No more questions, bodyguard."

Stunned, I had more questions that I'd started with, but even I could tell Giselle was at her limit for sharing. And truth be told, so was I. Unfortunately, when nightfall arrived, and I was cloaked in darkness, the memories of Chelsey would ambush me again. At least I had Giselle as a distraction. She knew that Donovan had ordered me to sit in her room while she slept. This time I didn't disagree with the son of a bitch. Even I was afraid that she might try and take her life again after her reaction earlier at the lake. But no fucking way would I allow that to happen on my watch.

Her words ran on a loop in my head. *It wasn't Donovan.* Then who the fuck was hurting her, and why wasn't Donovan stopping it? Or did he know? Regardless if those were his marks on her skin or not, I couldn't stand the way he was rough and controlling.

I resisted the urge to throw Giselle over my shoulder and run, taking her away from this place to where she could feel protected and I could coax the truth out of her.

Hours ticked by as I struggled to fit the puzzle together, but there were still too many missing pieces.

Giselle remained stony toward me, and I wasn't sure if it was due to the cameras in the house or if she was still angry. Finally, she collected the remote controls for the living room television, then curled up on the cream-colored Victorian couch. She looked at me for the first time since we'd arrived, but her lips were pursed into a tight line. Whatever was going on in that beautiful head had her twisted up. It had me fucked up as well.

Applause reached my ears, and I turned to the TV. It took me a minute to realize that it was Giselle, on stage, dancing. Completely mesmerized by her ability, I remained still, my attention trained on the performance. She was magical, the emotion that she portrayed while she moved breathtaking. I glanced at her and realized that she was watching me. I cleared my throat and returned to the dance. She radiated light as she moved across the stage, and even if it was only for a few minutes, it was clear that she was happy and born to dance.

I wanted more of that woman. I wanted to be the reason that she laughed and danced again. *Shit!* I was losing it. The more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to show her how special she was.

The video paused and Giselle rose from her seat, tossing the navy blanket on the cushion. She ignored me as she left. I followed her, hoping she was heading to the studio where there were no cameras, or so we thought. If I didn't see any, then I would scan the area for any listening devices. I'd planned on it the first day, but Giselle had had other ideas and stormed off to her room. At least we were on somewhat better terms now.

Giselle strolled into the studio, and the automatic lights turned on. Once I joined her, she closed the door. Apparently, she had the same thought as me because she joined me in searching for cameras. Unless they were planted near a mirror or in the ceiling, there weren't many places to hide them.

We remained quiet, then I removed a small device from my front pocket. Scanning the area, I released a soft sigh of relief when I was finished. For whatever reason, there weren't any type of recording or listening devices in Giselle's studio.

"It's clear." I pocketed the scanner and faced her. "Are there other rooms in the house that don't have security?"

"The bedrooms, bathrooms, and Donovan's office. It's Donovan's way of pretending I have privacy. There are cameras in the hall, so he knows when I have my door closed to my room, but the dance studio can't be seen."

We stood speechless for a moment, the air thickening around us.

"It's hard to watch my performances because I miss dancing more than anyone will ever know. It's in my blood—my DNA. It was the air I breathed, my sanity." She rubbed her arms as though she were warding off a chill.

"What happened?"

She closed the gap between us and peered up at me. My pulse jumped as her golden eyes captured mine. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with the urge to kiss her, but my arms remained at my side, waiting for her to speak. It wasn't the right time.

“Are you positive we're not being watched or listened to?” she whispered.

“Yeah. At least, not in here.”

Giselle backed away, fear flashing across her face. She opened a door, revealing a closet and sound system. “Helium” by Sia began playing from the in-ceiling speakers. Giselle slipped off her sandals, then pirouetted across the floor to me. A smile graced her full lips, and my cock sprang to life as I watched her. Jesus, she was even more beautiful when she danced. It was the first time she'd dropped her walls and willingly allowed me to see behind the fortress she presented to the world.

For the first time in my life, I wished like hell I knew just a few steps, so that I could dance with her. Meet her on her terms.

As if reading my mind, she took my hand and raised my arm, twirling beneath me. Flashes of helping Claire practice her lifts raced through my mind. Although Vaughn was the professional, I *had* learned a few things from them.

I released her and trailed my fingertips down her sides, then gripped her waist.

She glanced up, falling into step. “Hold and lift me.”

I walked forward and did as she said. Suddenly, she leaped, perfecting a split mid-air. She turned into me and covered my hands with hers as her upper body arched

backward. Her beautiful lips parted, and all I wanted was to taste them.

I was so immersed in her, I hadn't realized that "Helium" was on repeat. The lyrics finally began to break through my trance. Giselle looked captivated as she moved, like she was using the music and the tragic lyrics to try to make me understand her a little better.

The music pulsed through the room as I listened to the words of a woman that needed to escape hell and the love of another giving her hope. *Was I that for her?* If I wasn't, I wanted to be.

My jaw tensed, and I focused on her as she stood still. The air around us crackled with her tension and fear, then tears welled in her eyes. I stepped in and pulled her against me.

Giselle's gaze softened as I ran my thumb over her lips, then widened when she felt my erection pressing against her. The most beautiful expression of trust graced her features, setting my soul on fire. I tucked a stray hair behind her ear, never taking my attention off her. Giselle took my hand and placed it against her cheek.

"Thank you."

I wasn't sure what she was thanking me for, but I did know one thing. Giselle Lambert had just walked away with my fucking heart. And I didn't want it back.

**Giselle**

**O**ver the years, as I lost the ability to speak without consequences, I learned that music could talk for me. At first, I played the song “Helium” so I could dance. But when the lyrics started, and I moved across the floor, briefly allowing my heart to open, I realized that I’d selected this song for another reason—to let Zayne know how I had grown to feel about him.

Even though I had been upset with Zayne when he saw the burn on my back, there wasn’t any doubt in my mind that he cared about me. The following day, I would ask him for help, but there was one more thing I had to do first.

Now that I had recognized who he was, he needed to understand that it wasn’t just me. Anything that happened between us affected someone else I loved. Someone I would die to protect. Zayne had to know I was a package deal. As he learned another one of my secrets, we would see if this beautiful man would still wear his feelings on his sleeve, or if my secret would send him running.

For the first time, I hoped he stayed. As hard as I tried to fight it, Zayne had reached inside me and held my heart in his hand, caressing it, helping it to beat again. If I thought he’d

broken through my walls with a chocolate shake, when he lifted me over his head, my soul sang again. Sang for dancing—sang for him.

Fear slithered through me as I stared at him. If he knew what I was, he would walk away. I suspected that he would still help me escape, but I couldn't help but think his feelings for me would change.

Realizing that I hadn't ever answered his question about the injury that ruined my career, I released his hand. "I'll tell you more about my knee later. I promise."

Zayne's lips parted, his green eyes darkening. More than anything, I wanted him to kiss me. To feel what that would be like, to be wanted and cherished, something I'd never experienced. The men I was forced to be with were sadistic, brutal, and maniacal. There was nothing about being with them that made me feel the way I was with Zayne ... valued.

"Where did you learn lifts?" I pirouetted around him.

"My best friend, Vaughn, and his fiancée. Claire is a dancer and choreographer for the band August Clover. When she and Vaughn were first together, she talked us into working on lifts with her."

Zayne's chuckle filled me with warmth and sunshine, a feeling I'd lost a long time ago.

"What?" I asked, grabbing his strong forearm and leaning into him for support as I lifted my leg into the air behind me and pointed my toes to the ceiling.

"We had a few mishaps. Claire misjudged Vaughn, flew over him, and used me as a landing pad. It took a few times before she nailed it, but when she did, and Vaughn lifted her over his head, it was a cool moment." He stared at me. "You

could see them connect on a different level.” His voice was low and throaty.

“It happens.” I danced across the floor, then leaped into the air again, allowing the feeling of freedom to wash over me. I hadn’t played around in the studio in almost a year, but something about Zayne had unlocked the desire again.

“I have to learn to dance for a friend’s wedding.” Zayne rubbed his chin, appearing almost embarrassed.

“Slow dance? Waltz? Can you at least keep a beat?” I laughed, enjoying the look of discomfort on his face.

“Probably. Holden wasn’t specific about what kind of dance.”

I closed the gap between us. “This is a perfect song to start with.” “Helium” was still on a loop, but I didn’t even care.

I took his hand and placed the other one on my waist, then rephrased my question. “Do you have rhythm?”

His brow arched. “Yeah, I can keep a beat.”

“Good. Otherwise this would be a daunting task.” I smirked at him playfully.

“Thanks.” That single word dripped with sarcasm.

I began to move slowly, keeping my eyes trained on his. “Please don’t step on my feet.”

“Shit. Hang on.” Zayne slipped out of his black dress shoes and placed them near the door before he returned. “Better?”

“Much.” We positioned ourselves again. “Feel the music, Zayne. Let it flow through you, then allow it to move you.”



He nodded, watching my feet and following along. To my surprise, he picked it up quickly.

I stepped away, taking his hand and twirling, then returning to him. This time, he pulled me against his muscular body, and heat shot through me. Instead of fear rooting me where I stood, I leaned in, feeling secure. Placing my palm on his chest, feeling his heart beat strong and steady beneath my palm. I resisted the urge to place my head against him.

I moved my hand across his hard pecs, reveling in the muscular dips and plains. My fingertips traced over to his bulging biceps, and I gave it a gentle squeeze. The day he and Pierce had arrived to meet Donovan and me, I hadn't noticed how well-built Zayne was, but the last thing on my mind at the time was wanting anyone to touch me. This was different, and I wanted to explore Zayne from head to toe. My core clenched, shocking me. I hadn't been turned on or attracted to a man since I started puberty. Not after Donovan's constant unwanted attention. Until this moment, sex had only equaled pain.

I pressed my hips into him, his erection evident to me through his slacks. Closing my eyes and focusing on just him, I gave myself permission to dream for a fleeting moment. Dream that I wasn't trapped in Donovan's house or the dark world I lived in. Looking up into the face of the man that had saved my body, and I suspected would save my heart, I sucked in a breath. His green eyes flashed with the care and protectiveness I wanted. Needed. Craved. But I understood there was so much more to this man than safety.

"Giselle?" Zayne tucked a stray hair behind my ear, then his fingertips traced my cheek and down my neck.

Heat pulsed through me, my thong damp from his simple touch. He'd awakened something inside me that I thought was

dead and gone forever.

He bent down, his lips hovering over mine.

I stilled while my heart knocked against my chest and butterflies scattered in my belly. I pushed up on my tiptoes until our mouths were only a breath away.

The sound of the alarm pierced my ears, and I scurried backward. I darted to the door and flung it open. Donovan never allowed me to close it when he was here.

“I’ll check,” Zayne said, collecting his black dress shoes and sliding them on. He immediately slipped into bodyguard mode, and I mentally cursed a blue streak, realizing that we’d nearly kissed and could have been caught. My attention was glued to the back of Zayne as he walked into the foyer, the muscles in his legs and ass flexing with every step he took. Terror clawed at my spine, leaving me gasping for air. What if Donovan had returned already? My pulse pounded so hard with anxiety that my ears rang.

Unable to take the suspense any longer, I hurried down the hall and to the foyer.

“Thank you,” Marty said and closed the door. He turned, realizing that I was behind him. “Girl Scout cookies.” Marty pinned me with a withering glare.

I glanced at Zayne, and my legs began to tremble.

*Shit.* I bet he’d noticed the door was closed in my studio. I squared my shoulders and tipped my chin up. Fuck him. I was a grown woman, and I deserved some privacy. But even with my mental pep talk, I knew damned well that Donovan would punish me severely when he returned home. A terrifying realization dawned on me. If I wanted to escape with my life, time was of the essence.

And I only had six more days to make a plan.

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**Giselle**

“**A**re you ready?” I asked Zayne from the kitchen the following day. He’d only left me for a few minutes to shower last night, and I wasn’t even sure when it happened. I only saw a damp towel hanging next to mine in the bathroom. To my surprise, I’d fallen into a dreamless sleep, waking refreshed for the first time since I was a young girl. His presence in my bedroom had proven a good thing. A few days ago, I would have felt a lot differently.

“Shopping? Yoga?” He asked as he smoothed his black Westbrook Security shirt.

“All of it. I would also like to go to the dance store and purchase some new toe shoes. I’m ready to get back into the studio on a regular basis.” I glanced at him as I rinsed my coffee cup, then loaded it in the dishwasher, wondering what Zayne might do if he knew that Donovan had raped me in this exact spot the moment that he and Pierce walked through the front door.

“Good. It will probably help you lose the weight Donovan wants you to drop.”

I resisted the urge to sucker punch Zayne right in the fucking nose, but I understood he was speaking to me that way for Donovan's and Marty's sakes. I'd been so wrapped up in our day together, I'd forgotten that Marty was a weasel, and Donovan compensated him well for his spying abilities. It didn't mean his words didn't royally piss me off, though.

My gaze landed on Zayne's arms, wishing they were around me again. But after the scare with the alarm system beeping and the reminder that Marty could and would report any "poor" behavior to Donovan, it was too risky.

The best thing to do was get out of the house where Zayne and I could talk openly. Sweat slickened my palms, an incessant reminder of what I had planned for today. *You're putting everyone in danger.* My stomach dropped to my toes, and a sharp pain stabbed me in the chest. I shoved the fear into a dark hole, reminding myself that I had to break free one way or the other. I had to try to leave alive this time.

I collected my Hermes handbag from my dresser and shot Zayne a stony look. "Let's go, bodyguard," I said, my tone clipped and rude. I proceeded through the living room, then to the foyer. As usual, Zayne was on my heels, but I swore I could feel his heated gaze on my back.

My shoes smacked against the marble floor, announcing my presence. Marty was stationed at the front door, watching me like a hawk preparing to swoop in on his prey. I gave him a sweet smile as I approached him. Placing my hand on his chest, I unnecessarily smoothed his white dress shirt. "I'll be out shopping. Would you like me to pick anything up for you?" I peered up at him beneath my dark eyelashes. Marty might have been on Donovan's payroll, but I knew for a fact that he wanted to fuck me. His brown eyes darkened, and his

tongue darted over his lower lip. “Donovan would never have to know,” I said in a hushed tone.

The asshole could take that comment however he wanted, but he would never touch me unless I allowed it. Not even Donovan would be able to give me to him. I stepped away, my lips forming a slight pout. Marty gulped, and I realized he was putty in my hands. He didn’t understand he was getting played, and by the end of the week, I knew I would change his mind about reporting to Donovan. I was fighting for my survival, and any tool I used was fair play in my book.

“I’m fine, thank you, Giselle,” Marty croaked.

I mentally rolled my eyes. Pay an old creep a little attention and he was ready to do whatever I wanted. It disgusted me, but if Marty kept his mouth closed, it would spare me from being raped and beaten. The trade-off was worth it.

I peeked over my shoulder and slipped my sunglasses in place. “Coming, bodyguard?” I flashed Marty a warm smile, then left the house.

The front door shut behind me, and I removed my phone from my purse. Once I opened the text message, I filled the screen with the puke emoji. I knew better than to show Zayne until we were away from the mansion. Marty was probably watching us through the see-through curtains in the living room as we hopped into the car.

The farther away Zayne drove, the more relief flooded my body. When we reached a red light, I held up my cell so that he could see my reaction to Marty. Below the vomit emojis was the address where I wanted to go.

He nodded but didn't provide me with any other response. Anxiety scraped my skin, and I rubbed my arms. Maybe I'd pissed off Zayne when I'd flirted with Marty. Although I didn't need to explain myself, I should. My brain bounced around, toying with whether or not to talk to him later about what I'd done. Shame surrounded me like a toxic cloud, tugging on my battered soul. I hated that each decision I made in life was to avoid being raped and beaten. I wondered what life would be like if I no longer had to weigh every word and action. If I were free to speak my mind without horrible consequences.

An all-consuming ache spread through me, and I gripped the handle of my purse.

Zayne pulled up to the curb, and I hopped out of the car before he'd come to a complete stop. Glancing at my watch, I realized we were a few minutes early for the school's recess. I knew it was a risk, but I couldn't stop myself. I *needed* to see her.

The bell rang, and students spilled out of the building and onto the playground. I entered the gate, then waited until I found the one special kiddo I was looking for. My gaze zeroed in on the nearby teacher, and I gave her a friendly wave. It was customary for her to acknowledge me before I spent time with Ashley.

The sun glinted off Ashley's dark hair, catching her natural red highlights. I welcomed the huge smile that slipped into place, my heart leaping with happiness.

Ashley spotted me and sprinted in my direction. I laughed as she barreled into me and flung her arms around my waist.

"Hey, hon." I gently tugged her ponytail and kissed the top of her head.

“Hi! I wasn’t sure I would see you again.” Ashley looked up, and her big hazel eyes were full of tears.

“I told you I would be back.” I gently tapped her on her freckled nose. “We should say hi to Mrs. Samson.”

“She’s fine with you visiting.” Ashley released me and took my hand. “Mrs. Samson told me to come over and see you.”

I lowered my sunglasses and peered over the lenses in the teacher’s direction. She acknowledged us, so I pointed to the picnic table located at the edge of the playground. Mrs. Samson gave me a thumbs-up and quickly turned her attention to a pair of boys wrestling on the grass.

“How have you been this week? Are you learning a lot?” I sat on the top of the cement table and reached out to steady Ashley as she climbed up and joined me. Glancing at Zayne, I realized that he had remained next to the car, which was a smart move. It would probably scare the kids if he followed me onto the playground. He was a big, intimidating guy. Besides, I preferred to talk to Ashley by myself. I rarely saw her, so the time with her was precious.

I listened as Ashley rattled off details about the book she was reading, how she’d worked her way up into the advanced groups for math and science, and that she was still taking gymnastics and dance. I’d always wanted her to have a well-rounded life, and it seemed she was doing okay.

“I miss you, sweet girl.” I smoothed her hair.

“I miss you, too.” Ashley hugged me again. “Don’t go. Please.” She peered up at me with wistful eyes.

I rubbed her back, soothing not only her but my brokenness as well. Being away from her was sheer agony.



Ashley sat up, and I wiped the moisture from her cheeks. “I will never leave you.” I placed my fingertips over her heart. “When you’re sad, remember that I’m right here.”

“I do,” she sniffled.

The bell rang way too soon, but I knew it was a short recess. It was a shame that adults expected kids to sit in class all day, with only a few ten-minute breaks to run and channel their unbridled energy. They needed the sunshine on their skin and that feeling of freedom.

Ashley took my hand, squeezing it as more tears welled in her eyes. “Will you be back tomorrow?”

“We’ll see, baby.” Even though Zayne hadn’t seen anyone tail us, we still had to be careful, and visiting too much posed a risk.

I hugged her goodbye and stood rooted to my spot as I watched her run across the playground and line up with the rest of her class. Mrs. Samson gave me a little wave, and I returned it. When the last child had entered the building, I slowly made my way to the Mercedes. Sadness cloaked me as we climbed into the front seats, then I fastened my seatbelt.

Zayne remained quiet as he drove away. I had no idea where we were going, and I didn’t care, as long as it wasn’t home or sitting in the car. I fidgeted in my seat, unable to get comfortable. My muscles twitched as I was consumed with a feeling of restlessness. My nerves spun out of control while I battled with how and when to tell Zayne about my life—about Ashley.

I glanced at the bodyguard next to me, and a rush of calm briefly soothed me. Seconds later, I was once again shrouded in uncertainty. Mentally ticking off all the reasons that I had to

escape Donovan, I'd come to the realization that one of them was Zayne. I hadn't ever been free to explore a relationship before, and my heart was pulling me in that direction. Even though he hadn't hidden his feelings for me, I realized our next conversation might send him emotionally walking away from me. I wasn't sure I could handle that, but I had to try.

I placed my hand on Zayne's arm, tugging on the sleeve of his polo shirt. "We need to talk," I mouthed.

He nodded, then turned off Division Street and headed down a back road. The heat had settled over Spokane and had turned the grass a dreadful brown.

Zayne pulled up a playlist, and "[She Goes](#)" by Jordan Hart played, breaking the silence between us. At least we weren't firing cheap, cruel shots at each other for Donovan's sake. I wasn't sure I could deal with that at the moment. More than that, I was angry and hurt after leaving Ashley, and I didn't want to rip Zayne's head off when he didn't deserve it.

I stared out of the window, slightly jumping when Zayne reached over, his warm hand settling over mine. Surprised, I glanced at him before I threaded my fingers through his, seeking comfort in his touch.

Zayne veered off the paved road, turned onto a circular driveway, and parked in front of a three-car garage. The large contemporary-style house surrounded by acres of hardwood trees appeared comfy and inviting.

He released me, then turned off the engine. We exited the Mercedes, and again, he took my hand in his.

I wanted to ask him where we were, but there wasn't enough space between us and the vehicle to be certain that Donovan couldn't overhear us. It should have scared me with

how calculated I'd had become to survive, but to me it was just another life lesson I'd been forced to learn.

Zayne reached into the front pocket of his slacks and produced a key, then unlocked the front door and motioned for me to come in.

As soon as the entrance was secured and the locks were in place, Zayne shoved his fingers through his dark blonde hair. "This is my best friend's house, and Vaughn and Claire are gone for the day. It's all ours. We can talk freely."

His words slowly registered, and I threw my arms around him. "Thank you."

Zayne wrapped me in a warm hug, holding me against his muscular body for a long moment before releasing me and removing his sunglasses. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

Curious about my surroundings, I peeked around the open floor plan, in particular noting the vaulted ceilings and the wall of windows in the living room. The wood floors were pristine, and from what I could tell, they were new. My heart soared as I stared out and across the hillside, catching the green leaves of the aspens and maples swaying in the summer breeze. I loved hardwood trees, especially in the fall.

Zayne led the way to the kitchen. "Good. I'll make lunch while you tell me who the girl at the school is."

**Zayne**

I rummaged through Vaughn's refrigerator while Giselle settled on a stool at the bar. The second I mentioned the girl, Giselle's entire body stiffened. The young person looked just like her, and I had a sneaking suspicion that I wouldn't like what I was about to hear. Regardless of her answer, I had an obligation to protect Giselle, and I couldn't fucking do my job when I didn't have all the truth.

Removing the casserole dish filled with Vaughn's homemade lasagna from the fridge, I set it on the tan and white granite counter while my mouth watered.

"Do you like lasagna? Vaughn's an amazing chef. He should open his own restaurant."

"I haven't eaten a noodle in eons, it sounds wonderful." She clasped her hands, then moved them onto her lap.

"I can tell you're nervous, but take a breath and talk to me." I shoved the casserole into the oven and set the temperature to heat the meal. In my opinion, popping it into the microwave would be illegal and fuck up Vaughn's creation.

Snatching a banana from the fruit bowl near the sink, I tossed it to Giselle. "I'll split it with you." I figured Giselle would give me shit for being bossy, but she must have been hungry because she peeled it from the bottom and broke it into two pieces.

Although I wanted to walk around the counter and hold her, I was afraid we would get distracted, and she would divert the conversation. That couldn't happen.

It was clear that she wasn't going to start talking, so I started asking questions. My chest tightened, and I dreaded her explanation, but I began with the hardest one first.

"Is the girl your daughter ...?" I cleared my throat. "With Donovan?"

Giselle's eyes widened, and she fumbled with the banana, dropping it to the floor. I scooped it up, my nerves tingling while I waited impatiently, pinning her with a heated stare. She needed to put me out of my misery. I'd fallen for this woman, and the thought of Donovan connected to her for the rest of her life was pure fucking torture. Even worse, she would never be free from the man even if she hid. Sharing a child bonded you forever.

Giselle took my hand. "No. She's not Donovan's."

As hard as I tried to disguise my relief, I failed. Blowing out a sigh, I stepped away from her and tossed the fruit in the trash under the sink. "You can have the other part of the banana." I pointed to the other half still in the peel in front of her.

She flashed me a sad smile. "I'll wait for the lasagna." She tucked a strand of long hair behind her ear. "Her name is Ashley. I'm not allowed to see her."

A frown tugged at the corners of my mouth. “Why?”

Giselle’s attention bounced to the living room, then returned to me. “Donovan uses her to control me. Ashley is my little sister. She’s eleven.”

My heart hammered hard as the adrenaline pumped through my veins. I knew Donovan was a piece of shit, but threatening a child was fucking sick. Thoughts of murdering him flashed through my mind, but that would have to happen later. Giselle’s—and now Ashley’s—futures rested on me pulling off an escape and protecting them.

*Shit! Shit! Shit!*

The clouds of my blind fury cleared from my head. If I wanted a relationship with Giselle, she was a package deal, and I would expect nothing less, but was I ready? Was I prepared to fight for her *and* her sister? Ashley was a minor, and it would be kidnapping to take her without parental consent, which meant Giselle’s parents would need to know what was going on with Donovan. That piece of information complicated everything.

The timer on the oven beeped, and I turned my attention to the food. Once I removed it and placed the casserole on the stove, I located two plates and forks and put them on the counter. I dished us each up a piece, then set her lunch in front of her.

All the while, my brain bounced around faster than a ping pong ball gone wild. *Ashley. Giselle. Donovan.*

“Is she safe right now? Ashley, I mean?” I took a bite of the lasagna, nearly moaning as it melted in my mouth.

“I’m not sure. She lives at home with my mother and father, but you saw how easy it was for me to waltz onto the

playground and spend time with her.”

My forehead creased. She was right. It had been way too easy, which meant Donovan could snatch her up at any time. Not to mention the parents weren't aware of what Donovan really was, so they would have no problem giving him permission to check her out of school. I pointed at Giselle's food. “Try a bite.”

I watched as she took a taste and her eyes rolled back in her head. “Oh my God.” She covered her mouth with her hand, giggling.

Jesus, she was sexy as hell. My cock sprang to life, wanting to make her scream my name as ... *much younger sister, dude!* My dick deflated the second Ashley and her safety crossed my mind. At least I knew how to keep my overzealous hormones in check.

I was done messing around. If I was diving in headfirst with Giselle, I had to know where she stood. “Giselle, do you want to escape Donovan?”

She set her fork down, the color draining from her cheeks. “Yes,” she whispered. “But I don't know how. He's threatened to hurt Ashley if I leave or attempt suicide again.”

White-hot rage ripped through me, and I backed away from my food, no longer hungry.

“Zayne, the night you saved me. I was trying to get free of him *and* my ex-husband. They were good friends at the time and treated me the same. I'm terrified—not about what he'll do to me, but to my little sister.”

I turned away slightly, afraid that it might scare Giselle if she saw how angry I was. She'd had enough of that bullshit in her life. Placing my hands on my hips so I wouldn't punch

Vaughn's wall, I began to pace in an attempt to clear my mind, much like I had during martial arts training and my military days. I sucked in a deep breath, then faced Giselle again.

“And you're being straight with me about the burn on your back? Donovan didn't put it there?” I clenched my jaw so hard that I thought I might break a molar.

“No, he didn't do it.” Giselle gulped, visibly shaken. “But he was just as responsible.”

I stormed over to her, barely hanging on to sanity and pinned her with my gaze. “Before I kill the motherfucker, I have to know that I understand you correctly.”

Giselle grabbed my forearm, squeezing tightly.

“Donovan is hurting and controlling you with your little sister. If you escape, then we need to ensure her safety as well.”

Tears welled in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks, breaking my heart into a million pieces. All I wanted was for her to heal and be happy once she and Ashley were relocated—even if it was without me.

“Yes.” Her tongue licked the moisture from her lips. “He has a wide reach, so this has to be planned meticulously or he'll hurt her. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to Ashley.” She hiccupped.

I pulled Giselle in for a hug, rubbing her upper back while she fell apart. “I realize this is hard for you, but I need as many details as you can give me. Then I have to bring in my boss.”

Her red-rimmed eyes gazed at me in terror. “No one else can know.” Her voice trembled with her plea.



I knelt on the floor and took her hands. Looking up, I inhaled as my pulse skipped a beat. “Pierce, Vaughn, and I served in the military. We’re trained to plan an attack, go in and rescue people, as well as kill when necessary. I understand you’re scared shitless, but I can’t do this alone. I trust my men with my life. I also trust them with yours and Ashley’s.”

She chewed on her lower lip, looking away. I suspected she was weighing the pros and cons and trying to hold her fear in check.

“Okay.” Her voice barely hovered above a whisper.

“We’ll meet with them. It might be easiest if they come over here. Vaughn and Claire will be home in a few hours. I know Claire and Sutton will be right there for you, too. Claire escaped an awful situation, and I suspect she can offer you some support and someone to talk to. Shit, in one way or the other, we all did.”

Standing, I then reached out and smoothed her dark hair. “I realize this is a bad time, but I’m not just invested in you as your bodyguard.” I trailed my fingertips down her cheek. “After I saved you, I wanted to reach out. Even in those brief seconds before you collapsed, I felt there was something special about you. When I found out you were married, I decided to stop thinking about the woman with the golden eyes. No matter how hard I tried, though, I couldn’t. I have to believe that the universe brought us together again.”

“Me, too.” Giselle stood as well, then pushed up on her tiptoes. Her soft lips brushed against mine, the taste of her sweeter than I’d ever imagined.

As much as I wanted to pick her up and ravage her, I let her take control. She had to understand that I wouldn’t hurt her.

A soft moan escaped her, nearly undoing me. Our mouths parted, her tongue seeking mine. I threaded my fingers through her hair, breathing her in and taking what she was able to give me.

Her hands roamed over my back and my dick begged to be inside her. But that would have to wait, no matter how many times I had to rub one out in the shower. Her heart was the most important thing to me, not her body.

Breathless, I broke the kiss. “I could kiss you all day, but I need a break.”

Confusion flickered across her expression. “A break?”

I leaned down near her ear and said, “You’re too special to me to rush the physical aspect.”

A soft whimper slipped from her, and she dug her manicured fingernails into my biceps.

I straightened, then gently kissed her again. “I have to ask, Giselle: are you sure your feelings for me are more than just as your protector? I think it could be confusing.”

“I want there to be an *us*, Zayne. I realize you’re my knight in shining armor right now, but what I feel for you is real and goes beyond that. Please believe me.” She pressed her petite body against me, then brushed her lips against mine.

“If we want a chance to make a relationship work, please don’t tell anyone, especially Pierce and Sutton,” I said against her soft mouth.

“I won’t. It’s best we keep things a secret anyway. If Donovan or Marty finds out before we have a plan in place ...” She hesitated. “I can’t.” She shook her head, then backed away. “I can’t even wrap my head around what he’d do.”

I closed the gap between us, cupping her face in my palms.  
“You won’t have to find out. I’ll never let that happen.”

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### Giselle

**Z**ayne had just offered me the world and made a promise I wasn't sure he could keep. But he was the first man that I wanted to be with, so I would take my chances. He was my bodyguard, but he was so much more. He'd stolen my heart with a chocolate milkshake.

My legs turned to jelly the moment I kissed him, my nipples straining against the thin fabric of my lace bra and my G-string dampening between my thighs. I wanted to feel him inside me—wrap my legs around his waist and rock against him. I hadn't ever been this turned on by a kiss. When I pressed my body against his, the length of his cock nearly made me lose my mind in a good way. He'd pumped the brakes right before I was about to rip his clothes off and taste every inch of him. I chewed my lower lip, trying to rein in my hormones.

“What do you need to know?” I asked, sitting at the counter and returning to my lasagna. Even though I didn't have much of an appetite due to the upcoming conversation, I had to take care of myself. The last time I'd eaten was the hamburger and shake Zayne had bought nearly twenty-four hours ago.

“First, I need to know about Marty. I’m assuming he keeps an eye on you for Donovan.” Zayne speared a bite of the lasagna and stuffed it into his mouth.

I picked at my food, taking a nibble of the cheese on top. “I’m sorry.”

His brows knitted together, confused. “For what? What in the world do you have to apologize for?”

“That I flirted with Marty. I’m just trying to get him to keep his fucking mouth shut and not tattle on me to Donovan about the door of the studio being closed. Unfortunately, I’ve had to learn some life skills I’m not proud of.” Shame and humiliation seeped into my bones. Once Zayne learned that I was sold for sex to sick, sadistic, wealthy men, and what Donovan did to me, everything would change. In my gut, I knew he would still help my family escape, but he would no longer look at me the way he had the last few days—like I was the most beautiful and important person in the entire world. No one had ever looked at me like he had. I wanted more. I wanted him.

And I wanted to protect his heart as much as he wanted to protect mine.

A sickening thought turned my stomach, and I halted mid-chew. If Pierce and Sutton wanted to talk to me, that meant I should tell them *everything*. The rapes, being sold—every sick part of my life. They couldn’t help us with only half of the details.

I jumped off the barstool and hauled ass to the kitchen sink just in time to lose what little of my meal I’d eaten.

A gentle hand gathered my hair and held it while I heaved. Zayne didn’t say a word, just stayed next to me while I made a

mess in his friend's sink. The thought of sharing my past was too much.

Trembling violently, I straightened, then washed the sink and rinsed my mouth.

“There are some crackers and 7Up in the pantry. Claire is pregnant, so they're staples in the house right now. I have a spare, unused toothbrush and toothpaste in the guest bathroom. You can brush your teeth when you're ready.”

I nodded, gripping the sink as another wave of cold, harsh terror squeezed me. “Where's the bathroom?”

“I'll show you. I don't want you to pass out on me.” Zayne protectively slipped his arm around my waist while he held my hand.

“Here. And Giselle, just because we shared a kiss doesn't mean I'm not going to continue to stick close to you.” Zayne's voice was firm, and I realized there wasn't any possibility for negotiation.

“I know.”

Zayne followed me into the bathroom and located the toothbrush and toothpaste for me. A minute later, my mouth tasted minty instead of like regurgitated lasagna.

“Better.” I offered him a wistful smile. “Maybe some 7Up might help?”

“Why don't you get comfortable on the couch and I'll bring you some soda and crackers.” Zayne led me to the living room, and I curled up in the corner of the leather sofa. My eyes widened as Zayne grabbed the beige blanket from the back of the recliner and covered me with it. I melted with his sweet gesture. No one had tucked me in since I was a little girl. Every night back then, Mom would cover me up, then

read me a book. But this gorgeous man who had taken lives was just as kind and caring. I was with a badass who treated me as though I wore a crown.

“Thank you.” I snuggled into the spot, watching as he returned to the kitchen and momentarily forgetting why my stomach had given me a firm fuck-you.

He returned with a plate loaded with saltines and a full glass of soda. Zayne placed it next to me on the end table. “I’m going to call Pierce. The quicker we can meet, the sooner you and Ashley will be all right.” He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the top of my head. “Just remember that you’re not alone anymore, Giselle.”

Stupid tears welled in my eyes. Unsure of what to say, I simply squeezed his hand before he headed to the kitchen.

Zayne spoke quietly on the phone as I reminded myself to breathe. I wasn’t sure I had the strength to share what I needed to, but I could for Ashley. I had to. Even though I held a sliver of hope in the recesses of my heart that we could escape Donovan, I knew it wouldn’t be easy. Now that I was staring the beast in the face, I was even less sure. I was worth millions of dollars each time he sold me, not to mention being his personal sex slave. My stomach churned again, and I swallowed, then took a small sip of the soda. I knew I wasn’t ready, but Zayne, even if he thought he was prepared ... what he would learn might change the way he looked at me, and I wasn’t sure I could handle it.

**Zayne**

**L**eaning against the kitchen counter, I studied Giselle as she curled up on the couch. Pierce and Sutton were on their way over, and Vaughn and Claire were headed home. The small pieces of information I'd provided kicked all of them into high gear.

I needed a few minutes to myself before everyone arrived, though. Not only did I want to clear my head, but I had to tuck away my feelings for Giselle. My best friends knew me well, and one heartfelt glance her way would ruin our secret. I had to focus on Giselle and Ashley, not arguing with Pierce over how I felt. He would pull me off the case faster than I could blink, but no one would protect her the way I could.

Conversations with Vaughn when he was falling in love with Claire whispered in the corners of my mind. They'd been able to hide their relationship from Pierce and Sutton because the bosses had been out of town. Once Claire slipped up, Sutton had pounced like a lion on its unaware prey.

The front door opened after an obligatory push on the doorbell, breaking through my thoughts. I composed myself and walked to the entrance. I hoped Giselle was ready to share what we needed. If not, our hands would be tied.



“Hey,” I said to Pierce and Sutton.

“How ya doing, man?” Pierce asked. “Sounds like a lot is happening with Donovan and Giselle.”

“I have a suspicion I haven’t even touched the tip of the iceberg,” I replied. *But you touched her. Kissed her.* My cock stirred, and I quickly ignored the thought of my mouth on hers.

“Pierce and me too.” Sutton slipped off her sandals and left them near the entrance. She gathered her hair and pulled it into a ponytail, using the black hair tie on her wrist. Her pink Westbrook Security polo shirt was gently stretched over her pregnant belly and the waist of her jean shorts. No matter what Sutton wore, though, she always looked classy. *Just like Giselle.*

“Hi,” Giselle said, approaching us.

“Hey, it’s good to see you again. I wish it was under better circumstances, though.” Sutton gave her a brief hug. “Giselle, you remember my husband and the owner of Westbrook Security Company, Pierce Westbrook?”

“I do.” Giselle offered him a warm but tentative smile. “Thank you for meeting me. Zayne says that you guys can help me and my sister.”

“As long as you can provide us with enough information, I believe so. Before we even get started, are you ready for that? We’re going to dig pretty deep into your personal life. It won’t be easy.” Pierce’s brown eyes filled with concern.

The color drained from Giselle’s face, and I fought the urge to slide my arm around her. “Yeah. I don’t have a choice. Donovan is threatening Ashley, and she can’t be a part of my world.”

“Why don’t we go sit down and chat while we’re waiting for Claire and Vaughn?” Sutton asked as she led Giselle back to the living room.

Pierce patted my back. “You good, man? If this is too much, there’s no shame in saying so. I would rather you speak up than get into a dark space and allow your past to trip you up.”

For the first time, I realized I hadn’t thought of Chelsey since I’d told Giselle about her. Maybe Giselle and I had a way of calming the demons that clung to our backs.

“I’m good. Giselle actually knows about Chelsey.”

Pierce’s brows shot up to his hairline. “Is there a reason that you would share that information with a client?”

My defenses slammed into place. I shouldn’t have to explain to one of my best friends why I’d chosen to disclose my past to her. However, I realized that Pierce wasn’t asking me that question from a friend’s perspective. He was asking from a boss’s point of view.

I folded my arms over my chest, tension snaking through my neck and shoulders. “I knew something was wrong, Pierce. The quickest way for her to understand that I was on her side was for me to open up first. It worked, and that’s all that’s important. She trusts me enough to help her and Ashley get away from Donovan.”

Pierce pinned me with an intense gaze, assessing me. I returned his stare. If he didn’t like my tactics, that was fine, but I wasn’t going to back down from how I’d handled the situation.

“I trust you. You know that, but I need to be assured that your head isn’t too wrapped up in this case. I understand how

much Chelsey's suicide devastated you. It devastated all of us. And I can see Giselle being an opportunity for redemption. But keep your crap together, or this whole show could go to shit."

I recognized that Pierce was right, but this wasn't about a second chance to save someone from killing themselves for me. Not anymore. I was invested in Giselle—my *heart* was invested in her. But regardless of how a relationship might play out, saving her and Ashley was number one on my agenda.

"I'm good." I patted Pierce on the shoulder, hoping I could prove to him that Giselle's safety came first. Mentally, I shelved my feelings for her, ready to work with the team and plan her and Ashley's escape.

The front door opened, and Vaughn and Claire strolled in.

"We're here," Vaughn said, his hand resting on his partner's lower back.

"I'll excuse myself while you all discuss business," Claire said, rubbing her belly. "If I can support Giselle afterward, I will. I can connect with her in my studio." A huge grin split Claire's face. "I just can't fangirl because holy fuck it's *the* Giselle Lambert sitting on my couch." Claire did a little happy dance, and I peeked over at the ladies.

"I'm sure she would enjoy talking to you, Claire. She doesn't have any friends that I'm aware of. I think you and Sutton'll be good for her." I cracked my knuckles, already planning how to end Donovan.

"Let me know when you need me." Claire's bright blue eyes landed on me, then she tilted her head. "Hmm."

My forehead creased, wondering what she was thinking, but it would have to wait.

To my surprise, Claire strolled to me and took my hands in hers. She pushed up on her tiptoes, then whispered in my ear, “It’s going to be okay.”

Taken back, I swallowed my shock. Had Vaughn mentioned Chelsey to her, or could Claire tell I had feelings for Giselle? My heartrate kicked up a notch, then I remembered that Claire had overheard parts of my conversation with Vaughn.

“I know it will, Bonnie.” I chuckled and hugged her. Claire and I had become close when she and Vaughn were sneaking around with each other. I was the person that caught them together. At first, I’d given Vaughn shit and had confronted Claire about messing with Vaughn’s head—both of them. That girl didn’t even hesitate to put me in my place. She had the same fire as her sister. From that moment on, I liked her. Claire was exactly what Vaughn had needed. And me, too. I’d gained a funny, sharp, amazing friend.

Claire bounced into the living room as Vaughn, Pierce, and I watched.

“Hey, sis,” Claire said, tugging on her sister’s ponytail as if she were the younger one. “I hate to interrupt, but I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Claire, and I’m a huge fan, so after you talk whatever business you all have, I would love to hang out for a few minutes.” Claire paused, then wiggled her brows. “I have a dance studio in the house.”

I couldn’t see Giselle’s expression, but her laugh caught my attention. I realized it was forced, but if anyone could bring her out of a shell, it was Claire and Sutton. Unable to

hear Giselle's muted response, I watched as Claire smiled, then left the living room.

"Let's get started," Pierce said, taking the lead.

Vaughn and I followed him and joined the women. Sutton sat next to Giselle, and Pierce and Vaughn each grabbed a recliner. I stood behind Pierce so I could see Giselle and hopefully hide my feelings from him. If I accidentally gave anything away, Sutton would be more forgiving than her husband.

She glanced at me, fear practically bleeding through her pores. I lifted my chin. "You're in good company, Giselle."

She nodded, her hands fidgeting in her lap, then took a slow, deep breath. I braced myself for what I was about to hear. But nothing could have prepared me for what she was about to say.

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**Zayne**

“**A**re you ready?” Sutton asked, her tone kind. She reached over, took Giselle’s hand in hers, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Giselle bit her lip, then glanced at everyone. “Donovan is my adopted brother, as Zayne has probably told you. My parents love him as much as they do me, and in their opinion, he can do no wrong. I would have gone to them and asked for help, but Donovan is sneaky, and from the very beginning, he figured out what to threaten me with in order to keep his secrets.” Giselle cleared her throat.

“Take your time,” Pierce said, leaning back in the chair and propping his ankle on the opposite knee.

I knew Pierce well enough to understand that he was trying not to scare Giselle, but he was ready to urge her forward.

“When I turned twelve, Donovan would break into my bedroom at night and rape me. At first it was once a month, then once a week. Eventually it was almost every evening after our parents were asleep.”

“And your parents weren’t aware that he was hurting you?” Sutton asked.

“No. Donovan said he would harm my mom if I told anyone. I was only twelve, and a very sheltered kid. Not only was he bigger than Mom and me, but he was manipulative, and so convincing that it was easy to believe him.” She shook her head. “I should have never listened to him, but the fear of losing my mother when I could have protected her ... it was too much.”

“You were a child, that makes sense,” Sutton responded.

I glanced at Vaughn, his jaw tight, but he remained quiet and allowed Sutton to continue to take the lead.

“As he got older, his tastes in the bedroom grew rougher. When I was accepted into the dance company, I thought I would be free of him, but the moment he turned eighteen, he joined me in France. My mother and father visited often, but they still had no idea what was happening. It took a lot of high-quality theatre makeup to cover the bruises when I attended class. After the first year, Donovan became good friends with one of the power players of the ballet world. His name was Ander Pierre. My ex-husband.”

My eyes briefly narrowed, attempting to string the pieces together.

“It was then that I was selected as the prima ballerina. What I didn’t know at the time was that Donovan had ...” Giselle gulped.

Afraid she might start puking again, I walked over to the couch, grabbed her 7UP from the end table, and handed it to her. I returned to stand behind Pierce, hoping to hide any uncontrolled emotions that could reveal themselves in my expressions.

She took a few swallows. “Thank you.

“There’s no other way to say it, but Donovan sold me to Ander. As long as I submitted to Ander and his sick sexual fantasies, I would remain the prima ballerina of the company.”

I contained my growl and gripped the back of Pierce’s recliner.

“There was an exchange of money, or did he trade you?” Sutton had begun scribbling notes once Giselle spoke. “And Giselle, even though I need to ask questions, please know that in no way do I support Donovan or Ander in anyway. Don’t think that I’m not furious with how these men treated you. I just have to keep my business brain intact, then take out my frustrations and beat up Pierce when we get home.” She offered Giselle a grim smile. “I guess I better explain that. We’re both trained in martial arts and we spar. I win.”

The guys chuckled. Sutton was capable of kicking the shit out of all of us.

Giselle’s eyes widened, her attention darting to Pierce and back to Sutton. “You can beat him up? He’s a big guy!”

“She can kick my ass in a heartbeat,” Pierce said, chuckling.

“She has certainly kicked mine before,” Vaughn added.

I loved these guys for injecting some humor when Giselle needed it.

“I can teach you a few tricks if you’d like,” Sutton suggested.

“Yes! I would love that. If I could feel as though I even had a chance at protecting myself after I’m out of this ...” Giselle grew quiet. “I guess I should stop getting ahead of myself and tell you the rest.”



“I’m ready when you are.” Sutton rubbed Giselle’s arm, offering her support.

“Again, I thought that I was free of Donovan, but he and Ander just shared me. My body has never been my own. Now, though, I was raped by both of them at the same time. Soon after they started that, Donovan forced me to marry Ander, and the men continued with their abuse. Even though I’d had a brief reprieve from Donovan, when he joined me in France, I contemplated escape almost every day. After a few years of marriage, I started researching and planning my suicide.”

Giselle finally glanced up at me, our eyes connecting. “That was the night you saved me.”

It was all falling into place now. I’d been right about Donovan hurting her, but I had no idea her ex was part of the equation.

“Since I failed, my father forced Ander to file for a divorce, but he was still completely in the dark about what Ander and Donovan were doing to me. I wanted to say something in the hospital, but Donovan stuck to me like glue. He even convinced my father to allow me to live with him, so that he could watch over me. Both my parents agreed.”

“So, you were right back with Donovan,” Pierce said.

Giselle looked at him, her chin trembling. “Yeah, but it was so much worse than I could have imagined.”

“What do you mean?” Pierce asked, leaning forward slightly.

Giselle looked at me, then to the floor. She spoke so softly that I didn’t catch what she’d said, but Sutton must have because her nostrils flared.

“Giselle, I need you to reiterate what you just said, but loud enough so everyone can hear.” Sutton’s voice trailed off. “Wait. Would you like to talk to only me about this part?”

Giselle shook her head. “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t think I can repeat any of this again, so if the guys have questions, I need to do it all at once.”

Giselle squared her shoulders and tipped her chin up. “Donovan.” She inhaled deeply. “Donovan sells me to clients with sick fetishes. He makes millions off me in a single evening.”

My fists curled as white-hot fury swirled beneath my skin, possessing me. “The burn on your back,” I said through gritted teeth. “That’s what you meant that Donovan hadn’t done it, but he was just as responsible.”

Tears streamed down her beautiful face, and I desperately wanted to kiss her pain away. But it wasn’t an option right now. I had to remain impartial in front of the team no matter how I felt. Slamming the door closed on my heart, I plowed forward.

“Yeah. His name is Ashkov Butrick. He’s Russian mafia and a sick ...” Giselle’s hand flew to her chest, choking on her sobs. “He burned me, then cut me with the same knife. He used my blood to ...”

Her words punched me so hard in the gut I lost my breath. *Jesus fucking Christ.* That’s what I saved her for.

Sutton dropped her notebook on the floor and pulled a crying Giselle into her arms. “Guys, I’ll handle the rest of this. Please leave.”

That was my cue. I had to get the fuck out of there before I exploded.

I massaged the back of my neck and stared at my shoes as I hurried through the living room and out the front door, choking on the words I'd spoken to her earlier—that I didn't regret saving her life.

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**Giselle**

**S**notting all over Sutton, I finally pulled myself together. “I’m so sorry.”

Sutton grabbed a tissue from her handbag. “Giselle, don’t you ever apologize for crying. I have no idea how you kept it together this long.”

I took the Kleenex and wiped the moisture from my cheeks and eyelashes. It was then that I realized Zayne had left with Pierce and Vaughn. I had refused to look at him as I explained what Ashkov had done to me. My heart couldn’t handle watching his expression change from anger to disgust—disgust with me.

“I told the guys that we needed this time together, woman to woman. I’ll take care of their questions afterward. Right now, it’s you and me. You’re safe, and I know Zayne. He’s not taking this well. None of us are, but he’ll be on point protecting you. Zayne has a burning passion inside him to protect abused women.”

I nodded, not completely clear about what she meant. “I’ll worry about that later. I need to finish telling you so I can escape from Donovan. His reach is wide, Sutton. And ... he’s

controlling me right now. He said that if I don't do what he wants, if I try to get help, or attempt suicide again, that he'll take Ashley and sell her, too."

Sutton's brows knitted together. "Who is Ashley?"

"My little sister. She's eleven and attends a private school. Donovan won't allow me to see her. Since he's out of town, though, I asked Zayne to take me to visit her a few times, and I've talked to her. I had to know that she was okay, plus I miss her terribly."

Sutton's lips pressed into a thin line. "We can get her, too. Pierce and I have contacts with the FBI and military. We can help you both get out, then you can start over free from Donovan and his influence."

"What if we fail? Ashley is just a little girl. These men are sadistic. Ashkov raped me with a glass bottle! I would gladly go in her place, Sutton. She doesn't deserve that life."

Although I was sure Sutton tried to hide her reaction, she winced. "You don't either. No one does. Trafficking is a horrible problem all over the world. It's not just women, it's children and guys, too. I can't save everyone, but when I have an opportunity to even change a few lives, I'm in. I'm so fucking in. We all are."

Over the next hour, I provided Sutton with names of the most prominent men I'd been sold to, and as many details about Donovan as possible. Sutton took notes and asked questions. Although it was easier to talk to Sutton without the guys in the room, nothing could have prepared me for the rush of emotions that accompanied the conversation. It was the first time I'd ever told anyone what was happening behind closed doors.

“Can I ask you something?” Sutton inquired.

I almost laughed. “You know my darkest, deepest secrets already. Ask away.”

“How do you think your parents will handle this? Will they work with us to keep you and Ashley safe?” Sutton tucked her leg beneath her on the couch, frowning.

“The only reason I haven’t told them about Donovan was to protect my mother and sister. Once I do, they’ll do anything to help. They’re good parents. I’m not worried about that.” I fidgeted in my chair like a kid in grade school waiting to be punished.

“They need to know what you’ve gone through, Giselle.”

I hiccupped through more tears. “I know, but they’ll think I’m disgusting. Their famous daughter is nothing more than a sex slave. The truth will shame our family.”

“Oh, hon. There’s no way in hell they’ll look at you that way. You’re a gorgeous, smart, talented woman. They’ll zero in on your strength and determination to start a new life. Who wouldn’t respect that?”

I dabbed at my eyes with the tissue I still had in my hand. “I hope so. It’s hard to predict how someone will treat you after they learn the truth.”

Questions flickered through Sutton’s expression. “Are you talking about your parents or Zayne this time?”

*Shit! She did not just ask me that.* I had to spin this so Zayne didn’t get into trouble. He wouldn’t only be disgusted with me but hate me for breaking his confidence.

“He’s been good to me, Sutton. Men tend to lose respect for women like me once the dark secrets see the daylight.”

Sutton shook her head so hard that strands broke loose from her ponytail and fell across her face. “Let me stop you right there. Not all men are Donovan, Ander, and Ashkov. I grew up with these guys. They are pro-women and respectful, kind, gentle, and loving. Don’t get me wrong, though. If someone messes with their family, they will also kill to protect us just like we would kill to protect them. I’m surrounded by badass men who honor women and treat them as equals. I realize it’s difficult because all you’ve ever known is evil bastards, but try to see how many wonderful men showed up for you today because Zayne made a phone call.”

“Are you always this blunt?” I asked, a smile pulling at the corner of my mouth.

Sutton laughed. “You did just meet my younger sister, Claire. She’s even more direct than I am, but I think she’ll be good for you. She’s excited to get you on the dance floor.”

“I would love that, too. I miss dancing so much.” I leaned against the back of the couch, running my fingers up and down the glass of warm 7UP.

“Why did you stop?”

Sadness intertwined with anger threaded through me. “One night Ander and Donovan had a party. All the powerful, wealthy men involved with their scheme were invited. About twenty showed up and they all drank and put every drug possible up their noses. Ander forced me to wear a skimpy little see-through dress and Donovan chained me to the wall. Some of the men didn’t pay to touch or fuck me, they just watched. But one in particular was rough and began to beat me. When I tried to fight him off, he kicked me, shattering my left knee. It took six surgeries to repair the damage.”

The blood drained from Sutton's pretty face. "And Donovan and Ander watched this happen?" Disgust dripped from her words.

"Yes. Ander finally came to his senses and rushed me to the hospital. He realized that he'd just lost his prima ballerina that had sold out shows seasons in advance."

"What did your parents say?"

"They don't know the truth. Ander told them I slipped and fell off the stage during a rehearsal." I bit my lip to hold another crying session at bay.

"I'm so sorry. I can't even articulate my feelings right now. All I can say is that there's a special place in hell for them, Giselle."

"Don't get my hopes up." I glanced out the windows, wondering where Zayne was. "It's been impossible to escape. Finally, I had to end it all. The party that all of you were at was my anniversary celebration with Ander."

Sutton clenched her teeth. "If I'd known, I would have killed the motherfucker then. I suspect that Donovan was there, too?"

"Yup. He was rubbing elbows with the soon-to-be clients that wanted to rape and torture me, the famous prima ballerina. That's his business. He makes it appear as though he owns a company as a financial advisor, but it's all a front for how he earns his millions—off of me."

Sutton tapped her ink pen on her thigh. "When you leave him, how would you feel about leaving with those millions to start a new life with Ashley and your parents?"

I chewed on my lip, pondering the idea. In one way, I wanted nothing to do with the funds that had come from my



blood and tears. At the same time, money was just a thing, not a person. It wasn't the money that was evil, Donovan was. Not to mention, I'd gone through hell to earn it. Why shouldn't I use it to make a better life for myself and maybe others?

“If you can pull that off, then without any hesitation, I'll take every fucking penny that monster made off of selling me.”

An ornery grin slipped into place as Sutton winked at me. “Oh, I can make it happen. We'll set it up and create a diversion while we get you all away. Trust me, the FBI will close in on him fast.”

Hope pulsed through me for the first time in my life. If anyone could help my family and me, I believed it would be Zayne, Vaughn, Pierce, and Sutton.

“I think prison would be too good for him.”

“Don't worry about that at the moment. Let's speak to your parents and get them on board. We don't have a lot of time. Zayne said there are only four more days until Donovan returns, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we better start planning. Let me talk to the guys. When we have all the details figured out, I'll let you know and you can reach out to your mother and father. They'll want to keep Ashley home from school that day and be ready to run.”

“I understand. At least we can all go together. I miss my parents, and they need to know the truth about the sick son of a bitch they call a son.”

Sutton rose from the couch. “I'll send Zayne and Vaughn in after I chat with them. Take a minute to catch your breath. Maybe go dance with Claire. Her studio is pretty amazing.”

I stood, setting my drink on the coffee table. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to thank you all enough.”

Sutton pulled me in for a hug. “Thank us later, we have to get you out first.” She released me. “Just know that you have people who care about you. With the abuse you’ve endured for years, I can’t imagine you’ve felt close to many people. It’s hard when you’re keeping a secret from the world.”

I shook my head, sadness cloaking me. “I’ve never had real friends. Ballet is fiercely competitive and vicious on its own, even without the other hell I went through.”

“Good thing that you have us now. If my guess is correct, Claire is in the studio. Go down the hall and it’s the last door on the right.”

“Okay.”

I took a deep breath, my insides shaking with the possibility of escape as I watched Sutton walk outside. Before I realized it, I started walking in the direction Sutton had mentioned Claire might be.

I could process everything later. Right now, I needed to feel wood floors beneath my bare feet. A cold fear wrapped its fingers around my heart. Even though Sutton said Zayne was a good guy, it didn’t mean he was still interested in an intimate relationship with me. Dancing might be the only thing that I had left.

**Zayne**

I paced the length of the driveway, gravel crunching beneath my shoes as I raged. Hell, I was so angry I couldn't fucking speak. Images of Giselle being raped and tortured flickered through my brain, tearing me to pieces.

"I saved her for what? I sent her straight into the arms of fucking evil people." I laced my fingers behind my head, a pang of similar guilt ripping my soul to shreds. I never had forgiven myself for not getting to Chelsey in time. I'd reached Giselle but had marked her forehead with "Return to Sender" and pushed her straight back into the horror she'd tried so hard to escape. I also realized that what she'd shared with the group was most likely only the tip of the iceberg. Thank God for Sutton. She was definitely the right person for her to share with.

"I know you feel like shit, but you can't fucking go there, Zayne," Pierce said.

A strong urge to beat the hell out of someone rushed over me. "You weren't there, dude. You were fucking schmoozing with her goddamn husband!"

Vaughn gripped my shoulder. “It’s not Pierce’s fault either. It comes with the territory.”

Pierce’s brown eyes flashed with concern. “I didn’t have a choice. A few days before the party, I mentioned to Brian that I had a meeting with Ander. After running a background check on him, there were some red flags. Brian said if I ever had an opportunity to work for Ander or Donovan, to take the job no matter what. The FBI needed someone on the inside. I just couldn’t say anything. It was my job to get into their world. Fuck, Sutton doesn’t even know.” Pierce’s shoulders sagged. “At the time. I had no idea what Giselle was going through, or that she was upstairs attempting suicide.”

“Are you shitting me?” I asked, seething that my friend hadn’t been honest with me. “You knew what was going on when you sent me in?”

Pierce held up his hands. “No. I didn’t. Brian didn’t give me any details, just that he needed someone on the inside to see if the FBI was on the right track. In no way did I think the situation would blow up like this. I sure as hell didn’t realize that Ander and Donovan were goddamn monsters.”

I took a threatening step toward him, and Vaughn jumped in the middle of us, placing his hand on my chest. “Z-man, don’t fucking do it. I know you’re a live wire right now, but Pierce isn’t responsible. Giselle is in there spilling her guts to Sutton. Get your head out of your ass and screw it on straight. Once everyone is safe, we can plan how to take care of Donovan and Ander. I’m so fucking in.”

That got my attention, and my gaze drifted to Vaughn. “I can’t allow you to be a part of it. You have a baby on the way.” My blinding rage simmered to a boil. “Pierce, too. I have to take care of them myself.”

“Sorry, man. That’s not how it works, and you know it.” Pierce stepped around Vaughn. “I understand that you’re fucking livid. I am too. You’re welcome to take it out on me later, but I think we need to fuel that anger into justice after the family is safe. We’ll be in and out for those motherfuckers. The ladies never have to know.” Sincerity flashed in Pierce’s brown eyes.

I snorted. “The ladies will find out even if we don’t clue them in up front. If the FBI wants them, how are we going to work around that pesky detail?” I rubbed my clean-shaven jawline.

“We’ll figure it out. One thing I’m very clear on is that under no circumstances are you to touch Giselle. She’s fragile, and I know you, Wilson. You’ll want to protect and take care of her. She is *off-limits*.” Pierce stabbed the air with his finger for emphasis.

Our gazes locked, and I met his intense stare straight on. “Got it.”

Thank God the sound of the front door closing pulled our attention away from each other. I felt like shit for lying to my boss and friend, but it would all be revealed soon enough. I suddenly had a new appreciation for what Vaughn and Claire had gone through.

“Hey, guys.” Sutton offered us a sad smile. “We’ve got one hell of a situation to take care of, but I need a few minutes first. My heart was just shattered into a million pieces, then rolled over by an eighteen-wheeler.” Tears welled in her eyes as she walked toward Pierce and fisted her husband’s shirt.

Pierce wrapped his arms around her as Sutton softly sobbed against his chest.

*Fuck.* This was way worse than I'd heard or imagined. Sutton rarely cried.

"We'll get her out, Sutton. I promise." Pierce said, rubbing her back.

Vaughn slapped my shoulder with the back of his hand, his mismatched eyes speaking volumes.

"Later," I muttered.

Vaughn stepped away, giving me some space, but his attention never left me. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, but I had a good fucking guess, and I wasn't going to like it one goddamn bit.

After a minute, Sutton released her husband and wiped her tears away. "I don't want Giselle to know I lost my shit."

"It might be good for her," I said. "She needs to realize she's not alone."

"You're probably right, but I needed a space to process." She snuggled into Pierce's side, and he placed a kiss on top of her head. Jealousy ignited in my gut. I wanted to do the same for Giselle, but I was stuck outside while she struggled after what she'd just shared. *This shit sucks.*

Sutton sighed. "Let me share what I've learned, then we'll plan everything."

I stood in silence, rooted to the ground while I listened to the words that tumbled out of Sutton's mouth. My thoughts were discombobulated, and I struggled to find even footing as the reality of Giselle's life crushed me like a two-ton brick on my chest.

Once she finished, I laced my fingers behind my head and paced, trying to keep my shit together. No wonder Sutton fell

apart.

When Sutton was finished updating us, my gaze locked with Pierce's, then Vaughn's. In those brief seconds of silent communication, I knew there was no talking Pierce and Vaughn out of helping me destroy Ander and Donovan. My brain swam with possibilities of how to end their pathetic lives.

"Sutton and I will discuss details of how to get the family to safety, then I'll update you two. For now, keep your shit together ... And Zayne, fucking protect her. Do *not* blow your cover for the FBI. This is way bigger than we are."

"I know." I blew out a heavy sigh, pain splintering my soul with what she'd lived through. I'd saved her only to return her to a horrible life.

"I'll call later." Pierce slid his arm around Sutton's waist, and they headed to their company Mercedes.

I watched as they climbed in the car and drove away, then I turned to Vaughn. "I want to see if she's okay after talking to Sutton." I eyed him cautiously, waiting for him to say something. Instead, he silently walked with me back into the house.

"Pretty sure they're in the dance studio." Vaughn led the way, his shoulders slumped. I suspected what Sutton had shared was messing with him, too.

Laughter floated down the hallway and reached my ears. They must have had the door open because the room was soundproofed so the music and noise wouldn't bother anyone.

"No way!" Claire giggled.

"Leave it to Claire to lighten the mood," Vaughn said before entering the studio.

Giselle was in the middle of the floor, showing Claire some steps. I wasn't sure if it was jazz or what, but it definitely wasn't ballet.

Vaughn and I stood near the back, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, watching. Giselle's eyes were puffy, and her nose was a little red from crying. I resisted the urge to gather her in my arms and kiss her until she forgot about the hell she lived in. I wanted to show her what love was about. I wanted to make her laugh and smile. She had become my entire world, and I wanted to love and take care of her with every fiber of my being.

Vaughn glanced over at me. "Does Giselle know that you've got it bad for her?"

And there it was, the shoe just dropped.

I replied with my silence.

"Dude, good luck hiding that from Pierce. You've got that look in your eyes." He leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles.

"Like you did with Claire." I arched a brow at him.

"Probably. And you know how that shit went down. In my opinion, Pierce and Sutton already suspect there is something going on with you two, or Pierce wouldn't have said the crap he did to you." Vaughn looked at the ladies, his lips pressing into a thin line.

"She's beautiful, smart, a famous dancer, and she needs you. Just make sure that your feelings aren't wrapped up in your past and fucking with your future. One wrong move on your part, and you'll shatter her beyond repair."

"Shit. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I would never intentionally hurt her. I knew there was something special



about her when I saved her life at the party, but I never bargained for this. I think I'm in too deep already."

"I remember when Pierce confronted me and pulled me off Claire's case, said my emotions were blurring my perspective. Part of that I agree with, but man ... when your heart is in the mix, I think it sharpens your senses. The drive to protect is intense as hell. Go with that, then check your shit around Pierce. From the way Giselle keeps looking over at you, she's into you as well."

"Are you going to rat me out to the bosses?" I knew better than to ask that question. I'd kept Vaughn and Claire's secret for a while. I only needed him to keep mine for the week.

"Don't bust my balls. You know me better than that, Z-man. Never. That's not my pile of shit to step in." The corner of his mouth kicked up.

I cracked a slight grin. "Thanks. I would say that I owe you one, but I don't."

"You did right by me and shut your fucking yap about Claire, but we're family, man. We don't always like each other's decisions, but we always watch each other's backs." Vaughn gave me a slight nod.

"Agreed."

For the next half hour, I steeled my feelings for the beautiful woman in front of me, wondering how in the fuck I was going to handle her with care. Worse than that, what if I hurt her by accident? Vaughn was right. She was fragile, and I wasn't sure how to deal with that.

**Giselle**

**Z**ayne had been quiet for the rest of the evening. I wanted desperately to ask him if his feelings for me had changed, but I was pretty sure they had from how he was behaving.

We returned to Donovan's house in time for dinner, but Zayne declined to eat. I wasn't hungry either. When I thought about talking to my parents, nausea churned in my belly, so I asked Gretta to prepare us each a plate for later.

Marty's hawk-like eyes watched both of us, but I didn't give a shit. I would be rid of him and Donovan soon. Plus, my family would be protected once and for all.

Hurrying to my bedroom, I flopped on my bed like a teenager with a broken heart. Staring at the ceiling, I attempted to rummage up the courage to talk to Zayne, but I was too scared to hear the words.

I glanced at him as he sat in the chair. He folded his hands in his lap and pinned me with an intense look.

"We have to stop whatever is happening between us," he said quietly.

I shot up off the bed, then partially closed the door just enough to block the cameras in the hall from having full

access to my room. Walking over to him, I leaned down, my mouth near his ear. “Do you have your scanner to see if there are listening or recording devices?” I whispered.

Without a word, he removed the device from his pocket and scanned the area. I hoped like hell my personal space wasn't bugged because I had to ask Zayne why he no longer wanted me. Somehow, if I heard him say it, not being with him would be easier. I watched him as he searched the area, including the closet and bathroom.

“It's clean.” Zayne sat in the chair again and stretched his long legs in front of him.

“Why? Why did you say we had to stop whatever this is?” I asked, my voice low as I folded my arms over my chest in an attempt to protect my already broken heart.

“It's not a good idea. My boss suspects that I have feelings for you, and Vaughn confronted me while we were at his house.”

“Okay, so what's the problem?”

Zayne answered me with his silence.

A blistering rage licked through me, and I seized the clock on my nightstand and hurled it at his head.

Disbelief twisted his expression as he ducked. “What the hell, Giselle?”

Next, I grabbed a thick paperback book and threw it at him.

“Stop! Giselle!”

“No! You're a fucking coward!” I screamed, hoping Marty was getting a good show if he was still awake, even though I

wasn't pretending. I knew for a fact that the cameras were recording the loud parts of the argument.

"What are you talking about?" He yelled as I nailed him with the spine of another book.

He stormed over to me and grabbed my wrists, pulling me farther to his side of the room in order to avoid the line of the recording devices. "I don't want to hurt you, but throwing shit at me is *not* okay."

An uncontrollable cry escaped me. "Now that you know the truth about my life, you don't want me. It's the reason I didn't want to tell you."

Hurt flashed across his face. "Is that what you think?"

"You've hardly said two words to me since you found out what's been happening. It's not hard to figure out, but I want you to say it," I spat. "Goddammit, just say you think I'm disgusting."

Disbelief and horror twisted his expression. Then Zayne cupped my cheeks and wiped away my tears.

"I thought a lot of things, Giselle, but being disgusted with you wasn't one of them." I glanced up as his thumb gently swept across my lower lip. "You're beautiful in every way, no matter what you've lived through. I'm so sorry that I gave you any other impression." He bent down, pressing his forehead to mine. "I can never apologize enough that, when I saved you, this was the situation you returned to."

I hiccupped through my cries, soaking up his touch as if it were a healing balm to my bruised and broken soul.

"I've been used in ways you can't even imagine, Zayne. I've never willingly had sex in my life. You're different,

though. I wanted you. I wanted to believe that things might be better if you felt the same way about me.”

My eyes widened as Zayne knelt before me and gripped my waist with his large, strong hands. He placed a kiss on my stomach, then looked up at me, piercing my defensive walls with his beautiful green gaze. My pulse hammered so hard, it pounded in my ears.

“You’ve got it all wrong. My feelings for you have changed ... I have even more respect for you. You’re strong, smart, a fighter. All I want to do is protect you, protect your heart. If we didn’t work out, and I hurt you, it would fuck with me for the rest of my life. What you think is disgust is me making sure that my intentions are right. We’re in an emotionally charged situation. I have to be clear of my intentions for your sake.”

I threaded my fingers through his hair, playing with the curl that had flopped against his forehead. “No one has ever put me first.” I traced his cheek with my thumb. Zayne had handed me the power in the relationship the second he’d knelt before me. But I didn’t need power. I wanted an equal.

I sank to my knees, meeting him on the same level while my gaze scanned his face and landed on those green eyes that haunted my dreams.

“Zayne, I need a new memory to hold onto, something to help me through the next week. Make love to me.”

“Giselle ...” The vulnerable ache of his voice sent a little quiver through me.

“Please.” I pressed my mouth to his, nipping his bottom lip.

Raw hunger filled his expression before he cupped the nape of my neck and slanted his mouth over mine. His kiss stole the air from my lungs, and every part of me begged for more.

Zayne pulled away, then stood and helped me up. “Are you sure?” He searched me for any signs of hesitation.

“Yes. I want to be with you.” I hesitated, but I knew the next words that floated out of my mouth were what I wanted him to hear. “You already have my heart, Zayne.”

He wrapped me protectively in his arms, and I snuggled against him, never wanting him to let me go. “I care about you, Giselle. I don’t want to rush anything.” He smoothed my hair. “Plus, Marty or Donovan ... if either of them finds out. It’s too risky.”

His rich, gravelly voice reverberated in my chest, sending delicious chills through my body.

“Then we better be quiet. Besides, Marty retired to his quarters half an hour ago. He’s an old man. He needs his sleep.” I walked to the door, closed it a little more, and pointed for Zayne to move to the other side of the room. Joining him, I slowly unbuttoned my blouse, revealing a pink lace bra.

Zayne’s attention followed my movements, and I glanced down, noticing the thick bulge in his slacks. I was so ready for him.

He closed the gap between us, and I gripped his biceps as he gently cupped my breast. Zayne pulled the material away, exposing me. His eyes traveled to my face, then he kissed me cautiously. My lips parted, welcoming him.

Zayne slowly slipped my blouse off my shoulders, and it fell into a heap on the floor. His fingertips skimmed my sides,

leaving goosebumps in their wake.

My core throbbed, needing to feel him inside me. I hadn't ever wanted a man this badly.

"I'm on the pill and test regularly," I said between kisses. "If you don't want to use a condom, you don't have to."

Zayne gripped my hips, then lifted me off the floor. I instinctively wrapped my legs around him and whimpered as his hard length pressed against my center. He turned, then placed me on the bed.

I stared at him, my heart racing a million miles an hour. "Take your shirt off, bodyguard."

He pinned me with soft eyes as he untucked his black polo and pulled it over his head.

As hard as I tried not to, I gasped as my gaze traveled from his broad shoulders, taking in the ink that ran across his firm pecs, then down his arm and side. His abs rippled, flexing with each move as he tossed his shirt on the floor. My tongue darted over my lip as my attention landed on his V. *Oh God*. I was going to come just looking at this man.

Zayne lowered himself to the mattress next to me, the bed dipping with his weight. He placed soft kisses between my breasts and down my belly, nipping lightly at my stomach while he skillfully popped open the button on my shorts, sucking on my taut nipple as he slipped a hand into my panties. I gasped as he spread me apart, his fingers sinking into my juices.

"You're so wet," he said, kissing my other breast.

"It's your fault." I softly moaned as his thumb traced lazy, slow circles around my clit. I lifted my hips, rubbing against his palm as he eased a finger inside me.

“Relax and let me take care of you, babe.”

I melted into his touch, loving the fact that he'd called me babe. Delicious shivers wracked my body at the huskiness in his voice and the conviction in his tone.

He slid my shorts over my hips and down my thighs. The sound of them landing on the floor reached my ears.

“I need to taste you.” He moved lower, coaxing a soft whimper from me. His hands curled around my hips while his lips traced the wet spot on my panties. He tugged on the waistband of my G-string and lowered the lace fabric over my hips and down my legs, revealing my waxed pussy. Chills rippled through me when he dotted kisses along my inner thighs. His tongue darted out, striking my clit with the right pressure before delving inside me. I trembled beneath him, and I dug my nails into his shoulders. My back arched off the bed as he feasted on my sensitive flesh like he had wanted me all of his life.

I glanced down at him, sucking in a breath as his eyes met mine.

“Zayne,” I whispered as my orgasm swept through my system. I bucked against him, savoring every moment of his mouth and tongue on me.

Breathless, I relaxed and looked at him while I ran my fingers through his hair. He crawled up the mattress and hovered over me, our gazes connecting. But more than that—our hearts.

I rolled him over, straddling him. I leaned down and flicked his nipple with my tongue before I gently sucked on it. He threaded his hand through my hair, gently pulling the long strands. I dotted kisses down his chiseled abs, then licked my



way to the waistband of his slacks. In seconds, I unbuttoned and unzipped them. The tip of his cock peeked out from his boxer briefs, and precum glistened at the tip of the crown. I freed his thick erection, then slid my tongue along the underside of his length. His groan elicited delightful little shivers up and down my spine. I peered up at him as I took him into my mouth and stroked him with a firm grip. Increasing my suction, I eased him in until he hit the back of my throat, then looked up at him beneath my eyelashes. His lips were slightly parted, watching me as I quickened my pace.

“Jesus.” His eyes fluttered closed as his abdomen tensed, my pussy clenching with his longing. His features twisted with his pleasure ... pleasure for me. Blinking the tears away before he saw them, I willed my abundance of emotions for Zayne to remain intact.

He pushed against my shoulders and his erection slipped free. He rolled me onto my back and spread my legs to accommodate the width of his hips. He placed a sweet kiss on the corner of my lips, then he rubbed the tip of his cock over my wet slit, coating him.

His gaze locked on mine as he eased into me, our bodies melding together perfectly. My chest hitched with the realization that I hadn't ever felt this good. He settled on top of me, thrusting slowly and deeply. Time stood still as I allowed Zayne to consume every part of my body and heart.

His tongue dipped inside my mouth while he moved against me and hit my clit at just the right angle. My slick walls tightened as he pushed inside me again and again, my core throbbing and pleading for another climax. I moaned while I rocked against him. Running my fingers over his sweat-slickened skin, I caressed the dips and valleys of his

muscular back. My pussy pulsed around him as my orgasm built.

“That’s it, babe. Come for me,” he whispered against my ear.

My orgasm slammed into me like a tidal wave, and I bucked beneath him as he continued to move. I tensed, drowning in exquisite waves of intense pleasure, all of the pain in my soul shattering as that man pieced me back together at the same time.

Breathless from my climax, I lifted my hips, taking every inch of him in. I wanted him to come inside me, claim me, erase all the damage that the other men had left behind. His lips parted slightly, and his forehead creased as pleasure overtook his face. His intense gaze never strayed from mine as he filled me.

Happy for the first time in my life, I stared into the green eyes that had just set my soul free from its cage. A ball of emotion worked its way into my chest, and I struggled to maintain a neutral expression.

Zayne dragged his knuckles down my cheek, and his face filled with adoration and contentment. “Are you okay?”

I swallowed over the dryness in my throat and offered him a sweet smile. “I’ve never been better.” It was the truth. Not only had I connected with Zayne physically, but he now held my heart in his hands. I just hoped like hell he didn’t break it because I would never recover. I was head over heels in love with this man, but it still scared me.

He dotted the tip of my nose with a kiss before pulling out, his hot liquid dripping from me.

Zayne strolled to my bathroom, and I sucked on my bottom lip as my gaze greedily traveled over his back. I watched the muscles in his shoulders and arms ripple with each step. I could watch him waltz around naked all day and still not get enough.

My eyes widened when he returned with his pants fastened and a warm washcloth in his hands. He parted my legs and gently cleaned me.

Apparently, my mouth had a mind of its own and opened without my permission. “Do you do that for all the women you’re with?” *What the fuck did I just say?*

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**Zayne**

**G**iselle Lambert had just ruined casual sex for me. The second my cock slid inside her, I knew there were no other women in my future. Intimacy hadn't ever been my thing, but it was intense with Giselle, and I loved every moment I was with her. Thinking about Giselle writhing beneath me had my dick twitching again, but I had to get cleaned up before we got caught. We'd just taken a stupid risk, especially with the door partially open. But the way she'd looked at me, I would've given her the moon if she'd asked.

Once I'd returned from the bathroom with a warm washcloth to clean her, I glanced up, my brain registering that my action had stunned her. But *her* question knocked me off guard. I rose, searching for the correct answer, but I knew only the truth would work. I never had relationships after Chelsey. I was a man-whore who worked a dangerous career, and taking the time to wipe up my mess wasn't on my agenda. Also, I typically wore a condom. I mentally swore. What the fuck had I been thinking? I had just made love to Giselle in Donovan's house while on the job. I'd put both of us at risk.

I massaged the tense muscles in my neck. "To answer your question, no. I have never cared enough before now to help a

lady clean up.” I hurried to the bathroom, not wanting to continue this conversation. All I’d wanted to do was take care of her, but I’d accidentally lowered my guard and revealed my vulnerability. I hadn’t loved anyone since Chelsey, and there were times I never thought I would again ... until Giselle. Once she and her family were safe, then I could tell her. But not yet. I wasn’t ready to let her know that she had the power to break me, and some-fucking-how, I had to remain focused on getting her to safety.

I caught her beautiful smile slipping into place before I closed the door, then took a piss. Flushing the toilet, I cleaned up and located a toothbrush I’d stashed beneath the sink when Donovan had first given me this new duty. After I rinsed my mouth and face and cleaned my cock, I returned to her room for my shirt.

“Thank you.” She rolled onto her side and propped her head on her hand, her attention soaking me in as I dressed.

I offered her a lopsided grin. “No, thank you.” My brow lifted. “It smells like sex in here. If anyone comes up the stairs, our secret is out.” I fastened my slacks and smoothed my polo shirt.

“I can take care of that.” She sat up, then placed her small feet on the plush cream-colored carpet. “I’ll be back.” She gracefully strolled to the bathroom, naked.

I couldn’t peel my eyes away from her toned ass and legs. Giselle was beautiful with her clothes on, but she was stunning without them. The sound of the shower turning on reached me, and I sank into the chair, rubbing my forehead. I needed to talk to Vaughn to see how he and Claire kept it a secret for so long. More than that, how he managed to keep his dick in check so

he could work and not want to fuck every minute of the day and night.

Almond and strawberry scented shampoo drifted toward me, cloaking the scent of our time together. My brain began to entertain the ideas of what I wanted to do to her next—her legs over my shoulders, sliding into her slick pussy from behind, watching her suck my cock ...

My cell buzzed in my back pocket, forcing me out of my daydream. I shifted in the chair, then grabbed my phone. Pierce's text flashed across the screen.

*We have a plan. We'll meet tomorrow.*

My attention drifted to the cloud of steam that billowed into Giselle's bedroom. An intense wave of protectiveness jolted through me before I typed out a quick reply to my boss.

*Okay.*

Then, I messaged Vaughn, noting it was only ten-thirty that evening.

*Need some pointers.*

Little grey dots bounced while I waited for his response.

*Shit! Did you fuck her?*

My nostrils flared with annoyance.

*No, asshole. I made love to her.*

Even though Vaughn didn't show his age, on occasion his mouth did. He was the youngest out of the four of us childhood friends, and every once in a while, I wanted to shove my fist into his face for some stupid comment. How the fuck could he be so insensitive? I shook my head as his response popped up.

*That's what I thought. Z-man is in love and in deep. Welcome to the club where you check in with your heart but never leave with it.*

My forehead creased in confusion. What the hell was he talking about?

*Huh?*

*You left your heart with Giselle, dude.*

I slammed my eyes closed, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

My fingers flew over the keypad. *That was cheesy as hell. You can shut the fuck up now.*

Little grey dots appeared again. *As far as pointers, pretend you're in the military again, and if you fuck up people die. Get into that headspace and stay there, man.*

I blew out a sigh. What Vaughn suggested made sense, but this wasn't the military.

*See you tomorrow.*

I was about to pocket my phone again when it rang, breaking the silence.

The world paused around me, and I looked up to see if Giselle was still in the shower.

Jumping out of my seat, I made a beeline into the hall.

"Donovan," I answered.

"Why was Giselle's door closed?" he demanded.

"It wasn't. It's been open just like you ordered. Maybe the angle of the camera made it look like it was." I glanced up, allowing the motherfucker to witness the sincerity in my face,

and imagining my eyes would be the last thing he saw before he fucking died.

“Guess I didn’t see you open the door when you came into the hall,” he grunted. “Where’s Giselle? She’s not answering her phone.” I folded my arm over my chest while I held my cell to my ear. My brain immediately began entertaining ideas of *how* to kill this motherfucker—torture first, then a slow, painful death.

“She’s taking a shower.” I didn’t bother to hide my resentment toward him. “Do you want me to guard her then, too?” I could practically hear Donovan bristle over the line. I smirked, then reined myself in. If I didn’t play it cool, I might fuck up the entire situation.

Donovan growled, “Of course not. I assume you searched her bathroom before she went in.”

“Yes,” I lied. “And Giselle hasn’t been out of my sight since you left.”

“Good to know you can follow orders.”

Pissed wasn’t even the right word for what I felt. “Donovan, I’ve done everything you’ve asked of me. You have cameras, watch the recordings and see for yourself.”

He remained silent for a moment, then, “Have her call me as soon as she’s done. I want to check in.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end with his order. The sick son of a bitch didn’t even bother to say goodbye. He just hung up.

The bedroom door opened wider, and Giselle poked her damp head into the hall. “Is everything okay?”



I glanced around and reminded myself that recording devices were planted all over the house, except for the bedrooms, baths, and studio. I wondered why. As controlling as Donovan was, I expected him to have every nook and cranny filled with cameras. I made a note to ask him right before I slit the fucker's gut wide open.

“Call Donovan.” I ground my molars together. In no way did I want her ever to have anything to do with him again.

Her features grew stormy, and the vulnerability she couldn't mask bled through for a moment before she slipped back inside.

Bile crept up my throat, and I choked it down. There were only a few days before that monster returned home. Time was ticking, and it wasn't on my side.

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**Giselle**

**O**nce Zayne and I had met with Pierce and Sutton on Monday, I reached out to my parents. My father and mother weren't available to see me until Wednesday, which only left us two days to prepare.

Before Zayne and I left the house on Wednesday, I slipped him a note with my family's address written on it.

I aimed the car air-conditioning vent toward me, hoping that I could keep my shit together. My knee bounced up and down, and I was positive that Zayne could hear the frantic thumping of my heart.

Zayne glanced at me, then took my hand. His thumb gently stroked my fingers as he drove. I realized that he was trying to support my decision to tell my parents and get help, but I was barely holding it together even while he was with me.

Before we reached my parents' home, Zayne pulled over and parked down the street. We climbed out, then he led me far enough from the car so we could talk.

He turned me toward him. "You've got this, babe. I'll be with you every step of the way. Just remember that you don't have to give them all the details, only the highlights so they

understand the danger.” He pressed a sweet kiss to my mouth. “I’ll be right here.”

I nodded, not trusting the words on the tip of my tongue—the ones that screamed I couldn’t go through with it—but Ashley’s beautiful face flickered through my mind’s eye. I sucked in a breath, willing my stomach to stop rolling. “Thank you. I couldn’t do this without you.”

“After you talk to them, let’s head to the lake. If you’re hungry then, we can grab some food.”

“I’m not sure I’ll want to eat, but a chocolate shake might sound good.” I attempted a smile, but it wasn’t heartfelt. What I did know was that it would be hard as hell to tell my parents that I was a sex slave to a man they loved and thought of as their son.

“Are you ready?” Zayne asked, stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“No, but I need to get it over with.” I tipped my chin up and squared my shoulders, steeling my resolve. As badly as I wanted to take Zayne’s hand, I wouldn’t. My family couldn’t know about us yet.

Zayne and I walked toward my childhood mansion, and my stomach dropped to my toes. Memories seized my brain as I recalled swinging on the enormous columns outside and my parents scolding me. The off-white brick home was accentuated with rows of trimmed hedges that lined the circular drive and entrance.

I reached for the doorbell, my hand visibly trembling as I pressed it.

The mahogany front door opened almost immediately.

“Giselle,” Martha, my parent’s housekeeper, said.

“Hi, how are you?” I wondered if she could see my legs shaking. Rethinking my decision, I probably should have worn slacks. Maybe it would have hidden my nerves better than khaki shorts.

I walked into the foyer and spotted the ladder near the crystal chandelier. My gaze traveled to the formal living area to the right, then the magnificent wooden banister that Donovan and I used to slide down when we were in grade school. Those were the good days, before he changed and started hurting me.

Martha’s brown eyes widened as Zayne followed me. Since it was the first time that Zayne and I had been around another female outside of his circle, I hadn’t realized what kind of effect he had on women. A jolt of jealousy spread through me, then I chided myself. There was nothing to be worried about.

“Martha, this is my bodyguard, Zayne. Zayne, this is Martha.” I resisted wiping the imaginary drool from the corner of her mouth.

“Ma’am,” Zayne said, his deep voice sending goosebumps over my body.

I offered Martha a tight-lipped smile. “My parents are expecting us.”

“Giselle?” My mother’s excited tone reached me before I saw her. She entered the foyer from the living area, her heels clicking against the white marble floors. Mother was the picture of elegance with her dark hair piled in a neat bun on the top of her head, a navy-blue silk blouse, and black slacks. Her skin was flawless, with no wrinkle in sight for her fifty-two years.

Even though Mother and Father lived twenty minutes away, we wouldn't visit each other for months at a time, and Donovan always accompanied me. This was the first time I'd visited without him for longer than I could remember.

"Mother." I grinned.

"So good to see you, darling." Mother was a bit shorter than I was, but we were eye to eye with her shoes on. She wrapped me in a warm hug, and I wanted to stay in her arms like when I was a little girl.

"Good to see you, too." I turned to Zayne, who had removed his sunglasses, his gaze assessing the foyer. "This is Zayne, my bodyguard."

"Nice to meet you." Zayne extended his hand, and Mother shook it. She had much more experience hiding her feelings and never even raised a brow at him.

"You as well. Why don't we all make our way to the sitting room? Your father is waiting for us."

I wasn't sure how I managed to walk through the hall that separated the house sections, but I followed her past the kitchen, bathroom, and two guest bedrooms.

The lingering scent of my father's Cuban cigar wrapped around me, surrounding me with the aroma I'd grown to love over the years. He had to special order them, so it wasn't as if the sweet and clover smell of that type was prevalent.

We entered the sitting area, and Zayne remained near the door as I walked over to Father. Wisps of grey had feathered through his dark hair, and his tan face had a few new wrinkles, but other than that, Father was in excellent shape for nearing sixty. He played a lot of tennis and golf, and it showed with his rounded biceps and shoulders. Standing near his desk, he

appeared to be rifling through a file folder before he saw us. He smoothed his white dress shirt and rolled up the sleeves, revealing his muscular forearms.

“Giselle.” He spread his arms wide, then pulled me in for a big hug.

“Hi, Father,” I whispered against his ear. “I’ve missed you.”

“You, too, honey.”

I released him and nodded toward Zayne, who had remained near the entrance. His shoulders were rigid, his legs were slightly parted, and his hands were folded in front of him. I desperately wanted to kiss him, but it would have to wait until I’d finished speaking to my parents.

“Is Ashley home, or is she at school?” I settled into the black leather high-back chair next to Mother while Father sat on the edge of his desk. Eventually, he would sit down, but for whatever reason, he liked to start the conversation without any furniture between us. When I’d asked him about it, he said it was to establish a connection with who he was speaking to. He referred to it as Business Etiquette 101. Apparently, even when it was a casual meetup, the habit stuck with him.

I crossed my legs, willing myself not to fidget, but I was trying not to freak the hell out.

“Ashley is at school. You said you had something important to speak to us about?” Father started.

Mother reached over and patted my arm. “You seem worried. How can we help?”

I glanced at Zayne, who gave me a nod. If he believed in me, then I could do this.

“I need to tell you some things that will be difficult to hear.” My hand flew over my heart. “It’s also hard for me to talk about, but I no longer have a choice.” I paused for a moment.

My parents remained quiet, waiting for me to talk again.

“Donovan isn’t who you think he is.”

Father’s brow furrowed, and he folded his arms over his chest. “What do you mean?”

I cleared my throat, taking a moment to gather my courage to speak my truth. “Donovan has been raping me since I was twelve ... he’s still hurting me.” I stared at my feet, unable to bear seeing the disappointment and disgust on their faces.

Nervous silence stretched between us, and my brain scrambled to fill the gap. Instead, I remained quiet and tried to give them a minute to absorb the horror I had just breathed into the room. Gathering up my courage, I looked at my parents.

A gasp finally escaped Mother, shock registering in her hazel eyes. “Honey, you’ve been living with him for over a year. You’re telling us that this is still happening?”

I held my head high, gripping the arms of the chair until my knuckles turned white. “Yeah. He overpowers me easily, plus if I resist him, he’s threatened to harm you and Ashley.” I choked on my little sister’s name. “I can’t let him hurt her.” A cold sweat rippled over me, and my heart hammered, making me feel like I was going to pass out.

A dangerous growl escaped my father. “No man threatens my daughters, son or not.” Fury rolled off Father in waves as he rubbed his jawline. “You’ll move back home immediately,

and I will personally kill the son of a bitch for what he's done to you."

I shook my head. "There's more." I wiped my palms along my shorts. "Donovan sold me to Ander for millions of dollars to secure my position as prima ballerina."

Mother shot out of her chair, a wail catching in her throat.

"I'm so sorry, but I need to tell you everything. When you sent Donovan to France, he and Ander became good friends. Donovan sold me to Ander as a sex slave, and they both hurt me over the years." A tsunami of shame drowned me, but I pushed forward. "They had a party, and a client shattered my knee. I thought it would free me from Ander, but it didn't. We just moved back to the States. Ander and Donovan continued their sick games, peddling me for millions to wealthy men with sick fetishes. Donovan said that if I didn't cooperate, he would take Ashley and start selling her, too." I shook my head so hard that hair flew in my face.

Mother sank to her knees, her sobs shaking her shoulders. "How could our own son do this? Not to my girls. Not to my babies."

I wanted to rush over and soothe her, but I had to finish talking first. Plus, deep inside, I needed their forgiveness. My brain understood that it wasn't my fault, but their acceptance of me after revealing my dark secrets would help heal my heart.

With a racing pulse, I continued. "Donovan is away on business, but he will be home Friday evening. I've confided in Zayne, and he's assured me that he and his team can safely help me escape from Donovan. But I'm terrified that he'll go after Ashley, and I can't let that happen. If she wasn't a minor, I wouldn't be having this conversation with you, but she's only



eleven, only a year younger than when he started on me. I'm asking for the three of you to leave with us. We can change our names and start over elsewhere. I can't live like this anymore, but if you say no, then I'll stay in order to protect Ashley from a life of rape and cruelty."

I peeked over my shoulder at Zayne. We hadn't talked about me staying, but I was trying to make sure that my parents understood if they didn't leave, their lack of concern for my sister would chain me to this dark world. It was my job to keep her safe if they wouldn't.

Father paced back and forth, tears welling in his eyes as his fists clenched and unclenched. "Why? Why didn't you tell me? We could have stopped this years ago." His features flashed with fury.

"I was a scared little girl, Father. The fear of him hurting Mother, then later Ashley, was too much for me to overcome on my own."

Mom stood, then moved her chair next to mine. Her cries quieted as she took my hand in yours. "We'll go with you. Ashley is just a child, and I have to protect her. I'm so sorry that I failed you. Please forgive me."

"Oh, Mother, I forgive you both. You had no idea what was happening while you slept." My attention bounced between the two of them. "And you'll really leave?"

My father frowned and shoved his fingers through his dark hair. "Of course we will. You might be an adult, but you're my daughter and so is Ashley. Under no circumstances does my protection of you stop because you're grown."

My tears freely flowed. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that this is happening. I want to get away from him so badly. He

watches me everywhere I am, there are cameras in the house, and I'm not allowed to go anywhere without him. The only way I could escape was through suicide." I sank my teeth into my lower lip. "It was after I recovered that he threatened me with Ashley." A thick tension crackled between us, charging the air with the scent of anger and desperation.

My father walked over to me, then fury coasted over his face. A shadow of conflict and agony twisted his features while he took my hand, gently pulling me to a standing position. "You have done nothing to apologize for, *ma fille*. *Je t'aime tellement*." He wrapped me in his arms.

Sighing hard and giving in to the hot wash of tears, I rested my head against his broad chest. "I love you, too, Dad."

After my cries had slowed down, I turned to Zayne. I suspected I looked like shit after crying, but he'd seen me with a red-tipped nose and puffy eyes before.

"Zayne can talk to you about the plan and what we need to do." Exhaustion suddenly crushed my body.

Zayne stepped forward, his shoulders squared, and an air of authority surrounded him. His jaw twitched, his expression revealing zero emotion. I'd spent enough time with him to understand that his ability to hide his thoughts kept him sharp and clear-headed. I suspected he would have a lot to say once we left my parents.

"Sir. Ma'am." He pinned me with a troubled gaze. "When Giselle shared the circumstances with me, my boss started to dig into Donovan and Ander. What she says is true."

Father's brow arched. "Are you saying that I would doubt my daughter?" His voice was stern, and his eyes were tight with anger.

Panic crept up my throat, and my heart pumped wildly in my chest. The relationship between these two men couldn't start like this.

“No, but when someone is in danger from a person who should be trustworthy, outside proof can make it easier to digest. Uprooting your family and everything you've built in order to run and protect your loved ones is no simple matter. Emotions run high and it often helps everyone deal with the situation when there are facts presented as well.”

I hadn't ever seen Zayne stand his ground before, but I was pretty sure I had just fallen more in love with him. Not once did he flinch or back down from my father.

Father blew out a big sigh. “You're right. I have to remember that you're protecting my girls. I apologize for being rude. Please, tell me everything. We'll start packing as soon as we're done here.”

Father sat in his chair behind his mahogany desk, focusing on my bodyguard. Mother held my hand while we talked about the next steps and what it would look like. My head swam with the details. Panic bubbled inside me, but I refused to let it take over. For the first time in my life, I was about to be free from Donovan Lambert once and for all. Not only that, but I would have the freedom to be with Zayne. The realization that I could finally be with a man I cared for sparked a bit of light in my otherwise dark world. All I wanted to do was tell him I loved him, and hoped he felt the same.

**Zayne**

**C**larity was power. Watching Giselle spill her guts to her mom and dad, I witnessed everyone shift from distress into problem-solving mode. They all became focused, but they weren't the only ones. As I watched Giselle cry, her pain clawed at my chest, threatening to tear me into pieces. It was hell not gathering her in my arms and comforting her. But once her parents were on board, it was as if a black cloud had lifted off Giselle. I was so goddamned proud of her—her strength, determination, and fierce protectiveness of Ashley made me fall for her even harder.

After Giselle and I had left her parents' house with a plan intact, I picked up hamburgers and shakes, then drove to the lake where we could enjoy the water and talk without worrying. Once we decamped from the car, I spread the blanket on the grass under a giant oak tree that provided shade.

“You really love it here, don't you?” Giselle sipped her thick chocolate drink as she got comfortable on the ground.

“It's one of the places that gives me peace when the world doesn't make sense.” I unwrapped my hamburger and took a bite, staring out of the water as it lapped against the shoreline.

“Thank you.”

I glanced at Giselle. “For what?”

“For being there for my family.” She offered me a sad smile.

“It was a tough as hell conversation, but you did well.”

A frown marred her beautiful face. With everything inside me, I wanted her in my lap, but after the day she’d had with her parents, I was afraid to push her.

“What is it?” I set my food down, focusing on her.

“Do you think the plan will work, and I’ll finally be free?”

It was clear this woman had no idea that she’d become my entire world in a short time. I removed my sunglasses and held her gaze. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, Giselle. We’ll get you all out. We have two days left. Hang in there. I’ll be right by your side every second.”

Her beautiful features shifted, appearing shy and unsure. “You’re making a new life for me possible, Zayne. Not only do I want to know that my family is okay, but I want to start over.” She picked at the foil hamburger wrapper, then looked at me again. “With you.”

Unsure of exactly what she meant, I offered her a safe response. “I suspect we’ll always stay in touch. I won’t disappear on you if that’s what you’re worried about.” Although I hadn’t lied to her, I wanted to be in her life more than I was able to admit. I was just afraid it would spook her if I said the wrong thing too soon.

“You beautiful, dense man.” Giselle shook her head, then set her food down on the blanket. She crawled over to me and straddled my lap.

My hands instinctively traveled to her thighs, giving them a gentle squeeze.

“I just want to be yours,” she said softly.

A slow smile spread across my face, my pulse kicking up a notch with her confession. I smoothed her hair, assessing her for any concerns. “Are you sure? I’m stubborn, bossy, protective, and I do some bad shit, Giselle.” My hand snaked around her waist, and I pressed my lips to hers. “There’s no need to answer me yet.”

She cupped my cheeks, forcing me to look at her. “I don’t need time, Zayne.” Her fingertips traced my jaw. “The night I died ... when I opened the bathroom door, I saw you right before I collapsed.” Giselle gave me a gentle kiss. “There was something special about you. It was as if in the last seconds I could see things clearly—see you. And somewhere inside me, I realized that you were there for *me*. I guess after I recovered, I had to tuck that moment away. If Donovan knew how you had touched my heart, he would have made it his life mission to destroy you.”

My molars ground together. Right then, I made it *my* life’s mission to not ever have to speak the devil’s name again.

“Fuck that piece of shit. All I care about is you.”

Giselle leaned her forehead against mine. “Zayne?” She asked, breathlessly. Her hazel eyes searched my face. “Can you stop for just a moment?”

Confused, I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Can you stop pretending that I’ll break and tell me how you feel about me?”

My cock sprang to life as I ran my hand up her back, weighing the pros and cons of giving her what she wanted.

“I’m afraid that, if I say it out loud, I’ll somehow fuck up getting you to safety because my feelings clouded my judgement. It happened to Vaughn, and he lost everything for a while. It was screwed up. I can’t risk allowing my emotions to override my brain right now.”

Disappointment registered in her features. “You haven’t pushed me, so I’ll feel guilty about this later. You’re the one person giving me hope, and if I know that we’ll be together after this is over, it will help me stay strong.”

I inhaled deeply, and the fresh air drifted off the water and tickled my nose. I wrestled with the idea of telling her, but being open had its pros and cons. *What the hell? I had nothing to lose at this point.* I was lying to myself if I tried to backtrack and say that I wasn’t emotionally involved already.

“I wanted to wait until you were safe.” I tilted my chin up, nipping on her bottom lip. “I love you, Giselle. I’m in fucking deep, and even if you walked away from me after I just admitted how I feel, it wouldn’t change how much I care about you.”

Tears brimmed in her beautiful golden eyes.

“I love you too.” She slid her hand behind my neck, her fingertips brushing the edge of my hairline.

What had this woman done to me? No one had ever reached inside me and changed my world the way she had.

With a quick move, I rolled Giselle onto her back, my erection digging into her stomach. I was on fire. Every part of me hummed with expectation and need.

“Tell me again,” she whispered against my mouth.

I lifted my gaze, connecting with hers. “I love you, Giselle. When you’re finally away from that bastard, I want you by my

side. I want to wake up to your beautiful face each morning. I want to build a life with you.”

“I’m yours, bodyguard. Every part of me.”

A low growl escaped my throat. Gripping her waist, I slipped my tongue inside her mouth, kissing her with conviction.

I untucked her shirt from her shorts and pushed the soft fabric over her flat stomach. My thumb brushed across her hard nipple that poked through her bra. She arched into my touch, signaling that I needed to continue. I plumped her breast in my palm, then pushed the material out of the way so I could suck on her, nipping at her taut bud as she dug her fingers into my back.

My hand moved between her breasts, then down her belly. Flipping the snap open on her shorts, I worked the zipper down. Her scent swirled around me, intoxicating me. I loved everything about her. Giselle was better than any drug or drink I’d ever tried. I crawled down the blanket, removing her shorts and panties so I could see her bare pussy, then parted her toned thighs. Licking my lower lip, I dipped my head and nuzzled her bundle of nerves with the tip of my nose.

A soft little whimper escaped her as I lifted her legs and draped them over my shoulders, giving me the full access I craved. She writhed beneath me as I shoved my tongue into her slick walls and massaged her clit with my thumb. The sounds that escaped her were insanely hot, and I fought the urge to shove my hard cock deep inside her.

“Zayne,” she moaned, making me nearly come in the process.



I continued to feast on her, lapping up her juices as they trickled down the inside of her thigh. Slipping my hands beneath her ass, I lifted her as I made love to her with my mouth. Her parted lips and moans of pleasure had me begging for more of her. She tensed, grinding her hips against my face as she came. Once the last shiver had traveled through her, I got on my knees and undid my pants. My fingers wrapped around my long shaft as I glanced up at her.

“I need you inside of me,” she whimpered.

Not wasting any time, I positioned myself over her and ran the tip of my dick over her sweet slit, coating myself with her desire before I eased inside, her walls clenching around my cock.

Her attention remained glued to me as I thrust. Heat shot through me, pleasure sparking down my spine as I filled her. She wrapped her legs around my waist, rocking against me. My eyes briefly snapped closed as I felt her body squeezing mine.

“Come inside me, Zayne.” Her fingernails slipped under my shirt as I gained momentum and continued to dive deep inside her.

“Not yet.” I rolled onto my back, bringing her on top of me. She placed her hands against my chest, finding her new rhythm as I watched her. She straightened, and I flicked open her bra and freed her breasts. They bounced with her movements, and I gently pinched her nipples as she arched into my palms. My gaze drifted from her core, up her belly, to her tits. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Baby,” she moaned. “You feel too good.” She lifted off me, then slid down the length of me again and again. Pleasure

twisted her expression as she threw her head back, screaming my name as she came again.

My muscles tightened, and I released a harsh growl before grabbing her hips and pumping in and out of her. Just as she came down from hers, my climax hit. I jerked and tensed as I poured myself into her. My body finally began to relax, and she collapsed on top of me, breathless. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her forehead.

“When this shit is over, I’m taking you out on a ton of dates, and spoiling you rotten, so think about where you want to go. Fiji? Mexico? England?”

She lifted her head, her eyes filled with tears. “As long as you’re with me, I don’t care where we are.”

I was pretty sure I turned into a blob of Jell-O with her words.

Giselle grabbed my shaft, then slowly stood. “Get naked, bodyguard. You owe me a swim.”

Laughter floated in the air as she shucked her shirt and bra, then bolted over to the water’s edge. Not needing any more encouragement, I removed my gun from the leg holster, stripped, then ran after her. Quickly closing the gap between us, I scooped her into my arms and walked into the lake. She wrapped her arms around my neck as her giggles and squeals made me chuckle. I hadn’t ever heard her so happy, and it felt damned good to know it was because of me. Never again would I let anyone hurt her.

The water lapped over our skin as it reached my chest, and I continued to hold her.

“This is where you belong. In my arms. Don’t ever doubt that.”

She slanted her mouth over mine and kissed me. “I won’t.” She smiled, and my heart warmed. I would have stayed with her forever, protecting her from the monsters waiting for us.

“If it weren’t for Ashley, I would have already packed your bags, tossed you in my car, and left with you.” I hoped my confession wasn’t too much.

“I would have gone with you, bodyguard. But this way, since my family will also be safe, I can freely give you my time and attention without being terrified that they’re in trouble.”

I nodded. “I know. It’s hard, though.” I lowered us in the water, watching as it lapped over her breasts.

“I can’t guarantee that our plan will go over without a hitch, but there’s one thing I can swear to you.”

“What’s that?” She stroked the back of my neck with her thumb.

I pressed my mouth against her ear, then made my promise to her.

**Giselle**

**T**he water lapped against the shoreline, and the sun began its descent, painting the sky with brilliant blue, pink, and yellow hues as Zayne made love to me again.

For a few hours, I was able to forget the horror that waited for me and focus on the man that had captured my heart. When the fear was too much, I would hold onto these memories with him and remind myself that we would create more.

Once we dried off on the blanket, we dressed, then Zayne shook it out and folded it before putting it in the car's trunk. I waited for him beneath the tree so we could speak freely before getting back into the Mercedes.

"I don't want to go home," I whispered.

"I know." He pulled me into a warm embrace, and I laid my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. I pushed up on my tiptoes, brushing my lips against his. "This will be the last kiss until we leave the house again."

"No, it won't. If it's okay with you, I'll sneak a few in while you're sleeping since there aren't any cameras in your room. I'll check again, though." Zayne smiled and rubbed my back. "I'm not going anywhere, babe."

“I suppose we should get some sleep. It was smart to make our move tomorrow instead of Friday when Donovan will return.” I tightened my hold around Zayne’s waist.

“We need to be a day ahead of him. It’s the smartest thing to do. While Marty is sleeping tonight, Sutton will loop the cameras with a false feed, which will allow us to pack your important belongings and load the car. I want you to rest until Sutton lets me know she’s hacked the camera system, though.”

“Then I have an hour to gather my things and get out.” A ball of anxiety lodged itself in my throat as I repeated my part of the plan to him.

“Yeah, but there are two of us. Just plan ahead on what you want to take. Sutton said something about moving money for you too, but she didn’t give me any specifics.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Not only am I packing some of my belongings, but I’m taking Donovan’s millions. After all, I earned them, not him.”

Zayne threw his head back and laughed. “Leave it to Sutton to be able to pull that shit off. I wish I could see the fucker’s face when he sees all the missing zeroes in his bank accounts.”

I sighed. “I guess we better get back to the house. I’m sure Marty is wondering where I’ve been all day.”

Zayne pressed his lips to mine in a slow, leisurely kiss that curled my toes.

The gravel crunched beneath my sandals as we headed to the car and settled in. Zayne started the engine, then took my hand. Once again, his thumb traced little circles on my skin, calming my overactive nerves. A part of me was afraid to

hope, but the other part could taste the freedom on the tip of my tongue.

I leaned my head back and stared out of the window. For just a few minutes, I allowed myself to dream about a new life with Zayne and what it would look like. Where would we live? Kids? Would he continue to be a bodyguard and in danger? The questions weighed heavily on my mind, but they would have to wait until after I'd made the great escape from hell.

The drive and time alone were over far too quickly, and Zayne soon pulled into my driveway. My heart skipped a beat when I realized this would be the last moment I arrived at this house. When I was in this car again, it would be to leave for a new life.

Zayne released me, then parked in front of the garage. My fingertips tingled with anxiety, but I took a slow breath and peeked at my bodyguard—*my* bodyguard. Butterflies scattered in my belly with the idea of being in his arms again soon. At least he would be with me when I panicked. Whether he knew it or not, he was my rock. His love had encouraged me to run and start over. Zayne Wilson was my everything.

Zayne exited the car, then opened my door for me. I stood and walked ahead of him to the entrance. Unlocking it, I stepped inside, then disabled the alarm. Zayne cleared his throat, then secured the locks.

Footsteps smacked the marble floors, and I waited for Marty to make his appearance. I glanced at Zayne and froze when concern filled his face, recalling that he could tell the difference in footfalls and who they belonged to. Fearing the worst, I spun around and planted my palm against the wall to steady myself while holding my breath.

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**Giselle**

**M**y stomach twisted, fear nearly crippling me.

The second I saw the black wingtip dress shoes, the air whooshed out of my lungs. *Donovan.*

“Where have you been, Giselle?” Donovan snarled, frustration thick in his throat. His furious gaze peered straight into my soul, stripping me of the safety I had felt earlier with Zayne.

Terror spiked inside me, sending my pulse racing. “Swimming.” My hair was still damp, so there was no use lying.

He approached, then dragged his knuckles down my cheek. A renewed hatred for Donovan pulsed through my veins. The bastard was home early, which meant I wasn’t leaving. But that was the least of my worries. His stony, cold-hearted stare coiled around my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

“Where? We don’t have a pool.” He tapped my nose with his index finger like he used to when I was a kid. It was his signal to be ready and waiting for him to rape me soon.



“The lake.” My voice wobbled. “It’s hot and I wanted some sun and privacy.”

Donovan’s lips pressed into a thin line as he shoved his hands in the pocket of his suit slacks.

He gave me a clipped nod, a storm brewing in his eyes. “Zayne, you’re not needed tonight. I’ll see you in the morning. Giselle and I have some catching up to do.”

A whimper escaped me as I spun on my heel and flashed Zayne a bewildered look. We both knew what would happen if he walked out that door. I pressed my lips together as I realized my fear had just given away the fact that I didn’t want Zayne to go. Attempting to cover up my mistake, I gave a half shrug. “Later, bodyguard.”

Zayne’s stoic expression remained in place. His gaze traveled to Donovan’s. “When should I return?”

Donovan curled his fingers around my bicep and dug into my skin. “I’ll call. Go have some fun.” His maniacal brown eyes glimmered, and the hair on my arms stood on end.

“Have a good evening.” Zayne didn’t look at me as he turned away, then left.

Time had just put a rope around my neck. I was trapped with the man I had only been hours from escaping.

The door clicked closed, and Donovan slammed me against the wall, my head smacking the corner of the alarm system, causing me to wince.

“You’re home early.” I offered the best smile I was able to muster up.

“Eager to see you, sis.” He sneered as he placed his palm on my cheek.

I was pretty sure my skin burned where he'd just touched me. The devil had that effect.

“You look a little sad that I sent him away. It makes me think the two of you had arrangements this evening.” Donovan's warm breath tickled my ear.

Terror twisted my gut. *Did he know?* I attempted to slow my breathing and remain in control, but I was reeling and slipping off the sanity cliff.

“Our plans were to stay here. The sun and water made me tired.” I held his vicious gaze while my legs betrayed me and trembled.

“You're lying. I'm aware that you were leaving me. Good thing I got home to stop you from running off with the bodyguard. That will be the last time you see him.” He slid his hand between my legs and grabbed my crotch through my shorts. “This is mine. You just fucked up, little girl, and fell for the wrong man.”

*How the hell did he find out? Fuck, he had us tailed.* “I have no idea what you're talking about.” Desperation sank her claws into my soul and I dug my manicured nails into Donovan's wrist until he let me go. “Don't fucking touch me.” I spat in his face and shoved him off.

Donovan's shoes slipped on the floor, and I barked out a laugh as he landed ass first. I broke into a sprint, making a mad dash for the stairs. If I could reach my room, the door might hold him off long enough for me to crawl out of my window. If not ...

I ran up eight stairs, but Donovan was hot on my heels. He managed to seize my hair and jerk me backward, sending me

spiraling down. I gasped as my back landed on the hard floor, the air whooshing from my lungs.

Donovan sat on top of me, then captured my wrists with one hand. I attempted to buck him off, but he was too heavy.

He ripped the button off my shorts, then lowered the zipper while I screamed and kicked at him.

“I like it when you’re feisty, Giselle.” He tugged my clothes down to my thighs, and I pressed my legs together. “If you don’t stop, I will punish you.”

I stilled, understanding that it would be much worse if I didn’t do as he asked, but even though my survival instinct said to give in, my heart and body belonged to Zayne. There was no way I would go down without a fucking fight.

“Fuck. You.” I seethed.

“You’ll regret that, you little bitch.” He jumped up, then yanked me into a standing position.

I crossed my ankles and tightly pressed my thighs together, attempting to keep him from removing my underwear.

Furious, he let my arm go, and I landed a solid punch to his nose. He staggered backward, and I jerked up my shorts before running for my life.

Donovan scrambled after me, wrapped his long fingers around my ankle, and we both went tumbling back down the stairs.

**Zayne**

**I**f that son of a bitch thought I was leaving Giselle with him, he was sadly mistaken. I hightailed it to the Mercedes, hopped in, and nearly peeled out of his driveway. I took a sharp left on the road, then proceeded to hide my vehicle behind the fucker's property.

Once I was out of sight. I parked, jumped out of the car, and popped my trunk. Fumbling for my phone in my back pocket, I slipped in one of my air pods and called Pierce while I removed the cover to a hidden compartment and stared at the guns and ammunition I had on hand in case of an emergency.

“Hey, Zayne. How are things?” Pierce asked.

“Donovan fucking came back early from his trip, man. He sent me home. That sick fuck has Giselle in the house,” I explained through gritted teeth. “I’m going in after her.”

“Hang on, Zayne. Think this through. If you do, you’ll blow the entire investigation.”

Blinded by a white-hot fury, I removed another handgun and loaded the ammo before sliding it into the waist of my pants. “Donovan will fucking rape and torture her. How in the hell can you tell me not to go in?”

“Do you want Donovan to walk, get away with everything he’s done to Giselle?”

Irate, I nearly threw my phone. “Yeah, I want the bastards to run, then I’m going to hunt them down, fucking cut their nuts off, and stick them in their goddamn mouths while they bleed out.”

“We’ll get them. You have my word, but you’re in over your head and you need goddamn backup. I’m trying to get through your thick skull that we’re close to bringing Donovan and Ander down.” Pierce hesitated. “Shit. But I don’t think I could live with myself knowing she was getting hurt. You’re backing me into a corner. Brian is going to have my balls, but we’ll take our chances. But you have to wait for us, Zayne. Do *not* go in alone.”

“I’m not waiting!” I growled.

“Goddammit, Zayne. That’s an order.”

For the first time in my life, I had no plans to follow Pierce’s command.

I steeled myself. “If it were Sutton, you would already be in that fucking house.”

“She’s my wife, not a client!”

“Giselle isn’t a goddamn client, I’m in love with her. As soon as she’s safe, we’re all in, man. So say what you want, I’m breaking her out of there with or without your support.”

Pierce sighed. “Son of a bitch. I kept seeing the signs, but you promised me nothing was happening with you two. Let’s get her out. I’ll grab Sutton and deal with the FBI later. If you’re going in, we need a plan.”

“Time is ticking, Pierce. I need a solution fucking quick.” I checked the clip and safety of the handgun strapped to my calf while Pierce continued to talk. Giselle knew I was packing when she talked me out of my clothes to go swimming. The first two times we’d made love, I’d kept my pants on in case I had to get my shit together fast and protect us. I did a quick mental check and ensured I had everything I needed. I popped a piece of gum into my mouth as Pierce got Sutton on the phone.

“Zayne?” Sutton’s worried voice floated over the line. “Pierce and Vaughn are on the way. What do you need from me?”

“Donovan has Giselle, Sutton.” I massaged my neck. “I have to sneak into his place, but the alarm is on.”

“Give me a minute, hon. We’ve got this.”

I tapped my foot, surveying the area around me. The second I had seen Donovan, I suspected he knew something was off. My eyes narrowed as I pulled up the tracker app. “Fuck.” The tracker wasn’t working, which meant he probably found it. No wonder I had no idea that he was home. The app was supposed to alert me when his Porsche was on the move.

“Zayne? How close are you to the front entrance?”

“I’m not. I’m behind the property, and I parked on the side of the road. It’s quiet back here, so I figured I would be safe.”

“Okay, keep me on the line as you move forward, then when you’re at the front door, I’ll disarm the alarm and cameras in the house so you can get in.”

“Good. I’ll need a few seconds to pick the lock.” I closed my trunk and manually locked the car to avoid the beep

alerting anyone where I was, then jogged up the road to the back of the bastard's mansion.

"I'm running up the hill," I said quietly to Sutton. "How far out are Pierce and Vaughn?"

"Maybe five minutes. I'm pretty sure that Pierce is breaking every speed limit possible to get there."

"Perfect. I'll go in and leave the door unlocked, so they can come in behind me."

"Okay. I'll let them know," Sutton said.

I ducked into the trees as I approached the back of the manor and spotted the cameras sweeping the area. As soon as they pointed in another direction, I ran along the property until I was at the front of the house. "I have eyes on the door."

"Okay, I'm disarming the alarm and video feed now. You'll have five minutes to sneak in and out before it reactivates. The guys are only minutes away. Be careful, Zayne. Run in, grab her, and get the hell out as fast as you can."

"I will." I hunkered down, then glanced around before I darted to the main entrance. Reaching into the holster on my ankle, I removed the lock pick tool I carried with me. "I'm about to pop the lock," I whispered.

"The guys are three minutes out."

The door clicked, and I stood. "I'm going in."

"Be careful. Please." Sutton's voice bled with her concern.

"I will. I'll be silent moving forward." I adjusted the AirPods, securing it in place, and turned the doorknob slowly, listening as the seal broke. Giselle's scream pierced my eardrum, and I forced myself to creep rather than run into the

foyer, leaving the entrance slightly ajar for Pierce and Vaughn. I had to clear my head, or I would fuck everything up, but I wanted to go in shooting until the son of a bitch dropped.

I removed my pistol from my waistband, and my fingers wrapped around the grip panel and held steady as I hurried into the living room to the left of the foyer. Not seeing Giselle, I made my way to the far corner of the mansion where the kitchen was located.

“This is how it’s going to play out,” Donovan said, his back to me.

I flattened myself against the wall and my attention rested on Giselle in a chair. Blood trickled from her busted lip, and her eye was already bruising. My nostrils flared as I inhaled. *How dare he.* I was just about to step in when Donovan turned slightly, and I spotted the gun in his right hand.

*Goddammit.* One wrong move on my part, and he’d kill us all.

“Did you fuck him?” Donovan asked, bending over, his face mere inches away from Giselle’s.

“No. I told you there’s nothing happening between Zayne and me. You’re fucking crazy,” she spat.

Donovan’s palm flew across her cheek, and she released a cry. I rushed in with my finger on the trigger.

“Let her go, Donovan, and I might let you live.”

Donovan straightened, peering over his shoulder at me. “How sweet. The bodyguard is attempting to rescue the princess.”

“Move.” I used my weapon to motion for him to step away from Giselle. If I had to shoot, she was too close to him. It



could go horribly wrong.

Donovan laughed, spun around, and fired several shots. My body jerked backward, and my gun clattered to the floor.

“Zayne!” Giselle screamed as I landed with a hard thump on my back that knocked the air out of my lungs. “Zayne!” She knelt beside me, tears streaming down her face. “Hang on.” Her hands trembled as she placed them on my cheeks. “Look at me.”

My vision blurred as I struggled to catch my breath. I lifted my hand to smooth Giselle’s hair and noticed my fingers were covered in blood.

“Stay with me, baby.” She kissed my knuckles.

“Pierce,” I managed to croak out as the pain rippled through me. I attempted to stay coherent, but I must have hit my head pretty hard when I fell to the floor. “I love you, Giselle.”

“Zayne. Don’t you leave me. Please!” Her cries pierced the air, then my world turned black.

**Giselle**

“**O**h, God!” I cried as Zayne’s eyes fluttered closed. “What did you do?” I screamed at Donovan.

“Time for us to go, sis.” Donovan jerked me backward, tossing me to the floor. He sat on top of me, placed his hands on my cheeks, then lifted my head and smacked it against the tiles. Black dots danced before my vision, and the last face that flickered through my mind was Zayne’s.



MY SKULL THROBBED as I peeled my eyelids open, attempting to comprehend where I was—white furniture, pink-and-white-striped wallpaper, ballet posters lining the walls.

How did I end up at my parents’ house? I pushed myself into a sitting position on the bed. Tears welled in my eyes as everything rushed back to me, stealing my breath. *Zayne. Oh God, Donovan shot him.* There was no telling what bullshit story Donovan was saying to my parents at this moment. I had to stop him.

I placed my feet on the cool wood floors and slowly stood, gripping the edge of my old nightstand for balance. The room

tilted, and I sat back down before I passed out. I swallowed while my attention swept over the space. My parents had left my old bedroom the same as it was the day that I'd moved to the ballet academy. Pictures of us together and smiling while on vacations all over the world lined the bulletin board over my white, shabby chic desk. Donovan was all smiles, his arm around me in most pictures. Even then, I couldn't escape him.

Swallowing over the dryness in my throat, I rose again. My head didn't swim this time, so I first took a few cautious steps, then continued to the door. I treaded carefully down the hall but couldn't hear any voices. The mansion was huge, so it didn't surprise me.

Hugging the banister, I made my way down the stairs. I crept through the living room and headed to Father's office. If he was there, I might be able to catch him alone and see if Donovan was here or if he'd just dropped me off.

I slowed, noticing the door next to Father's office was ajar. My entire life, it had been locked with a keypad. Frowning, I caught sounds drifting up from below. Father had explained that it was for storage and that he kept his clients' confidential information there. If that was the case, why was it open now, and what or who was I hearing?

The light from the hall spilled into the dark space, illuminating a set of steps. How did I not know that we had a basement in the house? I had lived there for sixteen years, until I left for the academy. Confusion swirled through me, and I quietly descended the stairs, then heard Mother, Father, and Donovan speaking. Shit. The bastard was weaseling his way into their good graces again. Or was Mother terrified of him after I told her what he'd done to me all my life?

My bare feet landed on another stair, and the sight of both my parents talking with Donovan came into view.

I crouched down, trying to overhear what they were saying.

“You did the right thing bringing her here. I’m sure Zayne’s men were on the way,” Father said. “The moment Giselle showed up with Zayne and told us their plan, I knew I had to nip that shit in the bud and tell you to get your ass home.”

*What? It was my parents that told Donovan? How could they?*

My head clouded with panic, shock, and nerves that spiked my adrenaline. Not only had Donovan hurt me, my parents had betrayed me as well.

“Well, the sorry bastard is dead, so he won’t be a problem anymore.”

I gasped, then slapped my hand over my mouth.

*Zayne is dead! Oh my, God.*

I trembled in my hiding spot as I muffled my cries. I’d lost the only man that I’d ever loved. He was gone because of my sick and disgusting brother. Unable to control my sobs, I stood and started to run up the stairs. I would have to talk to Mother privately to learn what lies Donovan had fed her and Father.

Footsteps neared the steps, and I held my breath. “I thought I heard you,” Mother said from behind me.

I turned slowly, terrified of what Donovan would do to my parents and Ashley. I had to protect them. There wasn’t anyone else who could.

“Hey, I heard some strange noises, and thought I should check it out.” I plastered a smile on my face. “Are you okay?” I asked, my head throbbing from Donovan’s earlier beating and now my tears.

“Never better. Come here. I want to show you something.” She motioned for me, smiling the same smile I knew and loved.

Maybe Donovan hadn’t hurt them ... yet. I had no clue how to protect them, but images of a movie I’d seen years ago flashed through my mind, giving me an idea. Feeling a bit braver and mentally more prepared to handle Donovan, I descended the stairs toward my mother.

“You look a little rough. After we’re done, you can take a warm bath, then I’ll help you cover the bruises.” She slipped her arm around my waist, then led me past the corner.

An audible gasp flew out of me. “What the hell is this?” I squeaked, blinking several times.

There was no way that I was seeing what was apparently in front of me. I wasn’t in the basement. I was in another house altogether. My mouth gaped as my focus swept the space, noticing a living area and several tables in a large kitchen section. A young red-headed girl stood, her pregnant belly poking out in front of her. Her sad brown eyes caught my attention.

“Ah, she’s awake,” Father strolled over to me. He placed a kiss on my forehead.

“What’s happening, Father? I don’t understand.”

Donovan rounded a corner of the basement, smiling as though he’d just won the lottery. “Should we tell her, Mother and Father?”

“Tell me what?” I spun around, looking at each of them as if they were crazy. “Why is a girl down here?”

Donovan stood next to me and slid his arm around my waist. “You two have always looked good together.” Mother patted my cheek.

A chair scraped the cement floor, pulling my focus away from my parents. I stared in disbelief as two more girls stood, both pregnant. They rinsed and loaded their dishes into the dishwasher, then disappeared into a room off the kitchen. Door after door caught my eye. “How many girls are down here? Are they all pregnant?”

“I’m happy to explain it to her,” Donovan volunteered, all smiles.

“Son, go check on the sisters. I’ll handle the conversation.” Father arched his brow.

Donovan tossed his hands up in front of him, surrendering before sauntering in another direction.

“I’ll show you.” Father slipped his arm around my shoulder, but there was nothing gentle about it this time.

Mother quietly walked on the other side of me while Father led us through the basement kitchen, and my heart pounded with every step I took. There was no way out. Once I’d descended the stairs, I had a sinking feeling that it was over. I should have run out of the mansion, but even if I hadn’t convinced myself Mom was still innocent, I didn’t know how to disarm their alarm system.

“Is Zayne really dead?” I found my mouth asking without my permission.

“Donovan got a clean shot to his chest. Zayne bled out before our son brought you over.”

My legs buckled beneath me, and Father jerked me into a standing position. “Don’t be weak, Giselle. That bodyguard wouldn’t have saved you anyway. All he did was fill your head with silly notions. Sometimes I wonder who the child really is —Ashley or you.”

His cruel words struck me. Before I could respond to him, we reached a door, and he flung it open. Four young women that appeared to be around the age of seventeen peered up at us from the floor. Each of them was pregnant. Were my parents helping homeless moms-to-be? I was too terrified to admit the real possibility.

“We feed and clothe them, give them a safe place to deliver the babies,” Mother said. “We care for them, Giselle.”

Relief flooded my overwhelmed brain. “You’re not hurting them, then.” A thread of desperation clung to my words.

“Of course not. Once the young women have their babies by C-section, we keep them here for six weeks to allow them to properly heal,” Father continued.

“Then what?”

Father shook his head. “You really don’t know?”

“Giselle, how could you be so dense?” Mother tugged on my arm.

“I don’t know. Just fucking tell me what’s happening here.” My chin trembled, and unwanted tears pricked my eyes.

I heard my mother’s voice, but I couldn’t wrap my brain around the words spilling out of her mouth.

Dumbstruck, I stared at her as if she’d just revealed that she had four heads, and we were from Mars.

**Giselle**

“**W**hat the hell do you mean you breed babies?” Horror twisted my gut into a million painful knots.

“Giselle, you’re overreacting. These young women are runaways. We have rescued them off the streets, given them a reliable place to live, and fed them. In return, they’re impregnated. Once they have the child, we auction the young ladies off to wealthy men who then continue to take care of them.”

“And the babies?” I stammered.

“They all go to safe homes to be cared for, raised, and trained to serve the sons and fathers they will eventually be sold to.” My mother smiled at me as though she’d just shared the most wonderful news.

I gulped repeatedly. “That’s what Donovan does.” My voice cracked as I spoke the words out loud. “You knew? All of these years you’ve known what he’s done to me?” Nausea rolled in my belly.

“He’s worked for us longer than I can count. It was easy to teach him since he was under our roof. What he makes from



selling you for a night, he keeps seventy percent and gives us thirty. After all, we did the work and made you.”

Father led me to the next door and flung it open, revealing four more pregnant girls, and room after room contained the same horrible scene. He chuckled before he showed me the last one, and my chest constricted at the sight in front of me.

Donovan sat in a chair, his dick out of his dress pants, as two young ladies knelt before him. He motioned for one of them to join him. “My mother tells me you’re a virgin,” he said to the dark-haired girl.

“Yeah.”

“I promise I’ll be gentle,” Donovan laughed. “Suck my cock first while I taste your friend.”

“How old are they?” I stammered.

“Old enough.” My father’s chuckle froze the blood in my veins. Father’s hand snaked up my back and around my neck, holding me in place with his death grip. He forced me to watch as Donovan fucked the girls.

I slammed my eyes closed as a prickly panic crawled up my chest, and I felt dizzy. My overloaded brain was piecing things together. “He’s a father?”

“He’s one of the sperm donors, yes,” Mother said. Her tone was detached, indifferent.

My heart rate was erratic, my palms slickening with sweat. “Just so I’m clear.” I looked at my parents and took a deep breath. “You two kidnap young women off the street, allow men to rape them until they’re pregnant, hold them hostage, deliver the babies, then sell both the girls and their children to some sick fucks?”

“That’s a bit harsh, Giselle. We’re providing them with a much better life than drugs and homelessness. Once they are all cleaned up, they’re actually quite pretty.” Mother gave a slight shrug.

“And Donovan ...” I massaged the back of my neck, trying not to lose my shit. “Do you know that he sold me to Ashkov Butrick? I was cut, raped, brutalized. I’m your *daughter*, for God’s sake.”

Father ran his hand down my spine. “Donovan doesn’t make a move without my consent. Ashkov paid millions for a night with the golden-eyed ballerina.”

Without a second thought, I spit in my father’s face. “You disgust me. I am a human being, not livestock that you can sell!”

“Giselle!” Mother jerked on my arm as my father wiped his cheek, sneering at me.

“You just fucked up, little girl.” He stormed toward me, and the atmosphere around us heated like Satan himself was there. Father gripped my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “First you fall for your bodyguard, then you disrespect me in my own home.”

Footsteps neared me, then large, meaty hands grabbed both of my arms and jerked me backward. I screamed as two men dragged me across the floor as I kicked and fought them. They hauled me down yet another set of stairs and into a dank and dimly lit hall. The sound of keys jingling reached my ears, then my attention skimmed over glass-like cells that ran along the wall. Holes wide enough to stick your arm through allowed the girls to breathe as they crouched in the corners—dirty and scared.

I fought against the men as one of them opened a door to an empty cage and shoved me in. Landing on my knees, I yelped as pain shot through my body. The clang of the lock echoed through the hall. Crawling to the corner, I turned so that I could see if anyone would come for me.

My chest heaved as I started to process the cold, vicious truth. Zayne was gone—dead. The only man I'd ever loved was murdered by the monster I was chained to for the rest of my life. More than that, it wasn't Donovan pulling the strings all those years, it was my mother and father. My stomach squeezed tight, and I leaned over in time not to puke all over myself. I wiped my lips, the sour taste lingering in my mouth.

“Zayne,” I whispered. The moment his name slipped off my tongue, my heart shattered into pieces, fragmenting my soul. Fear, grief, and anxiety drowned me as I gave into the hot wash of tears. He'd brought me back to life twice, then lost his own. I would never forgive myself for bringing him into my fucked-up world.

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**Giselle**

**S**leep finally claimed me, and soon I peered through my swollen lids as the light spilled into the cage from the hallway. I hadn't noticed the window earlier on the opposite side of the room, but I was locked in a fucking cell, so it wasn't like I could break the pane, then crawl out of my parents' house.

Tears prickled my bleary stare as my legs quaked and nausea bubbled in my belly. I couldn't get sick again. I needed to clear my head and figure out an escape plan. Whatever Donovan and my parents had in store for me, they would have to let me out eventually.

Two sets of footsteps reached my ears, and I jerked myself into a standing position, my knees rebelling with the sudden movement. I grimaced as I tried to manage the pain, my previously shattered knee giving me a firm fuck-you at my attempts.

A heavy-set man with a buzzed haircut appeared, and a petite girl with dark hair walked next to him. *Goddammit, another runaway.*

He unlocked my glass container, then shoved the young woman in with me. I rushed over, catching her in my arms

before she hit the unforgiving concrete floor. My heart collapsed on itself as her breathing turned slow and deep, and her forehead scrunched.

Shock and fear seized me. “Ashley?”

“Hmm?” She narrowed her gaze, her pupils dilated.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked, tears clogging my throat.

“Hey, sis.” She staggered to her feet, scrunching her freckled nose at me. “I feel funny.”

“Baby, it’s okay. You’ve been drugged. I’ll take care of you.” I led her to the corner of the room, then helped her sit down without falling.

Noticing a small drop of blood on her arm, I lifted it carefully. “I’m going to fucking kill them,” I swore under my breath.

I sat next to her, realizing my worst fears had just come to fruition. The little sister I had worked so hard to protect was in a cage with me and was most likely about to enter the same fate as the other girls I’d seen. All my efforts to save her had failed, and I’d lost Zayne, too. I slapped my hand over my mouth, muffling my grief as my cries shook my shoulders.

Ashley moaned, shifting her butt on the hard floor.

“It’s okay, Ash. I’m here.” I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close. As fucked up as it was, I realized it might be the last time I got to hold her.



HOURS TICKED by slowly as I waited for the drugs to clear from Ashley's system. Two men brought food trays for us, but I waited for the other girls to eat first. If they all appeared to be out of their heads shortly after they finished, then I would know our meals were drugged.

I stared at the tray's sandwich, fruit, celery sticks, and chips. My stomach growled, urging me to take a bite. Closing my eyes, I calculated how many times I would have to count to sixty in order to see if the others were okay or not. It was the only way I could mark time, so I started counting in my head. At least it was a small distraction from my pit of despair.

Finally determining that everyone was all right, I gobbled down the food but saved Ashley's for when she was hungry. I had no idea when our next meal would be. Desperately needing to stretch, I paced the cramped space and trained my attention on my sister.

"Giselle?" came a soft voice.

I rushed over in time for her to puke all over the floor.

"I don't feel good." She placed her hand on her stomach as she heaved again.

I gathered her hair and rubbed her back as the last of the drugs left her system.

Her wide eyes landed on mine. "Where am I?"

"We're at Mother and Father's house ... downstairs."

Her gaze narrowed as she stared at the glass walls were in. "I don't understand." She attempted to sit up, her tongue darting over her chapped lips.

"Baby, I don't either." I couldn't force myself to tell her that our parents were most likely planning to sell her to a

horrible man who would beat and rape her. I had to hold out hope that she wouldn't endure the same fate I had, even as my brain told me it was futile.

She leaned her head against the wall, and I stood again. Surely, I could get someone's attention to help clean her up. She was just a little girl.

*So are they.*

I glanced at the other cells. One dark-haired girl paced back and forth, chewing her thumbnail to the quick. I was afraid to guess how old she was.

"Is anyone there?" I yelled out, hoping one of our jailers would hear me.

"What do you want?" a gruff voice answered.

"My sister got sick. Can I get some water and something to clean up with? I know damned well my parents have cleaning supplies upstairs, so don't even think about telling me no." I planted my hand on my hip as though I called the shots.

The burly guy poked his head around the corner, curiosity in his gaze. "You're the Lamberts' daughter?"

"We both are." I nodded in Ashley's direction.

"Huh. Yeah, I'll get someone to help clean the puke." He disappeared again.

"Why are we here?" Ashley's chin trembled.

"I don't know, honey, but at least we're together. We'll have the mess handled, then we'll see if you can tolerate some food. It might make you feel better."

Minutes later, a middle-aged woman showed up with cleaning supplies. Burly let her into the cell, and she took care

of the vomit in the corner. I felt sorry for her. What a shitty job, and if all the young women were drugged at one time or another, she probably had a lot to clean up. Then I remembered that she was privy to the hell that was going on around her, yet she never sought help. I stopped feeling bad for her.

My mind wandered to Zayne, and a sob escaped my throat as I looked down to the floor. How could I have spent an amazing day with him, then in seconds lose him ... forever? Anger steered my thoughts as I swore that I would kill Donovan myself. My parents would be next. It was now clear that my mother and father had never been on my side. I'd never been a daughter to them, just an avenue to make money. They had all turned on me, and their twisted, sick betrayal gave me power and fueled my revenge.

“Feel better, hon,” the lady said to Ashley.

An ugly, bitter feeling in my chest washed over me with a vengeance the moment the woman shut the door.

I sat down next to Ashley, then turned her back to me. “Do you want some braids?”

“Okay.” She shifted, probably trying to get comfortable on the hard floor. “Giselle?”

“Yeah, baby?” I separated her long dark hair into sections.

“Who was the man with you when you visited me at school? He always stood by a black car and wore sunglasses.”

My heart skipped a sorrowful beat. “He was the love of my life, but he’s gone now.” I choked on my words as tears stung my eyes.

“Where did he go?”



My throat tightened, and I sniffled while I began to braid her hair. “A very bad man killed him,” I gritted out.

Ashley looked over her shoulder at me. “I remember now. Donovan and Daddy were talking about him before Donovan stuck a needle in my arm.”

My heart raced, my breathing coming fast and rapid. I wiped the moisture from my face. “They are really awful men.”

She spun around with wide eyes. “Daddy and our brother?”

“Yeah. I tried to protect you as long as I could.” Reaching out, I stroked her cheek. “You shouldn’t be here with me. You should be with your friends at school, having fun.”

“I don’t understand why I’m here.” Ashley’s emotions were trapped inside her tense stare.

“Me either. I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. Hey, you’re almost twelve. Have you started your period yet?”

“Yeah. I’ve had four already.”

I bit my lip, holding the swell of feelings in. My head hung down, and I released Ashley’s hair, my hands balling into fists. I suspected I knew precisely why Ashley was here. They were prepping her to be sold. I cringed, unsure what that would look like for her, but I knew it couldn’t fucking happen.

As soon as I completed the thought, footsteps approached, then our door opened. Burly stepped in and helped Ashley up.

“You’re coming with me.”

“No!” I flung myself at him, clawing at his cheeks. He tossed me off like I was a ragdoll, and I landed with a thud. I scrambled off the floor, then hurled myself at him again, but

he quickly blocked me from reaching my sister, then removed his handgun from beneath this shirt and trained it on me. *Goddammit, I won't do either of us any good if I'm dead.*

“Giselle! Don't let them take me!” she screamed, nearly hysterical as she bucked and scratched the man.

“Be strong, baby. I'll see you in a bit.” I could only hope that they would bring her back.

I crouched in the corner, my chest heaving as Burly escorted her down the hall, then out of view.

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**Giselle**

**S** even more sunsets and sunrises passed, but I didn't see Ashley again. Depression had rolled in like a dark cloud, and I'd struggled to find anything to hold onto. I'd lost everything that mattered to me—Ashley, Zayne, ballet. At one time, I thought a better life was within my reach, then it was all sucked into a black hole, and my heart right along with it.

I'd alternated between pacing the cage or curling up in the corner. Occasionally I would drift off to sleep. At least we were well-fed and kept on an eating schedule, but the guards even accompanied us to the bathroom, then back to the cells.

I closed my eyes, seeing Zayne's beautiful face in my mind. Touching my lips, I remembered how his mouth felt on mine, his touch, his strength. The lyrics to "Helium" flooded my brain, and I began to sing softly, remembering how effortlessly he picked me up in the dance studio. His love had started to set me free. I wrapped my arms around my waist, trying to hold myself together as the grief stabbed me repeatedly in the chest.

"I love that song," one of the girls said from the opposite side.

“Sing with me.”

“I can’t really carry a tune.” She tucked her stringy blonde hair behind her ear.

“It’s okay. If it makes you feel better, then join me.” I approached the front of the glass and stuck my hand through the hole.

“I thought I could be strong enough to get through this horror on my own,” I whispered. “We need each other.”

I sang a little more, the girl joining in. Another person soon joined us, and I glanced around at the young women. There were at least seven of us, but I couldn’t see the other cells on my side of the hall.

A beautiful soprano harmonized, and we all shoved our arms through the holes. Eight arms. Eight young women were about to meet their horrible fate.

Once the song ended, we sang again, uniting together. The one thing that had been stolen from me—my voice—I’d found in a fucking cell while trying to give myself and others a sliver of hope in our dark world. I closed my eyes, imagining Zayne’s arms wrapped around me, and leaned into the safety of the memory.

Heavy footsteps broke through our song, but I didn’t even bother to look up.

They might be able to steal my body, but they could never strip Zayne from my heart, and I swore that he would live forever in my memories of the time we’d had together. Tears streamed down my face, but I continued to sing.

Donovan slowed in front of my cage, dressed in black slacks and a white button-down shirt.

Everyone fell silent, waiting for him to speak.

His brow arched, then the evil sneer I knew so well slipped into place.

“It’s your lucky day, sis.” With that, he unlocked my cell and grabbed my arm.

He jerked me into the hall, then practically dragged me with him. If I had thought it would help, I would have kicked and screamed all the way, but I knew it would have only worsened matters.

Donovan led me up the stairs to where the pregnant girls lived, then through the living room and kitchen. He stopped at the last door on the left, opened it, then forced me inside.

“Here she is,” he said to an older woman. “Check her out and make sure she’s healthy.”

“Of course. And blood work?” The woman with salt and pepper hair gave him a stern smile.

“No. She’s been with me for the last year, and I’ve had her tested regularly. This is just a basic checkup. Plus, we’re in a hurry. I’ll be back, sis.” He marched out, leaving me there.

“I’m Dr. Augustine,” the woman introduced herself. “My job is to ensure that all of the girls are healthy.”

“So, you basically give us a physical and if we have a clean bill of health, then what?” My legs trembled, and I rubbed my arms. The shirt and shorts I wore from a week ago were grungy, and I was pretty sure I didn’t smell good.

“Donovan didn’t tell you?” She pulled on a white pair of latex gloves, then motioned for me to sit in the chair before she grabbed her stethoscope.

“No.”

“This is the last stop before you’re cleaned up and auctioned to the highest bidder. It will be quite interesting to see who will pay the most for the famous prima ballerina.” She collected a green band from a metal tray and snapped it, filling the room with the popping sound.

It took a minute for me to realize what she’d said.

*Sold.* I was about to be sold for good. I had become useless to them. This was more than just punishment for falling in love with Zayne and angering my family. They were finished with me. Numbness replaced my anger as the doctor began my physical. My heart and brain warred against each other as I struggled to come to terms that I would be auctioned off to the highest bidder in a matter of hours. Even more, the son of a bitch would permanently own me. There would never be a reprieve from the bondage and abuse.

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### Giselle

**A**fter the doctor finished, I was returned to my cage, where I witnessed three more sunrises. Every agonizing moment was filled with thoughts of Zayne and Ashley.

I hadn't seen my sister since they'd hauled her away. I kept lying to myself, trying desperately to convince my brain that she was safe and sound, had been merely used to scare me into submission. But I knew better because the drugs that had coursed through her system were evidence against that.

The other girls and I would occasionally talk about hometowns, jobs, school, and anything else that kept our minds occupied. I was definitely the oldest at twenty-six. We were supposed to have our entire lives ahead of us, but not anymore. In mere seconds, each one had been taken while walking down the road or after hitching a ride with a stranger, then dropped here with no fucking clue they were entering a life of slavery.

High heels scraped against the cement floor, and I peered through the glass and down the hall.

My mother strolled in my direction as if she didn't have a care in the world. Her hair was tucked into a tidy bun, and she

looked stunning in her red blouse and beige slacks. If only people were aware that her soul was coated black with evil, her beauty only skin-deep.

She paused at my cell until the tall, dark-haired man escorting her unlocked the door and escorted me out.

“All your tests are clear, Giselle. Just in time for the auction tonight. You, along with nine other girls, will be prepared. I thought I would come say goodbye.”

I ground my teeth together. “Where’s Ashley?”

“Still the caring older sister, I see. She’s fine, don’t worry. It will give you wrinkles.” She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Hopefully, whoever buys you will treat you well. I know that you haven’t experienced kindness very often from men.”

I jerked back as though she’d slapped me. “You think? I mean, you and Father basically got pregnant in order to sell me for sex most of my life.” Disgust twisted my muscles into knots, and I clenched my hands into tight balls. “Do you even realize how fucked up you all are?”

Mother shook her head. “There you go, being dramatic again. I swear, Giselle, after everything we’ve done for you, I don’t understand how you don’t have an ounce of gratitude. We paid for your ballet, fed and clothed you—”

With my free hand, I reared back and slapped her face as hard as possible. “You bitch. How dare you.”

Mother gasped, her fingers flying to her cheek. “I’m the bitch?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m glad you’ll be gone once and for all.”

I smirked at her. “See you in hell. Tell Father the same.” A sharp stab to my chest had me realizing that the parents of my youth were just a mirage.



Mother spun around and marched away, leaving me with the oaf of a man that was digging his fingers into my biceps.

“Move,” he ordered.

Instead of taking me back upstairs, he led me in the opposite direction. I nearly groaned as I spotted the door. I hadn't been that far from it the entire time. He pushed it open, and the sunlight spilled in, temporarily blinding me. I shielded my eyes as Oaf ushered me up a set of outdoor steps mounted into a dirt hillside and hidden behind a brick wall covered with vines—Mother's cherished flowers were never to be touched when Donovan and I were little. The cells were literally underground.

I struggled to adjust to the daylight as we climbed the last stair. I peered around, realizing we were behind my parents' home. They had been running an illegal operation under our noses all these years.

A large white van was parked in front of us. Oaf opened the back and promptly lifted and shoved me inside. I stumbled, breaking my fall with another girl sitting on a bench. I glanced across from me, noticing the others on the opposite side.

Sweat beaded down my spine as I sat in the only spot available. The doors slammed shut, then the engine started. We all stared at each other, and I wondered if they understood what was about to happen. In order to calm my fears, I allowed my imagination to wander to Zayne. If he were still here, he would be hijacking the van and killing the motherfuckers that were driving while I peeked through the back window, ensuring it was safe to help the girls escape. The thought made me smile. I bet he'd been amazing in action.

*Had been.* I rubbed my chest where my heart hurled itself against my ribs. Fear, adrenaline, and shock fueled my

palpitations as I thought about how my life had turned out. How had all this happened? One minute I was with the man I loved. The next, I was riding in a hot-as-fuck vehicle to God only knew where.

I leaned against the van's wall and held my tears back. Crying wouldn't help me now.



IT WAS dark when we arrived at our destination. As soon as the doors opened, cool air rushed in, and I sucked in a big breath. We were ordered to exit, then guards escorted everyone to a large building that would have covered several city blocks.

More armed huge men were at the entrance, all with guns trained on us—too many to ever be able to escape from. We walked past them and into a foyer with white tile floors. It almost reminded me of some of the auditoriums I'd danced in when I was younger.

The men led us down a long hall to wooden double doors. The ones in the front pushed them open and the ones behind us forced us into a large conference room. At least twenty women milled around in workstations outfitted with chairs and mirrors, talking in hushed tones.

“Ladies, you'll shower, then receive a haircut along with manicures and pedicures. You will be clothed and fed, then at ten this evening, each of you will be presented for the auction. The women you see before you are armed, so if any of you consider escaping, think again. Two men will be stationed right outside. Don't get any big ideas, or you'll be sorry.” With that, a broad-shouldered man who seemed to be in charge of

this group of jailers stepped forward. He spun on the heel of his black boot and marched across the room and out the door.

One of the girls standing nearby grabbed my hand. “Why? What is happening?”

My heart dropped to my toes as I looked at her. She wasn’t as worn and dirty as the others, and I wondered if she hadn’t been in the cells as long. Some of the girls in the van I hadn’t recognized, so I suspected there were more places Mother and Father had them held as prisoners. “Hon, we’re being prepared to be sold to wealthy men as sex slaves. Let’s just hope we don’t end up with monsters.”

“No touching!” One of the women hurried over to us and slapped our hands as if we were two misbehaving toddlers.

She nudged the barrel of her gun in my back, and I lifted my arms, palms out. “No more touching. I didn’t know.”

I glanced at the girl beside me, who was shaking so hard that I worried she would crumple to the red-carpeted floor.

One of the women stood in front of us while another handed each person a little white pill, then a cup of water. Too many guns were trained on me to be a smart ass, so I took the medication, praying it would numb me enough to get through the rest of the night.

For the next several hours, I floated on a cloud with a stupid smile plastered on my face. Compliant wasn’t even the right word for it. Giddy to do what I was told was more like it. Everywhere I turned, I saw Zayne standing near me, smiling, his green eyes filled with love and adoration. Whatever these bitches gave me, I liked it. I never wanted Zayne to leave me again.

Once I was groomed to their specifications, they slipped a white, gauzy dress over my head. I glanced in the mirror, wondering if Zayne would like the see-through material. A whimper escaped me as grief clung to the corner of my heart through my drug-induced haze.

“It’s time,” a harsh-looking woman with blonde hair said, grabbing my arm.

My pulse jackhammered against my neck as we were led out of the room. Following the others, I softly hummed as we entered an auditorium through a side door. A soft glow of lights lit up a small area on the stage in front, spotlighting a round platform. At least thirty men wearing expensive designer suits chatted among themselves, drinks in hand. They started to take their seats, then an unseen announcer’s voice came through the speakers.

“Our first young woman comes from the States.”

One of the ladies led one of our group to the podium, then helped her up. The lights brightened, and the girl shielded her eyes.

The announcer continued as the woman guided the girl when to turn around, making sure the lighting showcased her naked body beneath the sheer robe.

“Bidding for this beauty starts at two million dollars.”

I shook my head as the men took turns walking on stage and assessing her like she was a sports car instead of a human being.

A shudder unnerved me as I realized the effects of my happy pill were starting to wear off. I stared at the men, recognizing some of them as those that had paid Donovan in the past for the chance to rape and torture me. Then an audible

gasp escaped me when Ashkov circled the girl like a buzzard, ready to swoop in. I swayed, rocking on the high heels the women had provided.

Oh, God, he was here. Horror snaked through me, leaving me breathless as a future played out before me in my mind.

Ashkov lingered a little longer, studying her a bit more, but the other men returned to their seats.

A scream ripped from the girl's throat as a quick *pop pop* rang through the auditorium and Ashkov dropped to the floor.

Utter chaos broke out, and the armed females hurried everyone into the hallway, forcing us into a different room a few doors down.

“Get on your knees, hands on your head!” The woman in charge ordered while the others began tying everyone's wrists.

Whispers and fear filled the space as we all speculated what had happened.

“Quiet!” She barked, her fingers tightening on her gun.

One of the other ladies knelt, secured my wrists behind my back with zip ties, then slipped a bag over my head. I sucked in the air as anxiety and claustrophobia stabbed me in the chest. Sudden panic sent a sharp pain through my temples, making me wince. I inhaled slowly, proving to myself that I was able to breathe through the material covering my face, and closed my eyes to try to piece together what had just happened. The events had unraveled so fast I hadn't had time to process the details well.

Everyone fell silent, and I tugged on my restraints, but they held fast. I tried to calm my racing pulse. What had happened to Ashkov? Heart attack? Was he dead? What was that muffled sound I'd heard? Ashkov had a ton of enemies,

and if one of them killed the motherfucker, they were my new hero.

I shivered beneath the thin dress, and tears welled in my eyes while I once again wished that my Zayne was still here.

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**Earlier That Day ~ Pierce**

“**W**e’re in,” I said, staring at my wife and Vaughn in my kitchen. “Brian just told me they have an undercover FBI guy in place, Eddie Farley, and he verified that Giselle is being held at her parents’ house.” I shoved my fingers through my dark hair, ready to kill every motherfucker connected to this evil. “She’s in a cage. Apparently, there’s an auction later tonight, so some of the girls will be moved to another location. This isn’t the first time Farley has been there, so he was able to provide the address. That’s where we’re headed, but we have to beat the FBI. Thirty piece-of-shit men will also be there, so the FBI will have plenty of people to keep themselves busy.”

I paced the room and gritted my teeth. Memories of finding Zayne bleeding on the floor of Donovan’s home blasted through me. “The FBI has no idea we’re going in, that after Donovan shot Zayne, shit got intense. With that said, we must move in and stay calm and focused. I know we’re all shaken up over Zayne, but we have to do this for him.”

“Hell, I’m ready to end those fucks.” Vaughn gripped the edge of the black granite counter and bowed his head.

“When we reach where the girls will be auctioned, we’ll take out a few of the guards, then hide the bodies.” Tension slithered down my spine, but I was too wired to give a shit about my stress level.

Sutton sat at the kitchen table, staring intensely at her laptop and chewing on her pen cap. “I’m pulling up the architectural plan for the building now.”

Half-moon shadows rested beneath her beautiful blue eyes. We were all exhausted and running on fumes, but what had happened to Zayne motivated all of us. No one fucked with our family and lived to talk about it.

“Got it.” Sutton set her pen down.

Vaughn and I gathered around her chair to study the building.

I drummed my fingers against my thigh. “I’ll call in Jaxon, Greyson, and Tad. We’ll need the extra coverage.”

Vaughn folded his arms. “Claire will be with Gemma and Mackenzie tonight at our place. I would rather she not be alone in case ...” Vaughn glanced in my direction.

“We’re all coming home, man. We’re not dying at Donovan’s hand. No way is that fucker winning. You have my word.” I patted him on the back, and even though I had the same concerns, I refused to voice them.

“I’ll see if I can hack into the surveillance system. If so, I’ll be able to locate where the girls are being held.” Sutton’s fingers flew across the keys.

“Good.” I squeezed her shoulder. The idea of my pregnant wife going on a mission with us scared the fuck out of me, but we needed her. I stepped away and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, then left the kitchen with a heavy heart.



Over the next few hours, we laid out a plan and discussed what to do if shit went south. Tension was high, but our need for revenge overruled any nerves. We'd done this a million times. The only difference was that this time, it was personal.



SUTTON PARKED the van a few blocks away, remaining inside while the five of us snuck up to the building, armed and ready to attack. I wasn't sure if the security was ex-military or not, but I crept up and knocked them out with tranquilizer darts without issue. Sutton had spotted a ditch along the side of the structure when she first arrived, so we hauled the pieces of shit over and tossed them in the dirt. They would be out cold for hours.

Vaughn gripped his sniper rifle and crouched down, waiting for me to pop the lock on the back door. We were both dressed all in black with balaclavas pulled over our faces. It was hot as fuck, but I didn't give a shit, and by the look in his mismatched eyes, he didn't either. This was for Zayne and to save innocents.

The door opened slightly, and I peered in, but the hall was empty. Waving the men forward, I hung back to guard the entrance. I adjusted my comm, then listened to Sutton's instructions on where to go.

Jaxon signaled with two fingers that he'd heard Sutton and was moving into place. Greyson moved as Sutton gave each of them details on where to hide. Tad and Vaughn were next, then I went last, ensuring that no one else came through our entry point.

Since Sutton could see us through the cameras, there was no need to acknowledge her commands. The racing of my heart pumped adrenaline through my veins. Even with the seriousness of this operation, it felt damn good to be out in the field again instead of schmoozing clients and scanning spreadsheets.

Quietly, I snuck up the stairs and onto the auditorium balcony opposite of Vaughn. We had a clear view of the men chatting on the auditorium floor below us. My attention swept the room, spotting the round platform on the stage from which I assumed the young women would be viewed. I ground my molars together, settling into my position and aiming my sniper rifle toward the fuckers.

“Is everyone in place?” Sutton asked through our coms. “I don’t have cameras available for your hiding spots.”

The guys confirmed they were in place, and now it was just a waiting game. The announcer’s voice rang through the speakers, and I dialed in my scope. Although I knew Vaughn was across from me, I couldn’t see him. I knew my man was itching to take these fuckers out, but the fun wouldn’t even begin until afterward. If my hands weren’t holding my gun, I would have rubbed them together in nearly giddy anticipation at what we had planned.

The lights dimmed more, and a spotlight lit the platform. The first girl was escorted on stage, then her armed guard stepped away. Men circled the young woman one by one, checking her out as though she was a highly sought-after thoroughbred racehorse. My stomach churned, ready to heave up my lunch.

“Holy shit, that’s Ashkov Butrick. How did we get so fucking lucky?” I whispered.

“I’ve got a line on him,” Vaughn replied.

Even with a suppressor, the zing of Vaughn’s ammunition breaking the sound barrier was heard if you understood what you were listening for.

Ashkov dropped to the floor with a sweet little bullet to his forehead.

Screams filled the air as my men and I began to take out the motherfuckers left and right—except for two.

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**Giselle**

**M**y body trembled uncontrollably as screams reached my ears from the main auditorium. I had no idea what was happening, and my imagination ran a hundred miles an hour through multiple scenarios.

A loud thunk caught my attention, and I struggled against my restraints, but it was useless. My chest heaved as anxiety began to pull me under.

Muffled noises filled my ears, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Seconds later, my hands were cut free, and the bag was tugged off my head. I furiously blinked against the bright light in the room, trying to focus on the blurry figure before me.

“Sutton?”

“In the flesh. I’m guessing your legs are numb.” I fell backwards onto my ass and rubbed my limbs as pins and needles prickled them. The girls around me were also free, and it was then that I spotted an armed man dressed all in black at the door. I flinched slightly.

“He’s one of ours,” Sutton explained. “Let me help you to your feet. We have to leave.” She held her hands out, and I managed to stand on wobbly legs.

I watched as young faces turned to each other in terror. “How can I help?”

“Just reassure everyone that we’re friends. But we have to move *now*.”

I walked as quickly as my feet would allow and helped gather the other prisoners. “I know these people,” I murmured in as soothing of a voice as I could muster. “They’re here to get us the hell out of here.” I slipped my arm around two of them and nodded for the others to follow Sutton.

Sutton hurried out of the room, down the hall, and out of the building. Fragrant, delicious, untainted air greeted me as I stepped into the night. I urged the other girls forward, then exhaustion buckled my legs, and I plummeted to the ground. I couldn’t stand.

“Giselle!” Sutton crouched down next to me. “Can you get up?”

“I’m trying.” I struggled to get my feet under me, until finally, with Sutton’s support, I was back up. I mentally swore for needing a very pregnant woman’s assistance. This had to be hard on her.

“I’m going to help you to the van. It’s just up ahead.” Sutton slipped an arm around my waist while I used her for balance.

I glanced up and saw the girls climb into a dark-colored van. Hobbling as fast as I could, I was the last one in, needing the man in black to help me aboard before he closed the doors.

Suddenly, panic ripped through me, and I attentively sat onto the van’s bench. We weren’t out of danger yet, and even if Sutton had found us, Donovan would never stop searching for me.

The engine purred to life, and Sutton crawled from the front passenger seat to the back.

“Hi everyone.” She knelt on the carpeted floor. “My name is Sutton and I’m a friend of Giselle’s.” She reached over and squeezed my hand. “We’re taking you somewhere safe where you can have a shower, clean clothes, and food. After you get some sleep, I’ll talk to each of you to see if you want to return to your home, or if there’s a safer place I can offer you.”

“What if the bad people find us again?” A blonde with big brown eyes wiped her runny nose.

“I promise you they won’t. If you were safe with your family, then we’ll help you return. You won’t be in any more danger.”

I grimaced, wondering how Sutton could guarantee that, but then I remembered Ashkov dropping on the stage. Once I was alone with Sutton, I would ply her with a million questions before I broke down and sobbed. I would cry from relief that Sutton found us and misery because Zayne wasn’t with her. Somehow, I had almost convinced myself that he had lived, but if he had, he would have been with Sutton tonight, and I would be in his lap instead of the back of a van with nine other females.

“We have a long drive, but ...” Sutton leaned over to an ice chest I hadn’t spotted when I’d climbed in. “I have Gatorade, sandwiches, chips, and even some chocolate chip cookies.”

The small space filled with excited voices, and my heart squeezed with Sutton’s thoughtfulness.

Sutton remained on the floor next to me as we all ate silently. I wasn’t sure about the other girls, but I struggled to

understand everything in order.

I finally settled on one thread as the most important. “Do you know where my sister, Ashley, is?”

A pained expression twisted Sutton’s face. “I’m so sorry, but I don’t.”

My heart sank. Maybe she was still at my parents’ home, but that wasn’t any better of a fate. “I saw Ashkov on the stage.” I ensured my voice was low enough that the other girls couldn’t overhear our conversation.

Sutton nodded, nibbling at her cookie.

“What happened?” I took a drink of my orange Gatorade, grateful she had brought something to parch the desert in my throat.

Sutton popped a chip in her mouth and shook her head.

“You don’t know, or you’re not going to say?”

She placed a finger over her lips. “Leave it alone for now. I realize you have questions, but I can’t safely disclose any information here,” she whispered.

“Is he dead? Just give me that, please.” My voice sounded whiny even to my own ears, but I was desperate to learn if that fucker lived. If he did, I would be hiding for the rest of my life.

Sutton stared at her black boots, then looked up at me. “I’m not sure. I slipped through the back entrance to get to you and the others, but that’s all I have.” Her blue eyes filled with concern as she pressed her lips into a thin line.

“Is it lonely sometimes?” I asked. “Keeping secrets from everyone?”

“It was at first, but not anymore. I have my husband. We talk about everything. Him and Vaughn.” She winced as though a knife had just twisted in her gut.

I wanted to ask what she was thinking, but I knew she wouldn't answer. Maybe later, but not now.

“Try to get some sleep. It's a long drive.” Sutton stretched her legs in front of her and took my hand. “I'm glad we found you.”

“Me, too.” I attempted to find a comfortable position on the bench seats, then closed my eyes and dreamed of the man I'd loved and lost.



THE BUMPING of the van woke me from a restless sleep. I sat up, my body stiff from sitting for so long, but I would take the back of a moving van over an underground cell any day.

“We're almost there,” Sutton said from the passenger's seat in front.

I nodded and glanced around at the other girls. Most of them were leaning against each other, asleep. With a heavy heart, I stared out the window. I had no other choice than to fully absorb the fact that I'd lost Zayne. *Dead.*

The van slowed, then stopped. The guy in black hopped out, then the back doors flew open. It was still dark, and I guessed it was early morning. The man started to help us all out, and I was the last person to exit.

“Thank you,” I said. “For everything.”

“No problem, ma'am. If you belonged with Zayne, you're family.”



My eyes widened right before I burst into tears.

Sutton pulled me into a warm hug. “It’s okay, Lincoln. I’ll take it from here.” Sutton led all of us to the entrance of a large white farmhouse nestled in the woods. She unlocked the door, turned on the lights in the living room, then ushered us in. “There are three bathrooms and enough hot water for all of the showers to run at the same time. However, try to limit your turn to fifteen minutes. We have twelve people here. I have T-shirts, underwear, and gym shorts for everyone, as well as toothpaste, hairbrushes, and slip-on shoes. Hopefully we have your size, but sometimes it’s hard to guess.”

“Thank you,” one of the girls whispered.

“You’re welcome, hon. I’m just glad you’re safe.” Sutton reached over and squeezed my arm. “Would you help me?” She placed one hand on her baby bump.

“Of course. I need something to do.” I wiped the tears from my cheeks and sniffled, ready to focus on where I was needed. I could cry about Zayne later.

Once Sutton and I handed out clothes and toiletries and the showers began, I leaned against the living room wall and looked out the window into the darkness.

“What time is it?” I asked when Sutton joined me.

Sutton removed her phone from the back pocket of her jeans and stared at it. “A little after three in the morning.”

I rubbed my arms. A hot shower sounded heavenly. “When will you learn more? About Ashkov, I mean?”

“Soon. And I’ll let you know one way or the other, but I can’t give you a lot of details. I hope you understand.” Sutton flashed me an apologetic look.

“I just want to know if the son of a bitch is rotting in Hell as we speak.” A chill slithered down my spine as I recalled the night I was forced to spend with him.

“I can’t imagine how relieved you would feel.” Sutton glanced around as if she were anticipating something.

“What is it?” I knew better than to ask, but I hoped she would share with me anyway.

“I’m waiting for confirmation on more than just Ashkov.” She placed her hands on her hips, appearing nervous.

“I’m out of the shower,” a voice said.

I turned to see a brown-eyed girl with wet hair behind us. She shifted her weight from one foot to the next. “Um, I just wanted to say thank you for saving me—us.” She rushed toward us, threw her arms around Sutton’s waist, then embraced me.

Even through all of the pain and chaos, this moment made the darkness a little brighter.

“Why don’t you get cleaned up, Giselle?” Sutton patted me on the back, then busied herself showing the girls to the bedrooms.

Whatever was going on made Sutton uneasy, which did not soothe my tattered soul one bit.

**Giselle**

I dragged my weary bones to the now empty main-floor bathroom. I had never been so happy to see a shower and soap in my entire life.

I placed the toiletries from Sutton on the small, cream-colored counter next to what were obviously a fresh towel and new hairbrush, then wiped the steam from the mirror, only to immediately regret it. My hair was a mess, and dirt from the bag over my head had smeared across my face. Suddenly, the events of last week rushed through me, and I gripped the edge of the sink, fighting the tears again.

*How is Zayne gone?*

As the horrific memories bombarded me, I gasped, nearly losing my balance. I could understand why I felt like shit—stress and exhaustion to start with.

Carefully, I turned on the shower and waited for the water to grow hot. I would never be able to scrub my family's filth off me, no matter how much soap I used. Their actions had stained my soul with a mark from their abuse that would never disappear.

I stripped and stepped beneath the spray. Disbelief and confusion clouded my mind as I reached for the shampoo. How had my parents ended up being so evil? It was obvious there was something wrong with how their brains processed information, right? What if I was broken like they were?

Lathering my hair, I inhaled the lavender scent of the shampoo, allowing it to permeate my senses. If Zayne were here, I wondered what he would say about my family. A sharp pang of grief doubled me over, and I sank to my knees. I planted my palm on the shower wall, gasping as my cries escaped me and mixed with the sound of the water.

Finally having a moment to myself, I broke down again and sobbed. It had all been too much. I hadn't only lost Zayne, I'd lost my parents and Ashley. My heart folded in on itself, blocking out the world and protecting me from further pain.

After my tears had run out, I finally remembered that Sutton had asked us to limit the time we spent showering. I stood slowly, my equilibrium still a bit off-kilter. Hurrying, I finished cleaning up, then rinsed my face before I shut off the water. My thoughts returned to Sutton and why she was acting strange. She was clearly nervous, but I assumed it was because we were all on the run after her efforts to save the lives of ten humans.

I held onto the sliding glass door and lifted one leg, placing my damp foot on the fluffy black rug. Beads of water streamed down my body, and I grabbed the towel waiting for me on the counter. Minutes later, I was dried and dressed and feeling a little better. I ran the brush through my wet hair, not looking at myself in the mirror again. It was insane how rough I looked, but I shouldn't have expected any different after dancing with the devil in the pits of Hell.

I cleaned up my mess, then left, the steam billowing into the hallway. The living area tilted on its axis, and I struggled to remain standing.

“Sutton!”

The last thing I remember was the worry on my friend’s face as she ran toward me before my world turned black.



A SINGLE LAMP lit a room I didn’t recognize. The firm mattress creaked beneath me, and I jolted upright. *Am I still with my parents?* Cold, dark fear shot through me.

“Hey, hey there.” Sutton took my hand. “You’re safe, Giselle. Safe. All the girls are worried about you. You fainted in the hallway.”

I relaxed at her words and laid back on the pillows. “Was I out long?”

“No, but long enough for Lincoln to carry you into the bedroom. I’ve called the doctor we use in case of an emergency. She’ll be here in about ten minutes. With everything you’ve been through, I think it would be best to have a checkup. She has a lab in her van so she can run bloodwork, too. She’s a one-woman show and has stitched up many a bodyguard when we’ve had to use this house to lay low.”

“I think I’m just stressed and tired. I’ve lost so much.” I chewed on my lower lip, willing myself not to cry again.

“I know, and I never want to minimize your feelings, but it does get better. Loss is difficult to deal with, and only time helps.” Sutton’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Hopefully, we can

talk about things soon, but I don't want to stress you out right now. You've had enough to deal with."

"I just don't understand how I never saw that my parents could be so evil. My father and mother taught Donovan everything he knew, raised him to be a co-conspirator in their breeding and sex trafficking business." My stomach rolled, and I clamped my palm to my belly. "Shit."

Sutton jumped off the bed and grabbed the trashcan, shoving it under my face just in time for me to puke.

"Fuck." I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Hang on, hon." Sutton left the room, only to return with a cold, damp washcloth, as well as toothpaste and a toothbrush that she set on the nightstand. I burst into tears at the sight of the cloth, recalling how Zayne had gently cleaned me up after we made love.

"Lay back." Sutton washed my clammy forehead as moisture welled in her blue eyes. "I know it's hard, but you have me. I won't leave you, Giselle."

After she wiped my face and mouth, I rolled over on my side and curled up. The agony of losing Zayne was more than I could handle. I knew I would never be all right.

The doorbell rang, and I glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was almost eight in the morning. It had taken hours for everyone to get cleaned up and eat, but I suspected they were all too wound up to sleep.

A soft knock on the slightly ajar door pulled my attention away from my grief. A woman appearing to be in her early fifties with blonde hair to her shoulders smiled at me.

"Hi, Giselle. I'm Dr. Mankin. I'm a friend of Sutton's."

“Hi, thank you for coming.” I gave her a weak wave as my stomach considered rebelling again.

“I’ll leave you two alone. Call me if you need anything, Giselle.” Sutton squeezed my hand, then left me with the doctor.

“Sutton explained a bit of your situation. She said you collapsed on the way into the house, then fainted after your shower. I know hot water can drop your blood sugar sometimes. Most of the time it happens in a sauna or jacuzzi, but if your water was hot enough, it might have done the trick. What symptoms are you having?”

“I’m dizzy and weak, and I just vomited.” I nodded toward the trashcan. “Sorry. I know that’s gross.”

“I’ve seen a lot worse.” She offered me a genuine smile. “Can you sit up, hon? I want to take your blood pressure.”

I cautiously sat up, gripping the edge of the iron headboard. Once my feet were on the floor, the doctor slipped the cuff around my biceps.

“Your blood pressure is good. Are you okay if I do some lab work?”

I nodded. “How long have you known Sutton?”

“Since she married Pierce. I take care of those guys when they get busted up.” She chuckled. “I don’t think boys ever grow up. They’re always into something that leaves them banged up.”

I tried to smile, but I couldn’t. She pulled on a pair of white latex gloves and gathered a needle and three tubes.

“You look like you have good veins.” She placed the vials in a little rack, then grabbed a blue elastic band. “Let’s use the

nightstand to lay your arm on. The light is favorable from the lamp, too.”

I did as she asked, and a few minutes later, she was done. “I’m going to process these, so I’ll be back when I have some answers. Why don’t you rest? Whatever the reason for your dizziness, the stress you’ve endured has been extreme and that can affect every body differently.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” I reached for the toothbrush and toothpaste Sutton had left and stood. I really wanted to clear the yuck taste out of my mouth.

After I returned to the room, I laid back, stifling a yawn. A sudden, heavy exhaustion swept through me, and my eyes fluttered closed.

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**Giselle**

“**G**iselle?” A quiet voice broke through my dreamless sleep.

My eyes fluttered open and focused on the doctor standing at my bedside.

“I’m sorry to wake you. Hopefully you can rest again, but I can’t share your test results with anyone else due to doctor-patient confidentiality.”

I sat up, blinking the sleep from my vision. “Do you know what’s wrong with me?”

Kindness flickered through her dark gaze. “I do.”

I listened to the shocking words tumble from her lips. For some fucked-up reason, I thought the worst was over, but karma had just slapped me on the ass and walked away like the cackling bitch she was.

“I’m sorry, what?” A burst of energy had me jumping out of bed. “That can’t be right. I’m on the pill.”

“Women using that method of birth control find themselves pregnant all the time, Giselle. As you grow older, the hormone levels change and can throw your birth control

off. If you took antibiotics recently, that could also cause the pill to fail.”

I frowned so hard my head hurt. “Or someone tampered with it. The man I lived with for the last year managed and controlled all of my medications. If this is his baby, it would be another way to control me.” I sank to the edge of the bed, feeling the blood drain from my face. My hands trembled as my thoughts flitted around like Tinker Bell on speed. Was the child Donovan’s? Zayne’s? Ashkov’s?

Grabbing the trashcan, I hurled again, cursing my body for betraying me in the worst way. No way in hell could I bring a baby into this world that shared DNA with Donovan Lambert or Ashkov Butrick. I refused to raise another monster. *But if it were Zayne’s?* It would be a piece of him that I could hold onto forever.

“I should get a DNA test as soon as possible.”

“I think Sutton is your girl. Talk to her. In the meantime, you should start on a prenatal vitamin in case you decide to keep the baby.”

“How far along am I?”

“When was your last period?”

I wracked my brain for when I’d last had one before answering.

“My best guess at the moment, then, is that you’re at the very beginning stages of the pregnancy. It’s difficult to nail down how many days.”

My mind reeled as I stitched together the timeline. Was it possible that the baby was Zayne’s? I had been held at my parents for a week and a half. Zayne and I had made love for the first time only days before Donovan killed him. At the

same time, Donovan had discarded his condom while he raped me the last time.

I gulped, frantic. How would I raise a kid on my own?

“I’ll talk to Sutton. Thank you for your help. Am I healthy otherwise?”

“Yes. You shouldn’t have any problems with the pregnancy if you choose to go through with it. Have Sutton call me if you need anything else.”

“I will.” I stood, feeling a bit better after I had slept for a little while. “I’ll show you out.” I nearly barked out an obnoxious laugh—what a strange time for my manners to appear.

The aroma of sweet baked goods filled the air and invaded my senses as Dr. Mankin and I entered the living room.

“Something smells yummy,” the doctor said to Sutton, who hurried to join us from the kitchen.

“Nerves.” She laughed, then wiped her hands on the pink-and-white-checked apron she had tied around the top of her baby bump. “Cinnamon rolls.”

“Well, I’ll let you two eat. Call me if you need anything.” The doctor gave Sutton a quick hug, then squeezed my shoulder before she left.

I turned to Sutton. “I need a DNA test and some hair of Zayne’s,” I whispered. “I’m pregnant.”

Sutton’s blue eyes widened, then she caught herself. “I’m sorry. You probably haven’t figured out how to deal with your news. I can find what you need, though.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you like to help me in the kitchen? I need to get back in there before I burn them.”

The sound of car tires crunching gravel reached our ears. Sutton frowned and hurried to the window. She peeked through the crack in the curtains to ensure she remained hidden.

Without a word, she grinned, grabbed my wrist, and dragged me outside. A black Mercedes rolled to a stop, then a tall, broad-shouldered man with blonde hair climbed out of the driver’s seat. He nodded at Sutton as he walked around to the back passenger door and opened it.

Sutton gripped my hand so hard, I had to pry her fingers loose.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “That’s Jaxon. He’s one of our guys.”

Utterly clueless about why I cared about someone I’d never seen before, I waited with Sutton. She obviously needed my support, and I wanted to try to be there for her after she’d rescued me.

Jaxon stepped to the side, and I stood rooted in place as my little sister bolted to me.

“Giselle!”

I ran toward her and wrapped her in my arms. “Are you okay?” I smoothed her dirty hair, with one hand.

“I am now. I thought you were dead. Mother and Father said you were.” She sobbed into my shirt.

I kissed the top of her head, tears blurring my vision as I held onto her.

A black boot stepped into my line of sight, and I realized I needed to thank Jaxon. Lifting my head slightly, my gaze traveled up dark denim jeans hugging long, muscular legs and a burgundy Westbrook Security polo shirt tight against a flat stomach, only to land on a face I never thought I would ever see again. I blinked rapidly, attempting to clear my vision.

“Zayne?”

“Hi, babe.”

Releasing Ashley, I flew the last few feet to him and threw myself into his arms as his gorgeous smile breathed new life into me. “You’re alive.” My body trembled against his as he pulled me in tighter and clung to me.

“I’ve missed you so fucking bad.” He cupped the back of my neck, and I realized that he was shaking slightly. My man of steel had been wrecked in the process of whatever he’d gone through.

“I don’t go down that easy.” He rubbed my back as he spoke into my hair. “God, I’ve missed you. I’m so sorry you thought I was gone. I can explain everything.”

His husky voice warmed me in all the right places. I looked up at him and his mouth covered mine. He kissed me as though I was the oxygen he needed to survive. The world disappeared around us as I lost myself in him.

A giggle reached my ears, and I realized that Ashley was watching. I placed my palm against Zayne’s chest and arched a brow at him. “I love you, bodyguard, but you have a hell of a lot of explaining to do.”

He pressed his lips to the tip of my nose. “I know, and I will. Let’s get you inside. I can smell Sutton’s cinnamon rolls from here, and I’m fucking starved.”

From the longing in Zayne's green eyes, I wasn't sure he only wanted cinnamon rolls, but I was okay with that.

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**Zayne**

**T**he ride to the safehouse had been agonizing. I wasn't sure how Giselle would react when she saw me. I hoped she could forgive me, but after all, we had let her believe I was dead. Even worse, we let her believe I was dead even after we got her out. But after Dono—that fucking bastard shot me, the plan flipped on its head.

I slipped my arm around Giselle's waist as we all walked into the house.

As we entered the living room, I saw surprise flicker across Ashley's face. "What are all of these girls doing here?" She gestured to everyone sprawled out asleep on the couch and recliners.

"I'll explain everything in a bit," Giselle said. "First, why don't I find you some fresh clothes and let you clean up?"

Ashley nodded enthusiastically. "Something smells so good."

Sutton returned to the kitchen, and we followed her. "That would be my grandmother's cinnamon rolls. She handed down the recipe to me when I married Pierce." She opened the oven

door and pulled out a cookie sheet lined with piping hot baked goodness.

“Ashley, why don’t you shower? Then when you’re done, you can help me frost them. They should be cool by then,” Sutton said.

*What the hell is happening?* I hadn’t ever witnessed Sutton being so motherly, but the circumstances were pretty fucked up.

“Zayne, why don’t you and Giselle use the master bedroom upstairs to get caught up?”

“Thanks. I’m sure she has plenty of questions.” I glanced at Giselle, and she gave me a slight nod of agreement.

After helping Ashley with clothes and toiletries, Giselle led her to the main-level bathroom while I waited in the kitchen.

“What does she know?” I asked Sutton, rubbing my aching neck.

“Nothing. Pierce said it would compromise the mission if I told her anything.” She leaned her hip against the counter and folded her hands over her chest. “I couldn’t tell her you were alive, either. I mean I could have, but if you didn’t make it out this time, she would have lost you twice, and I wasn’t going to do that to her.”

“Have you talked to Pierce yet?” I resisted grabbing a hot cinnamon roll and devouring it without frosting. Sutton’s rolls were melt-in-your-mouth, tender perfection.

“Yeah, I spoke with him a while ago, but I don’t know how everything went.” She pursed her lips.



“Me either, but we’ll find out soon enough.” I walked over and gave her a big hug. “Thank you for taking care of Giselle. You have no idea how much it means to me.”

“I do, actually. All those years you took care of Pierce for me ... it’s what family does for each other.”

I released her, ruffling her hair, and laughed when she swatted my hand away.

“Go spend some time with your girlfriend.” She grinned, shaking her head as she shooed me out of the kitchen.

I rounded the corner to the hall, searching for the love of my life. It had been a while since I’d been here, but I still remembered the layout perfectly. Once Ashley was settled, Giselle closed the bathroom door, then turned to me.

Closing the gap, I backed her against the wall, pressing my body against hers. My cock thickened, and I couldn’t wait to be inside her. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to see your beautiful face.” I nipped at her lower lip and giggles filled the hall.

Giselle and I glanced toward the laughter, realizing we were giving the rescued girls a show. I chuckled, took her hand in mine, and led her up the stairs. After we were in the bedroom, I locked the door behind us.

I gripped her waist and pressed her against the wall.

A flicker of fear danced in her golden eyes, and I hesitated. “Am I scaring you?”

“No. I know you’ll never hurt me,” she whispered. “I just can’t believe you’re here.”

One of my hands skimmed down her side. “I’m home, baby. Right now, I need to feel every inch of you, taste and

devour you. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” she replied breathlessly.

“Good,” I growled playfully before I sucked on her bottom lip. Cupping her breast, I traced the nipple that poked through her T-shirt. I bent my legs enough to capture the taut bud in my teeth, giving it a gentle tug.

A whimper escaped from her as she arched her back. I lifted the hem of her shirt and revealed her perky breasts. *Jesus, she takes my breath away.* I began to tease her, kissing my way down the center of her body until I reached the waistband of her shorts. She grabbed my hair, pulling on it as I continued. I tugged them down and her intoxicating scent filled my nose.

The sight of her slightly parted lips and heaving chest when I glanced up was enough to make me almost lose it. My dick begged to be free, so I flipped open the button on my jeans, unzipping them to allow myself some room. Carefully, I wrapped one hand around her waist and lifted her leg over my shoulder. Licking her outer lips, I brought her other leg over my opposite shoulder, then slowly stood. She gasped as she peeked down at me, and I planted my palms against the wall. Her fingers threaded through my hair as I licked her sweet flesh, tasting her, sating my hunger.

My tongue fucked Giselle faster as I tried to possess every part of her. She was mine, and never again would another man touch her and live to talk about it.

“Zayne,” she whisper-yelled. “Oh, God. Oh. Dear. God.”

Her orgasm exploded on my mouth, and I lapped at her juices as they trickled down my chin.

She squirmed against me, and I knelt to the floor before gently lifting her off my shoulders.

A sassy smile eased across her face. “On the bed,” she ordered, then removed her top.

I shucked my clothes as she climbed onto the mattress, her sweet little ass sticking up in the air. She rolled over and licked her lips, her gaze fixated on my hard dick.

I didn’t waste any time as I crawled on top of her. Our gazes locked, and I pushed inside her slick walls.

“I love you, Giselle.”

She lifted her hips as I slowly pulled out and slid back in.

Tears gathered in her eyes. “I love you, too.” She hiccupped, then tugged my head down for a kiss. “I can’t lose you again. I can’t.”

I stopped moving. Holding her was more important than getting off.

“You won’t have to.” I smoothed her hair. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so damn sorry.” I blinked, clearing the moisture from my cheeks. What I’d had to do to protect her had absolutely wrecked me. She’d been through hell and back, and I wanted to ignore orders and rush to her, but I would have put her life at risk again.

I rolled over onto my back and brought her with me. She settled on top of me and placed her head on my chest.

My dick softened, but the moment her walls clenched around me, I was fully hard again.

She sat up and wiped her tears away. Placing her palms on my pecs, she let her fingers play with my light brown hair. She

rocked against me, and we froze before a melodic giggle escaped her.

“Zayne, the bed is too squeaky. We will advertise to everyone in this house what we’re doing.”

Giselle crawled off me.

I stood, then picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I eased inside her.

“Looks like the wall is the best place after all.” She giggled once again as I backed her up, then grabbed her butt cheeks. I lifted her slightly and her pussy glided up and down my cock. I sucked in a breath, willing myself not to come yet. She felt so goddamn good. I wasn’t sure how long I could hold out, though. I held her with one hand and slid the other over her ass crack and down. Her desire coated my fingers as I gently pushed against her tight, puckered hole.

She gasped, and I stopped and held her gaze. “If I ever do anything that’s off-limits, please tell me.”

“I’m good,” she replied breathlessly.

I eased a finger into her ass while she moved up and down my cock. Her tits pressed against my chest as she moaned in my ear. Her pussy clenched around my shaft, and I realized she was about to climax again.

“Come for me, baby.” I covered her mouth with mine, muffling her shout of my name as she released.

Her fingers skimmed over my shoulders, and heat pulsed through me, my balls tightening. With a few more thrusts, I tensed, pouring myself into her while I placed my lips against hers.

She sighed against my mouth and pressed her forehead against mine. “Is it crazy that you stole my heart the first second I saw you? From the very beginning, I knew you would come back for me.” Giselle ran her thumb across my lower lip. “Once I woke up at the hospital, I talked myself out of it. I told myself it was all a silly fantasy of being rescued by a prince with green eyes.”

I walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress, still holding her in my lap. “It’s not crazy.” I tucked a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. “I was so sure I needed to see you again that I checked into you. When I found out you were married, I tried damned hard to forget you, but I never could shake the beautiful girl with the golden eyes.” A smile eased across my face. “No wonder Sutton told us to come up here. I didn’t notice the attached bathroom when we first walked in.”

Giselle carefully lifted off me. “I’m a little messy, but I don’t mind.”

“I could use a shower.” I raised a brow at her and wiggled it slightly. “If you want to join me?”

She laughed at my silly flirting. “Definitely. I probably shouldn’t see Ashley while reeking of sex.” I was transfixed for a moment by a lingering look from her warm hazel eyes. I held my hand out to her, and we spent the next half hour soaping each other up and rinsing it all off.

**Zayne**

**A**fter we showered, Giselle wanted to find Ashley to ensure she was all right, so I took that time to call Pierce. Even though the conversation was short, he confirmed that our plans were still intact for the morning. I wasn't sure how Giselle would react when I told her I had to leave again, but this was my life, and I hoped like hell that she would be on board with the part of my job that had me disappearing and being secretive at times.

Maybe getting shot had something to do with it, but Pierce didn't rip me a new asshole over falling in love with Giselle like he had Vaughn with Claire. Even though I managed to walk away in one piece, I think Donovan pulling that trigger put some things into perspective for all of us.

What was done was done. I was in love with Giselle, and there was absolutely nothing Pierce could do about it. We were more than boss and employee, we were family, and apparently when he and Vaughn found me unconscious in a pool of blood, it scared the shit out of both of them. Once we'd cleared the air, I felt a lot better. I'd hated keeping Giselle a secret.

Giselle returned to the bedroom an hour later and sat down on the edge of the mattress.

“I have questions.” She turned to me and tucked one leg beneath her.

“I know.” I took a deep breath. “I’ll explain as much as I can. Pierce knows I have to talk to you about what happened. He wasn’t crazy about the idea of you knowing details that could send us to prison, but I wouldn’t take no for an answer. In order for you to make a decision about spending your life with me, I have to tell you everything.”

Giselle gulped, squared her shoulders, and met my gaze straight on. “I don’t spook easily. I’ve lived through a lot of shit. I’m sure I can handle whatever you throw at me.”

My pulse stuttered. I wouldn’t admit it, but I was scared shitless that she would leave when I told her who I was.

Her golden eyes narrowed. “What happened when Donovan shot you? I know he did, I saw you bleed.”

“He did, but I had on a bulletproof vest. I carry one in the trunk with my guns. Sutton’s stitched in fake blood for all of them, so I hit the packet hidden between my vest and shirt. When assholes see the blood, it gives us an advantage because they don’t expect us to get up. In this case, Pierce ordered me to stay down. I knew they were only a few minutes away, but I didn’t anticipate that I would hit my head on the marble floor when I flew backward. I gave myself a fucking concussion.” I glanced away, sheepish. “That piece of shit only nicked my shoulder. He’s a lousy shot.” I pulled my shirt up to show her the graze. “It’s healed enough that I don’t need a bandage over it.”

“Donovan thought he killed you, though.”

“Sutton’s a genius. She and a couple other brainiacs created a gum. All we have to do is chew it, and it slows our

hearts. Anyone without the right medical knowledge would think I was dead.”

She shook her head, her expression filled with awe. “Are you okay now?” She asked, tracing her fingertips around the minor wound.

“Good enough to pick you up.” I gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m so fucking sorry, Giselle. I was supposed to grab you and run, but Donovan had a gun trained on you, and I couldn’t take any chances. By the time I regained consciousness, Pierce and Vaughn were hovering over me, and I was still in your kitchen, but you weren’t. The guys searched the entire residence. Hell, Gretta and Marty weren’t even found. They probably ran scared.”

“So, you’ve been alive all the time I was trapped at my parents’ house?” Anger ignited her stare.

I was rooted in a haze of uncertainty about how to respond, but only the truth would work. “Yeah, but we were looking for you the entire time.”

“Why didn’t Sutton tell me?” Giselle hopped off the bed, her hands landing on her hips.

I blew out a sigh. “I wanted her to, but we were in the middle of a dangerous mission, and she was afraid that if I didn’t make it, if she told you that I was alive, she would then have to tell you I was dead again ... she couldn’t do that to you, and neither could I. If it helps any, I asked Brian, Pierce’s FBI connection, to get word to you through the FBI agent working undercover with your parents’ breeding scheme. But he said it was too risky, that it would look suspicious and ultimately put you in danger.”



Giselle's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, and her brows knitted together. "What? Who?"

"I obviously can't tell you who it is, but he had eyes on you several times. He worked with us and helped free you and the other girls." I placed my hands in my lap and leaned forward. "I wanted to go into your parents' house and get you immediately, but Pierce wouldn't let me. I was in the hospital for a few days, and he said he couldn't risk anything happening to me for real. I still was feeling the effects of the concussion then, too."

Giselle's shoulders slumped. "I wished I'd known that you were alive, Zayne. I was in agony when I thought I'd lost you. On top of that, my parents knew about Donovan all along. He runs the business with them."

I wanted to tell her he didn't anymore, but I couldn't say that until it was a fact.

"The undercover FBI agent also let us know where your sister was transported. With several other men, I went after her. One thing I can say is that while I was rescuing Ashley from the transport van to God knows where, the auction that you were at turned into a bloodbath. Pierce confirmed that Ashkov Butrick is dead."

Giselle's fingers flew over her mouth as she sank to her knees. "Are you sure?" Her hand trembled, and I pulled her off the floor and into my lap.

"Yeah. If I wasn't a hundred percent positive, I wouldn't have told you, babe. He's gone. He can't hurt anyone again."

I rubbed her back as she buried her face in my neck. "Is that what you do, Zayne? Rescue women, get shot, and make sure the monsters don't walk away scot-free?"

“Yeah. I do.”

She sat up and looked me in the eyes. “If I stay with you, I’ll be scared to pieces that you won’t come home.” Her chin trembled with the realization.

“It’s not an easy life to share. That’s why I’ve never settled down. But ... I’ve never *wanted* to until I found you. I know it’s a lot to think about, but if you’ll have me, I want you, Giselle. I love you so fucking much.”

She nodded and snuggled against me, and I held her until she fell asleep in my arms. I knew my life was a shit ton to handle, but it was who I was. It ran through my veins, and I wouldn’t be able to give myself to Giselle completely if I left the team.

Her soft snore reached my ears, and I carefully stood, then laid her on the bed and covered her up. My heart skipped a beat. How in the fuck would I be able to leave her if she wasn’t okay with my job?

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**Zayne**

I hadn't expected Giselle to sleep the rest of the day and through the night. After spending time with Ashley, Sutton, and Jaxon, I slipped in next to her and she barely moved.

Early the next morning, I quietly grabbed a pen and paper from the nightstand and left Giselle a note on my pillow, explaining that I would be back as soon as possible, and I loved her. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell her any more details, but I knew for a fact that I would return to her. I suspected Sutton would be good company for her since she was often left behind, too.

The house was quiet as I crept down the stairs, the only sound being Sutton's voice from the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee reached my nose, and I headed in that direction. She and Jaxon were quietly speaking when I entered.

"Hey." I gave them a little wave.

Jaxon raised his steaming cup to me. "Morning. Are you ready?"

I rifled through the cabinet, located a travel mug, and filled it with the rich, dark roast. "Hell, yeah. I was ready from the moment I met the fucker."

“Please be careful, you two.” Sutton took a sip, then set her drink down. “Bring me some good news so we can get everyone back to Spokane and help these young women return home or find new ones.”

I gave her a brotherly peck on the cheek. “You know, you weren’t supposed to know anything about this, but I’m glad Pierce decided to loop you in.”

“Me, too.” She hugged me and patted Jaxon on the shoulder.

I fastened the lid, followed Jaxon outside, and secured the door behind us.

“Let’s do this.” The gravel crunched beneath my black combat boots as we made our way to the company Mercedes. I was nearly giddy with excitement when I settled in, then Jaxon whipped the car around and headed to the main road.

“How are you doing with all of this, man?” Jaxon turned left off the bumpy dirt lane and onto the paved highway. The safe house where we were staying was hidden from most of civilization, but stores were only an hour away in case we needed anything.

“I’m a little fucked in the head. I should not be so excited about this.” I took a drink of my coffee and grinned.

“You were always a bit twisted, but it’s why I like you.” Jaxon ran his fingers through his blonde hair. He had been with Westbrook Security when Pierce’s dad still owned the company. Once it had transitioned to Pierce, Jaxon wanted to stay on. I was glad he did. He was a good guy.

I stretched my legs in front of me, then stared out the window as he drove the winding road.

“How’s Giselle?” Jaxon reached for his sunglasses as the first hints of pink streaked through the early morning sky.

“I would love to say that she’s okay, but that would be a lie. She has a lot to deal with.” My words were an understatement, and I knew having to make a decision about me just added to it all. I’d laid the cards out, and now it was her turn. All I could do was hope that what we had was strong enough to survive my way of life.

The next four hours passed slower than a snail’s pace, but Jaxon finally turned onto a dirt trail that was barely noticeable if you weren’t looking for it.

My pulse spiked. I was so looking forward to my day.

Once Jaxon parked in front of an old, beat-to-hell warehouse out in the fucking boonies, we climbed out of the car. I stretched my neck and popped my knuckles in preparation for the good times ahead.

“You know it’s wrong to look that happy, man.” Jaxon grinned and patted me on the back.

“Thanks for your help.” I tipped my chin before I walked away and left him near the vehicle.

The white peeling paint on the door reminded me of how weathered the structure was. An old padlock hung from the bent latch. I gave the lock a little jiggle, and it popped open. The door creaked loudly as I pushed through, and I searched around the musty space. My shoes smacked the dirty, stained concrete floor as I followed the path to the opposite side of the building, heart hammering against my ribs. Jaxon was right. It was wrong to be this excited, but I fucking was, and I planned to enjoy every single minute.

Opening another door, I rubbed my hands together, spotting my boys.

“Morning,” Pierce said, leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed in front of him. He wore an old pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. We sure as hell didn’t need to dress well for our workday. Not this time.

“Morning.” I walked over to him, then glanced in the cages in the corner.

“Pretty exciting shit, huh?” Vaughn rubbed his chin and chuckled from the other side of the space. He tugged on the hem of his faded navy shirt and tapped his booted toe against the floor.

“I’m so fucking ready.” I danced around, throwing a punch in the air.

“Let’s do it.” Pierce pushed off the wall, his dark gaze full of fury.

I waited as Vaughn and Pierce opened two cages and pulled out a couple of blindfolded men. Their hands were tied behind their backs, and their faces were caked with dried blood.

“Sitting or hanging?” Pierce asked.

I rubbed my chin, pretending I hadn’t imagined this a million times in the last few weeks. “Let’s get warmed up with sitting first.”

Vaughn’s mismatched eyes sparkled as he forced one of the guys to sit down.

He secured his hands as Pierce did the same to the other man. I grabbed a chair, the legs scraping the floor as I placed it in front of the two men. I flipped it around, then straddled the

seat. Vaughn removed their blindfolds before he and Pierce stepped to the side and folded their arms over their chests, waiting for my orders.

Donovan and Ander rapidly blinked as they tried to adjust to the dimly lit warehouse.

“Hello, Donovan.” A malicious grin eased across my face. “Ander? Nice to finally meet you. Well, you won’t think so by the time I’m finished with you.” I chuckled and cracked my knuckles. Ander was thinner than I’d expected, and his beady blue-grey eyes and mousy brown hair weren’t how I’d pictured him.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Donovan spat.

My brow quirked. “Well, you piece of shit, you fucking shot me for starters, but we both know what this is all about.” I slapped my hand on the back of the chair, making Ander jump. I could see who pulled the strings here—Donovan. Which meant I would deal with Ander first and make Donovan watch. The bastard would be squirming with fear when I was done.

“Where’s Giselle? I want her returned to me right now!” Fire burned in Donovan’s gaze.

“Dude, you’re clearly not understanding what is about to go down.” I spread my arms out as if I was about to present the greatest show in the world. And I was. I so fucking was.

I stood, strolled over to the men, and shoved my hands in my pockets, staring at them. “Let’s make something clear. Giselle is *mine*. No one—and I mean *no one*—fucking touches her ever again. You should be begging for your sorry ass life, not making demands. Not that begging will help you any, but it would be a hell of a lot of fun hearing you.”

Ander nodded, and a little whine escaped him. Disgust percolated in my gut. Apparently, he could hurt others but was a real pussy when it involved himself in pain.

“She’ll never belong to you. You’re a stupid bodyguard that can’t offer her anything,” Donovan seethed.

I wagged my finger at him. “That’s where you’re wrong. My financial advisor just gave me an update on how my millions of dollars have been working for me.” I gave a nonchalant shrug. “Money isn’t a problem. What I do worry about, though,” I shook my head, “is what Giselle thought of me when I told her I killed pathetic pieces of shit like you for a fucking hobby.” I placed my foot on the edge of Donovan’s chair and kicked him backward.

He howled as he hit the floor, banging the side of his skull. I glanced at Pierce, who was calm and collected as if we did this every day. We didn’t, but on occasion, we had to.

I paced in front of Ander with my hands behind my back. “So, Ander, Giselle informed me that you raped her repeatedly, and sold her to some sick fucks that destroyed her knee, which ended her career. What kind of husband treats their wife like that?”

“I’m sorry, man. I just did what Donovan told me to,” he stuttered.

Vaughn snickered from behind me. “Are we sure this prick hasn’t lost his balls somewhere?”

“Hm, no. We should probably check,” I said.

Ander’s eyes widened as much as weasel eyes could when Pierce and Vaughn picked him up from the chair and suspended him from a meat hook hanging from the ceiling.



I bent down and moved Donovan so he had a good view of the show. Walking over to a shelf behind Ander, I grabbed the stun gun. Without a word, I walked over to the bastard, undid his pants, and pulled them down along with his boxers. I fired up the taser and touched his nuts. He jerked, then screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Make sure he doesn’t piss all over you, man,” Pierce said, chuckling.

I moved out of the way, then tased him again. “That’s for Giselle, you little fuck.”

Over the next hour, we all took turns torturing Ander until he was barely conscious.

When I returned to Donovan, his nose and eyes were red from bawling like a baby. He had no idea what he was in for, though, since I’d saved the best for last.

The guys strung Donovan up on another meat hook, and I approached him. “Everything happening to you is because you’re a sick fuck who sells people for sex. I just want you to understand what landed you here with us.”

“You’re no better than we are. You’re torturing us!” He reared his head back, then spit on me.

I hesitated, then wiped my cheek. “I am better than you are. I’m taking out the fucking trash so you can’t hurt any more innocents. And I promise you this, I will be the last face you see as you take your last breath. If you think you and the other asshole are walking out of here alive, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Murderer!” he screamed between his tears.

I smirked at him. He wasn’t such a badass now that he was on the other end of the stick. “Call it what you will. I’ll see

you in hell, motherfucker.”

I took a deep breath, then released all the rage I’d held onto for years as I unleashed the beast on Donovan. For Giselle. For Ashley. For all the lives that had been taken and sold.

I glanced at my bloody and bruised knuckles, then Donovan’s fucked-up face and body. He was barely hanging on, but I wanted to ensure he was conscious.

Pierce, Vaughn, and I slipped on the noise-canceling headphones that Pierce had brought.

I approached Ander, grabbed my handgun from my leg holster, and raised it for him to see. A tortured scream escaped his mouth, and then, with a quick *pop pop*, the son of a bitch went limp, still hanging from the meat hook.

I returned to Donovan. “It was nice to meet you, Donovan.” Sarcasm dripped from my words. “And you’re mistaken. Giselle *is* mine.”

*Pop. Pop.* Donovan’s head jerked back as I blasted two holes into his goddamn forehead.

I took a step back and removed my headphones. Giselle was finally free.

Pierce’s phone chirped, and he pulled it out of his pocket. We fell silent as Pierce answered.

“Hey, Brian.” Pierce’s brow rose as his attention bounced between Vaughn and me. Then a huge smile eased across my friend’s face.

“That’s fantastic news. I’ll give everybody an update. Later.” Pierce disconnected the call. “The FBI raided Giselle’s parents’ home. They arrested everyone there, including

Giselle's parents. The girls that were held there are in protective custody."

"Dammit. I was so looking forward to dealing with Giselle's father." Vaughn smirked.

Even though Giselle's mother was involved, we never hurt women. They were off-limits, so the FBI could deal with her.

"Let's clean up and get the fuck out of here. I want to see my girl." I wondered if Giselle'd had time to think about our conversation and if I even had a girl to go see. At least she wouldn't have to look over her shoulder again. It was the greatest gift I could give her.

Freedom.

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**Giselle**

“**M**orning, Ashley.” I walked over to the sofa where she and the other girls were watching television. “I’m going to grab some coffee, then we can spend some time together, okay?”

“Sounds good. Sutton already fed everyone eggs and pancakes.” She stifled a yawn.

“That sounds tasty. I’ll be back in a bit.” I leaned down and kissed the top of her head. Ruffling her dark hair, I smiled at her. I was elated that she was safe with me.

I strolled into the kitchen to find Sutton sitting at the table with her laptop.

“Hey.” She closed the lid, then rose from the chair. “How did you sleep?”

“Good. Probably one of the best rests I’ve had in a long time.” I pursed my lips. “Zayne left me a note that he had to leave.”

Sutton placed a hand on top of her belly. “Yeah. It happens sometimes.”

“How far along are you?” I opened the white cabinet and gathered a bright blue mug.

“Seven months. Claire is a few weeks behind me.”

“I bet everyone is excited.” I grabbed the coffee pot and filled my cup before I sat down at the table.

Sutton opened the oven door and removed a plate of eggs and pancakes. “Your breakfast is still warm.” She set the food in front of me. “Try to eat.” After she gathered clean silverware, she joined me. “I wanted to talk to you about a few things while Ashley is with the other girls.”

“Okay.” Stabbing my scrambled eggs, I popped a big bite into my mouth. “Wow, these are really good. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

Sutton leaned back in her chair. “My grandma and my best friend, Vaughn.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you and Vaughn were that close.” I cut a small piece of my pancake and nibbled on it, then collected the syrup from the center of the worn, dark wood table.

“I’m close with Zayne, too. Vaughn and I just hit it off when we were in high school, and even the years they were in the military and I wasn’t around, Vaughn either called or wrote me a short letter every week. He updated me on how he was doing and listened when I cried on his shoulder about my life.” Sutton tucked her long, blonde hair behind an ear.

“I’m not sure what you’re planning for Ashley, but if you’re okay with me weighing in, I would like to.” She drummed her fingers against her small round belly.

“Of course. I trust you.” I continued to eat, chewing slowly in hopes that I would keep my food down.

“There are families that we can place Ashley with that are in the Witness Protection Program.”

My hand froze mid-air, trembling. “I won’t be able to see her.” I set my silverware on the side of my plate. I’d just lost my appetite.

“I realize it would be super hard, but until we are certain that you’re safe, keeping Ashley with you puts her in danger, too. I suspect you would feel like shit if someone took or hurt her while she was living with you.”

I shook my head. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it. In my mind, she would always live with me.” I bit my lip as my heart and head wrestled. “Will I be able to have any communication with her at all?” Tears welled up in my eyes, and I turned away.

Sutton placed her hand over mine and squeezed it. “No. We’re hoping it will only be for a year. I have a family that I think will be a great fit, but you’ll have to agree since she’s a minor. In extreme circumstances like these, the FBI and WITSEC can grant you temporary custody to help protect her.”

I sucked in a breath as my heart lodged itself in my throat. “I hate this. For some stupid reason, I thought we would be okay once we left. But you’re right. Donovan and my parents will never stop looking for me. I know too many of the men they work with.”

“I wish I could say you aren’t in danger anymore, but that’s not the case. It will be difficult but try to hold on a little longer. I can’t imagine how awful this is for you and Ashley, but unfortunately, I’ll need an answer today.”

“Today?” I croaked, unwilling to let Ashley go so soon.

“We have to move everyone out tonight. We never stay in one place too long. You and Ashley will, of course, come with us, but if you agree, we would meet with a marshal on the way to the next safehouse. As soon as a few more things are taken care of, then the girls will go home or be placed with good foster families.”

I wiped the tears from my cheeks. “I know it’s the right thing to do, I just ...” I stared at the half-eaten food on my plate. “I just can’t stand to say goodbye again.” My shoulders shook with my sobs as Sutton pulled me in for a hug.

“I’m so sorry, hon. Maybe if you plan for her coming home, it will help. Figure out where you want to live, someplace in a nice neighborhood, with an excellent school district and friends nearby. It might give you something to look forward to.”

I sniffled. “It’s a good idea.”

“Also, we haven’t had much time to talk, but you have a nice sum of money in an offshore account.” Sutton grinned, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “You’re set for life.”

“Won’t Donovan miss it?”

“Oh, I’m banking on it.” Sutton’s giggle filled the area.

I laughed. “You’re punny.” I blew out a sigh, then took another bite of my eggs.

“One more thing.”

I stopped chewing my food. “Do I want to know?”

“Yup.” Sutton rose, then walked to a drawer and opened it, removing a little brown bag. “I had Jaxon go into town and pick up an at-home paternity test. Once Zayne had spent the night, I figured you could look for a few strands of his hair.”

My brows briefly knitted together. “That’s why you gave us the master bedroom?”

“Well, and it’s hard to have much fun on a twin bed. The rest of the rooms have two singles.” Sutton opened the bag and removed a box. “Gather what you need, then I’ll have one of the guys drop it off at a FedEx. You should have results in twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“If it’s Donovan’s, I’m terminating the pregnancy immediately. I can’t handle having a part of him with me for the rest of my life. I’ll already have the scars from his physical and emotional abuse. I can’t force myself to carry to term for adoption, either. What if the baby turned out just like Donovan, and I was the person that released another monster into the world?”

“Giselle, you don’t owe me any explanation at all. It’s your body and your decision. Don’t let anyone pressure you into making a choice that isn’t right for you.” Sutton slipped the box into the bag again, then tilted her head. “I should tell Zayne what’s going on, but it’s not my place. So take this and go collect his hair.”

“I promise, as soon as the results are in, I’ll tell Zayne either way. He needs to know, but I want more information first.” I stood, then gave Sutton a brief hug. “Thank you for everything.”

“If I were in your shoes, you would do the same for me.”

“I’ll be back. I should get it done before he returns. Whenever that’s...” I hesitated, focusing on Sutton.

“This life is hard, Giselle. The men leaving, working, coming home you’re not sure when ... but if you love Zayne



and want to be with him, he'll do his best to share what he can.”

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. “It is worth it?”

“I love Pierce with all my heart, and it would be harder to not have him in my life at all. And my circumstances are different than yours will be because I work with the guys. Normally, I'm behind the scenes, but I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“I have a lot to think about.” I nibbled on my lower lip. “One thing at a time, though.”

“Exactly.”

I left the kitchen, then headed upstairs. Hopefully, it would only take a few minutes to find what I needed. Afterward, I would dive into one of the hardest conversations I'd had in my life. My throat tightened, and I paused as I reached the door to the bedroom where Zayne and I had spent the night together.

I ran my fingertips over the iron footboard of the bed, staring at the pillow Zayne had used. The bright sunlight spilled through the window, and I resisted the urge to crawl onto the mattress and inhale his woody scent that lingered, but instead I sat on the edge of the bed and smiled as it creaked. Our evening together had been magical, but he'd also admitted that part of his job was taking out the monsters in life. He would be in danger anytime he was gone, and I wasn't sure if I could handle any more heartache. I'd had enough for ten lifetimes.

Reminding myself of why I was in the room, I started to search for strands of Zayne's hair.

**Zayne**

**I**t had been three long-ass days away from Giselle, and I was ready to kidnap her and run. After we cleaned up all of the evidence, Pierce and Vaughn took a long way back to Spokane while Jaxon and I began the two-day drive to the new safehouse where Sutton had moved the girls. Even though she had kept us all up to date when transporting everyone to the home in Montana, it was still hard not talking to Giselle myself, especially when she had to say goodbye to Ashley again.

“We’re almost there,” Jaxson said, fiddling with the stereo, hoping to find better music than country. “I gotta ask the boss to subscribe to Sirius XM. This shit is killing me.”

I chuckled. “You don’t need satellite radio when you have Spotify.” I grabbed my phone from the leather dashboard and pulled up the app, paired it with the car’s Bluetooth, and selected the playlist Giselle and I had listened to when Donovan had bugged my car. At least that wouldn’t ever happen again.

The fucker was dead, and I didn’t feel guilt over what I’d done. Not even an ounce.

“Breathe In Bleed Out” by Jared Lee thumped through the speakers.

Jaxon scrunched up his face like he was in pain. “Are you fucking with me?” he asked, peering over his sunglasses in my direction.

“Lay off, man. It’s on the playlist I put together for Giselle. She likes this song.”

Jaxon shook his head. “Whipped. P-U-S-S-Y whipped.”

I chuckled. “I’m not too much of a man to admit that you’re right. I would do anything for her.”

“Yeah, you proved it back at the warehouse. I wish I could have gotten in on the action, but I understood it was personal. I just fucking hate sick fucks that hurt kids and women. Makes me want to hurl.”

I rubbed my palm along my jeaned thigh. “I won’t lie, it felt damn good to see the terror in their expressions.”

“I’m glad she’s free of him once and for all.” Jaxon gripped the steering wheel tighter than normal, and I wondered what was playing through his mind.

“You and me both. I’ll tell her when I see her ... *if* I see her again.” I smacked the dashboard. “Jax, you drive like an old lady, fucking hurry up. I’m ready to see Giselle.”

Jaxon chuckled, then sped up by a whole five miles an hour. I rolled my eyes, then leaned back in my seat as I realized it would be a long ride.



LATE THAT EVENING, Jaxon pulled up to the split-level red brick home in Montana. I'd talked him into stopping at a store where I picked up a temporary phone for Giselle until we could get her a new one.

Besides having to take a wicked piss, I was ready to throw Giselle over my shoulder and carry her to a bedroom. Hell, we didn't even need a bed. We hadn't used one a few days ago, and it worked perfectly.

I'd texted Sutton fifteen minutes before we arrived so she wouldn't shoot us on sight.

Locating the key hidden in the dirt of a potted plant, I unlocked the door. Turning the handle, I entered, then Jaxon followed me into the house.

Sutton and Giselle's voices spilled from the kitchen and into the living room, where several girls were laughing at the television. They all stopped as Jaxon and I entered.

"Hey," Jaxon waved. "We're here for Sutton."

One of the girls arched a dark brow. "You might be, but that one is here for Giselle."

I smoothed my beige Westbrook Security polo shirt and grinned. "Yes, I am."

"Zayne?" Giselle cautiously walked toward me and gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek.

*Fuck.* Not only was that not the welcome I'd hoped for, but she'd had a few days to think about the next phase of her life ... with or without me.

Her beautiful eyes were red, and so was her nose. She'd been crying. Shit. "How are you?"

“Let’s go talk, and you can update me.” I took her hand in mine. Maybe she’d decided, but I wouldn’t let her walk away that easily.

I poked my head into the kitchen and waved at Sutton. “I’ll be back to chat.”

She frowned but nodded.

I led Giselle down the hall until I discovered a bedroom. I let her enter first, then quietly closed the door behind us.

Before she could say a word, I hugged her. “I missed you so fucking bad.”

“I missed you, too.” She pulled away, then sank onto the edge of the queen bed.

“Here, I bought you a cell phone. I thought you could set it up for calls and email, or whatever important things you needed to check on until we get you a new one.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” She blew out a sigh. “I had to say goodbye to ...” She sniffled, then choked out her sister’s name.

Goddammit. I’d been so excited to kiss her and tell her Donovan and Ander would never bother her again that I’d forgotten about WITSEC.

“I’m sorry, babe.” I sat next to her and rubbed her back. She leaned into me, but there was still distance between us emotionally, and I didn’t like it. At all.

“I know it was the best thing to do for her, but it was so fucking hard.” She wiped her cheeks, then blew out a sigh. “I’m tired of crying, Zayne. I just need to catch my breath and get my feet on the ground.”

“I’ve been there, and it’s not fun.” I stood and took her hand in mine. If she was going to tell me goodbye, I was determined to make these last few days worth it. Hopefully, she would think twice before she walked away with my heart, wrecking me.

“I need to talk to Sutton, then we’re leaving,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t argue with me.

“What?”

“I’ll ask Sutton for a few extra shirts and shorts for you. So, whatever belongings you have, get them together.” I kissed her knuckles, then left her alone.

I hurried down the hall, my thoughts whirling like an F5 tornado.

Entering the kitchen, I saw Jaxon eating dinner at the small table. “Sutton.” I took my friend’s hand and dragged her to the back of the room, where I noticed the pantry. I flung the door open, poked my head in, and realized we would fit. I pulled her in, then secured the entrance.

Sutton looked at me like I’d lost my fucking mind. I had.

I gently gripped her shoulders. “Please, I’m begging you. Did Giselle talk to you about leaving me?”

Sutton’s worried gaze met mine. “Zayne, I love you, but you’re acting like we’re in high school and not grown-ass adults.”

“I know, but she’s behaving weird and if ... if she’s going to leave me, I need to prepare myself.” I released Sutton and scrubbed my hands over my face. “I love her, Sutton. I’m in deep, and all I want to do is take her to my home and keep her safe.”

“Then do it, Zayne. For the record, all she asked was if it was worth being with Pierce knowing that he had a dangerous job. I’m paraphrasing, but that was the gist. I told her yeah, but that I also worked with you guys, so my situation was a bit different. She didn’t say anything else.”

“Okay.” I folded my arms over my chest, feeling like an absolute idiot for talking to one of my best friends in the fucking pantry about the girl I loved with all my heart.

“But I don’t think Giselle is acting differently because of you. I can’t swear to that, but there are some other factors contributing to her stress. Go get her, take her to your place for a few days, and let her figure some things out.”

I massaged the back of my neck. “She needs more clothes.”

“I have plenty of shirts and shorts. I’ll get some for her.” Sutton planted her hands on her hips. “I recognize this is difficult for you, but if Giselle sticks around, she needs to realize that she can trust both of us and that means I can’t betray her confidence any more than I could yours.”

I blew out a breath. “I know. It’s just got me fucked up.”

“Then go talk to her and stop wasting time with me in the pantry.” Sutton shook her head, grinning.

“Thanks.” I leaned down and gave her a peck on the cheek. “By the way, Pierce hates being away from you while you’re pregnant.”

Sutton rubbed her belly. “Me, too. But it’s only for a few more days until we can meet up.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, Giselle gathered some toiletries and clothes from Sutton. My duffle bag was already in the car’s trunk with everything I needed. Jaxon had agreed

to ride in the van with Sutton and the girls to their new safehouse, then bring Sutton back to Spokane after the girls reconnected with their families or met their foster parents.

Giselle hugged Sutton goodbye and followed me to the Mercedes, where I opened the door for her and she climbed into the front passenger seat. I nearly chuckled, thinking about the first time she had ridden with me and had hopped into the backseat instead.

As soon as I climbed into the driver's side, I started the engine and turned on our playlist. "Lost Without You" by Ruby Ibarra and Nick Isham played softly. I took her hand and kissed her palm before I shifted into drive, and we headed out.

"Is this your car?" Giselle asked.

"No. Mine is in the shop back home. All of the devices have been removed, though. No more worrying about it." *No more worrying about Donovan and Ander, either.*

"Where are we going?" She traced little circles on her thigh with her fingertip.

"My place." That got her attention.

"You're taking me to your house?" Her voice held a hint of excitement.

"Yeah. We're about an hour away, so it's not too far." I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "We should be there by midnight."

"Iris" by the Goo Goo Dolls played as she leaned back in her seat and stared out the window. Whatever was going on with her was big, but hopefully, the good news about Donovan would help put her at ease. I'd asked Sutton not to say anything until I came back and could explain everything at once. Otherwise, it could have left Giselle with even more



questions, and that would be frustrating as hell for her. If possible, I wanted to protect her from any additional turmoil.

“I have some things to tell you, Giselle. I just didn’t want an audience when I did.”

“Tell me what?”

“The FBI called Pierce. They have your parents and everyone that was at their home in custody.”

Giselle’s hand flew over her mouth. “What? Everyone? What about Donovan?”

I shook my head. “He wasn’t arrested, but your parents were, along with the guards, doctor— everyone that was working there that day. The other young women were rescued, too. Apparently, a lot of them are pregnant.”

The color drained from Giselle’s cheeks. “Some by Donovan.”

“He won’t be doing that shit again.” My fingers curled into a fist, the bruises on my knuckles showing.

“What happened to your hands?” She reached out and examined one of them, gently tracing the cuts with her fingertips. “Zayne?”

“I’ll tell you what happened, but we need to be at the house first so I can give you my undivided attention.”

“All right.” She placed my palm on her thigh and covered it with hers.

Maybe things between us were okay, but I couldn’t ignore the nagging voice in the corner of my mind.

**Zayne**

**A**n hour later, a roaring fire in my cabin's stone fireplace started to heat the room. I hadn't been to the place in a while, and I'd forgotten how chilly it was at night on the water.

"I can't wait to see it all in the daylight, especially the lake." Giselle curled up on the sofa, watching me.

"My granddad left me this place. It needs to be enjoyed more, but with me working and moving around all the time, it's kind of just sat here. Sorry it's so dusty."

"A little dirt never hurt anyone. I'll help you clean tomorrow." She pointed at the white sheets that had been used to cover the furniture and were now piled in a heap on the floor. "Do you have a washer and dryer here?"

"Yup. Everything works, too. I did check-in a few months ago. Not many people even know about this spot, so it's a good place for me to visit and unwind. Well, I mean Pierce, Vaughn, and Sutton know."

I stoked the fire once more, then sat with her on the brown leather couch. "I'm sorry about Ashley. I realize it was hard on both of you."

“My plan is to bring her home in a year. I want to figure out what the hell to do with my life, then make sure I’m settled into a new house in a good school district with everything she needs to succeed. I can easily afford taking care of her ... thanks to Sutton.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “That girl is fucking magic.”

Giselle tossed me a grin. “She definitely has some impressive skills.” Giselle faced me and tucked one of her legs beneath her.

“What did you want to talk about?” She propped her elbow on the back of the couch, focusing on me.

I cleared my throat. “The day you and I skinny dipped at the lake ... do you remember the promise I made you?”

She hesitated, then, “That you would make sure Donovan could never hurt me again.”

“Yeah. I’m going to go out on a limb and tell you the truth, but what I share with you can never, ever be repeated.” My tone grew more serious with each word.

“I owe you my life, Zayne, and Ashley’s too. Whatever happens in the future, I’ll never betray you.”

I gulped. *Whatever happens in the future. Fuck!* I scolded myself and returned my attention to the conversation at hand, trying not to worry if she would walk away from me for good.

“I went a step further. Donovan nor Ander will ever hurt you or anyone again.”

Her forehead creased. “I’m confused. How can you be so sure?”

I rubbed my stubbled chin. “Because I fucking took them out a few days ago.”

A gasp escaped Giselle. Her gaze narrowed, then widened. “You ... you killed them?”

“Yeah.” For some reason, I thought this conversation would go differently, but here I was mentally begging her to tell me it was okay. Regardless, I would never apologize for taking the fuckers out.

Giselle trembled before me, and I fought the desire to pull her into my lap. I was afraid she would resist me.

“They’re both really gone?” Her voice cracked.

“Yeah. They can’t hurt you, Ashley, or any other person. I’m sorry if you think differently of me, but I couldn’t let them get away with what they did to you.”

Giselle leaned forward, then climbed into my lap. Her haunted eyes searched mine. “Thank you.” She pressed her soft lips to mine. “Thank you. Oh my God. I’m finally free.”

“Yeah, you are, baby. You’re free.” I wrapped her in my arms and kissed her as she kept repeating to herself that the two fuckers were really dead, as if she was afraid she was dreaming and would wake up at any moment.

“I can’t give you any details, but they’re gone, babe.” I smoothed her dark hair as she continued to pepper my cheeks with kisses.

“And Ashkov is out of the picture, too. I’m not sure how it all happened, but I don’t give a shit. I’m free.” She pressed her forehead to mine.

“I have something—” Her alarm on her phone rang, interrupting her. Deep concern was embedded in her

expression as she assessed me.

“What are you needing a reminder for at three in the morning?” I whispered, brushing my lips against her temple.

She climbed off my lap and retrieved her cell from the coffee table. “That it’s six am on the east coast.” Giselle paced the room as her fingers flew across the screen, then she swiped up a few times.

I watched as the warmth of the scorching flames cast an orange hue over her pale cheeks.

“Jesus.” She sank into the rocking chair, her face draining of color.

I scooted to the edge of the couch, anxious as hell. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and stared at her screen.

“Giselle? Babe, what’s going on?”

*Fuck. This wasn't good.*

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**Giselle**

I gripped the arms of the antique rocker I'd plopped into, my world spinning as I looked at the email with the paternity results. Gulping, I took a deep breath in an attempt to steady my erratic heartbeat.

I glanced at Zayne, knowing full well I had to have a conversation with him, but there was a different one I needed to have first. Lowering my iPhone to my lap, I hit the button to lock the screen.

"I'm okay. Before I explain what that was about, I wanted to tell you I've been thinking about us while you were gone." I sucked on my lower lip, almost laughing as Zayne's gaze focused on the action. "I didn't have much time to talk to Sutton, but she said that, for her and Pierce, their marriage works well with his career since she's on the team. With the open communication, she realizes you guys are safe, and it puts her at ease. Obviously, that's not going to be my case."

I stood and paced the wood floors, searching for my next words, but I was stalling. I'd rehearsed this conversation a million times in my head. I stopped and looked at Zayne, falling in love with his beautiful green eyes all over again. "I love you, Zayne. I would willingly give my life to keep you

safe. I've never felt that way about anyone other than Ashley. I want there to be an us, but I also have to figure out how to deal with your job and dangerous lifestyle.”

Zayne leaned forward, his shoulders tense. He pressed his fingertips together and stared at me.

I paused, chewing on my next words. “This is what I came up with, Zayne. I want in.”

He blinked excessively before staring at me in shock. “No.”

I shot him a ‘don’t fuck with me’ look. “Hear me out before you decide that you have a right to dictate my life. And to be clear, you don’t have any right.” I tapped my toe against the floor, a little miffed at him, but then I remembered the email I’d just received.

“The men that Donovan and my parents sold me to and had parties with, I understand how these sick fucks work, Zayne. I have a list of the names of everyone I met.”

Zayne winced at the pain in those words.

“I can help us save more girls and reunite them with their families. I remember some of the locations of where I was taken. I have critical information, Zayne. I want in. I can work with Sutton behind the scenes, and ... please.”

Zayne stared at me, clearly upset and caught off guard. “It’s not up to me, Giselle. It’s up to Sutton and Pierce. It’s their business, and even if I was fine with the idea, they could overrule me.” He flopped back onto the couch.

“Zayne.” I sat beside him and took his hand, allowing his warmth to ground me. “I’ll be safer working with you than at home. It will give me a purpose again. It would be the best therapy to take down motherfuckers like Donovan and Ander.”

He reached up and stroked my cheek. “I know it’s probably what’s best for you, but I have to wrap my head around the idea.” He leaned up and kissed me. “I love you. A part of me wants to take you to a castle, hide, and keep you safe from the world.”

“Just like I want to do with you, but we both recognize life doesn’t work that way. Besides, I need to settle down somewhere and find a good therapist. I want to show up in this relationship with you, Zayne. I want to become my best self and discover who I am, but with you by my side. I’ve never been free before. I would love to travel, and run around our house naked, lay in the sun, spend time with your friends. I adore Sutton and want to spend time with her and Claire. But you also have to consider that Ashley will live with us at some point. Are you okay with that? A teenager can be scary.”

A lopsided green eased across his face. “Are you asking me to be Uncle Zayne to her?”

I giggled. “No, but you’ll be a father to her. You’ll help me parent, prepare her for the real world again, attend teacher conferences, maybe even endure some band or choir concerts. I mean, if you’re not away on a job, of course.”

“I like the sound of all those things.” He took my hand and brushed his lips across my knuckles, sending delicious chills over my body.

“How do you feel about finding a house together in Spokane?” I tilted my head, waiting for him to realize what I’d just asked.

His palm covered his chest, and he batted his eyelashes at me. “Giselle Lambert, are you asking me to move in together before marriage?”



“Yup.” I popped the p on the word. “And I plan on taking advantage of you, too. Many times.” I reached over and massaged his dick through his jeans.

“I could get used to that. I could really get used to that.” Zayne thickened as I undid his pants, then lowered the zipper. I freed him from his grey boxer briefs and wrapped my hand around his shaft.

“I have one more thing to talk to you about. Do you want to talk now or later?” I rubbed my thumb over the tip of his crown, smearing the drop of precum on his sensitive skin.

“Maybe both. I really don’t want you to stop,” he whispered.

I gave him a firm stroke, lowered myself to the floor, and knelt between his parted legs. My tongue licked his length, then I took him into my mouth.

He watched and threaded his fingers through my dark hair. “Goddamn, that feels good.”

Licking and sucking as he squirmed in his seat, I worshipped every inch of his cock and balls. My head bobbed up and down, and I hollowed my cheeks, basking in his moans of pleasure. My G-string was growing wetter by the second, and I desperately needed him inside me.

“Shit, babe. Shit. I’m going to lose it.” Zayne tried to push me away, but I refused. After I swallowed every last drop of his hot liquid as it hit the back of my throat, I eased him out of my mouth and wiped my lips.

Zayne ran his thumb along my lower lip, pulling it down. “Give me a few minutes, then I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name.”

“Promise?” I peeked up at him from beneath my eyelashes.

“Count on it.”

I stood, my nerves returning front and center. “Well, at least we don’t have to worry about birth control.”

He tucked himself back into his boxer briefs. “Yeah, you said you were on the pill, so we’re good.”

“Yeah, I was.”

Zayne fumbled with the button on his jeans. “Was? Why did you stop taking it?”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my shorts. “Because we don’t need birth control if I’m already pregnant.”

For the second time that night, I’d caught Zayne Wilson off guard and shocked the shit out of him.

He stood, his mouth hanging open. “How?”

“Well, when a man and woman love each other, they have an intimate relationship, and he sticks his penis in her vagina.” I snorted, then covered my mouth with my hand.

Bewildered, Zayne stared unblinking at me. Apparently, he didn’t think my joke was funny, but when I was nervous, I said stupid shit at times.

“The doctor explained that my body could have changed, and the current pill I was on wasn’t a high enough dosage.” I studied him, attempting to determine how he felt about being a father. “Honestly, I suspect Donovan messed with my pill. He was the one that managed any of my medication. If the baby had been his, he would have been able to control me for the rest of my life.”

“The fucker is gone.” Zayne’s jaw clenched. His green eyes were full of different emotions I couldn’t pinpoint. “You’re sure? It’s not a false positive?”

I shook my head. “While you were away, I fainted, and Sutton reached out to your team’s doctor. She did some bloodwork. To the best of her knowledge, I’m about two weeks along.” I folded my arms over my stomach, afraid that Zayne would see me shaking. “I was scared shitless it was Donovan’s, so Sutton helped me get a paternity test, and I gathered a few pieces of your hair from the bedroom we slept in. I was just emailed the results. That’s what was so important at three a.m.” I held my breath and waited for him to yell at me for sneaking behind his back.

He paced the floor, shoving his hands in his pockets, shock, and disbelief twisting his features. “I’m going to be a dad?”

“If you want to be. If not, I don’t expect you to stick around, but I wanted to be fair and have this conversation with you first.” Nervously, I chewed on my thumbnail.

Zayne looked up at the ceiling and rubbed the back of his neck. “I can’t believe it.” He pinned me with an intense stare.

A messy ball of emotions wedged in my throat as my brain scrambled to fill in the silence.

With a few quick steps, he closed the gap between us, knelt before me, and raised the hem of my T-shirt. Tears welled in my eyes as he kissed my belly, then placed his cheek against my stomach. He wrapped his arms around my waist and stayed still.

“Do you want to keep the baby?” I whispered, smoothing his hair.

He peered up at me. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, babe. I can’t wait to start our family. I never thought I would

find my person and have kids, though. I'm in shock that we're here together."

He looked at me as if I were the most beautiful woman in the world, and I tucked the moment into my heart and mind to cherish forever.

He rose from the floor, grinning. "Guess we should have a lot—and I mean a lot—of sex now that we don't have to worry about you getting pregnant."

I threw my head back and laughed. "I love you, Zayne."

"Oh, babe. I love you, too. So, fucking much." With that, he pressed his mouth to mine and dominated me with a kiss.

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**Giselle**

“**A**re you ready to share the news about the baby?” Zayne asked as we stood at the entrance of Pierce’s log home.

“You don’t think it’s too soon? We’ve only known for a week.”

Zayne gathered me in his arms. “We don’t have to say anything until you’re ready.” He kissed the top of my head, then opened the front door.

It was beautiful. I stepped onto light, shiny wood floors that extended into the living and dining area, where a grey stone fireplace stretched towards the vaulted ceiling, and I fell in love with the exposed beams. Fans circulated the air, keeping the temperature nice and cool on that one-hundred-and-two-degree day.

“We’re here,” Zayne called out.

Sutton hurried around the corner, a big grin on her face. “Hi! I’m so glad you’re back.” She hugged him, then me. “How are you doing? A little bit better now that your parents are in custody?”

“Yeah. As long as they go to prison for the rest of their lives, I’ll be fine.”

Sutton placed her hands on her belly. “The girls they kidnapped should take care of that.” She offered a genuine smile. “I’m just happy you’re both here. Pierce, Vaughn, and Claire are out back. Pierce just fired up the grill. I’m starving for a good juicy steak.” Sutton smiled and began walking through the living room.

“I’m glad we’re here, too. It’s nice to think that I actually have friends and can come and go anytime that I want. It’s kind of weird.”

Zayne slipped his arm around my waist. “You’ll get used to it.”

We strolled through the house and into the kitchen. The ample open space was stunning with the stainless-steel appliances, black granite counters, a large island, and a breakfast nook that looked over the property.

Sutton opened the back door, and we stepped onto a spacious patio with an outdoor cooking area.

“Hi!” Claire jumped up and hugged me. “I’m so happy to see you.” She turned to Zayne. “But not you.” She giggled, then gave him an enthusiastic embrace. Even though she was a few weeks behind Sutton’s pregnancy, Claire’s baby bump was quite a bit smaller. I glanced at Zayne, wondering what I would look like pregnant. I secretly hoped for a boy. Maybe I wouldn’t be on edge, worrying about him being hurt like I would if we had a daughter. I made a mental note to add that to the list of what to discuss with a therapist.

Vaughn and Pierce greeted us both with hugs, then settled down around the table.

“Zayne tells me you’re interested in working with us,” Pierce said.

“Way to cut straight to the chase,” Zayne said, reaching for a bottle of Angry Orchard and a can of caffeine free soda from the cooler next to him. He handed me the soda, then twisted off the bottle’s cap and took a long swig.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Sutton offered, realizing that Zayne hadn’t given me a beer.

“No, thank you. I don’t drink alcohol.” *At least, not for now.*

Excitement filled Sutton’s expression when she understood what my answer meant. “I have some amazing nonalcoholic white wine, if you would like some.”

“That sounds fantastic, actually.” I rose from my seat, nervous about diving into the conversation that Pierce had just started. “Point me in the direction, and I’ll grab it. Stay off your feet.” I gave her a warm smile.

“It’s in the refrigerator and the glasses are in the cabinet to the left of it.” Sutton pointed toward the kitchen.

“Perfect. I’ll be right back.” I glanced at Zayne and noticed the flicker of concern in his gaze.

I entered the kitchen and walked over to the fridge as I heard the door open again. Glancing over my shoulder, I quirked a brow at Zayne.

“Let me get the glass for you. They built this house with really tall cabinets.”

I busied myself in the refrigerator as he produced a wine goblet.

“You’re nervous.” He pulled me flush against him, kissing me gently. “If Pierce says no, it doesn’t mean that it’s a no forever, babe.”

I sighed and leaned my forehead against his muscular chest. “I need to find something to do, Zayne. Other than therapy that starts next week. I need to feel like I’m making a difference and helping other women. I want to have a purpose.” I clutched his black T-shirt in my fingers.

He tilted my chin up. “If Pierce thinks it’s too soon, we’ll find something for you to do. Maybe you could work with Claire on choreography for August Clover or teach ballet. Whatever makes your heart light up and gives you a sense of purpose, we’ll make it happen. I’ll do everything in my power to give you the world.”

“I know, babe. Thank you. One of the things that will help me heal over time is to realize that I can give myself the world, too. That I can stand on my own two feet and be a partner in our relationship, not a hindrance because of my past.” There, I’d said it. I’d admitted my real fear.

Zayne stroked my cheek with the pad of his thumb, sending shivers through me. “You aren’t a hindrance, Giselle. You never were. I don’t think you understand how much you breathed life into my heart again. After I lost Chelsey, I wasn’t able to commit to anyone. Yeah, I played around, but I haven’t ever had feelings for someone the way I do you. You complete me.”

I grabbed his hand and soaked in the warmth of his touch. “I hope I can continue to do that. I don’t want to just take and take from you as I deal with my past. I need to show up for you, too.”

He leaned down and kissed me gently. His lips left mine, and he cupped my face, peering deep into my eyes, his expression determined and sincere. “You already do.”



I broke our embrace, then filled the glass half full of white wine. I tasted the crisp drink, my brows rising. “Yum! I think we might have to load up on this, babe.”

Zayne laughed. “I’m sure she’ll tell you where she bought it. I’ll purchase as many bottles as you want.”

Feeling better, I took Zayne’s hand and led him back outside.

“This is really good, Sutton. Thank you. Where do you buy it?” I sat in my seat next to Zayne.

“I order it online. I’ll text you the website. So far, I’ve been really happy with what I’ve tried.” Sutton raised her glass to me.

I lifted mine as well. “To friends,” I said. I couldn’t believe that I actually had amazing people in my life, and it felt so damned good.

Pierce stretched his long legs in front of him, then laced his fingers behind his head. “Back to the conversation, I have an opportunity for you, Giselle. I think you could be an invaluable asset to our team.”

Hope ignited inside me, and I held my breath while I waited for him to continue.

“If you’re interested, we would start you out like any other new employee and you can work your way up. Sutton would train you in the back end of the business. You’ll assist her for a while doing research and she’ll teach you on the computer systems. While you’re learning that, you can provide details of the men that are buying girls. We’ll pay you, of course. Great benefits, too.”

I raised my hand. “I don’t need the money, Pierce.”

“I understand, but people who are paid tend to perform better. So, set up a college fund for Ashley or whatever you want to do with it.”

It was clear who called the shots in the business, but I had a feeling that Sutton called them in their marriage.

“We already ran a background check on you when Zayne was concerned there was some shit going down with you and Donovan. You’re cleared, so we can get you started next week if you like.”

I looked at Zayne, then Vaughn and Claire. “Is everyone okay if I join the team?”

“Oh yeah. Eliminating those sick fucks will be so rewarding. I totally want you on board,” Vaughn said, taking a drink of his beer.

“I don’t work with the guys, but I think you’ll be a great addition to the company and our family.” Claire placed her hand on her baby bump. “I won’t lie. I can’t wait to really spend time with you in the studio. If you’re interested, I mean.”

“I’m definitely in. I would love to see what you’re working on for August Clover, too.” I took a sip of my wine, enjoying that I could drink with everyone.

“I’m excited.” Claire’s blue eyes danced with eagerness.

I looked at Zayne. “What about you, bodyguard?”

A boyish grin eased across his face. “I trust you to have our backs just as much as I do these dudes. You’ve proved yourself as far as I’m concerned.”

“He’s going easy on you since he’s in your bed.” Vaughn chuckled.

I laughed, loving that the guys were close enough to flip each other shit.

“I would certainly hope so. If not, then I need to up my game between the sheets.” I smirked and lightly punched Zayne in the shoulder.

“Nope, you’re good,” he whispered in my ear.

I took a deep breath. “This will be my first job outside of dance, and I can’t wait to dig in and see how I can bring value to the team. I would love to accept the offer, Pierce. Thank you so much.”

“Excellent.” Pierce smiled, his brown eyes sparkling. “Let’s get some steaks going and celebrate.” He stood, then walked over and extended his hand. “I’ll have the paperwork drawn up in a few days.”

I shook his hand. “I’m excited. Thank you again.”

Pierce clapped, then rubbed his palms together. “Sutton and Claire, your steaks will be well done since you’re body builders.”

“What?” I laughed.

“Pierce calls pregnant women body builders because we are literally building and growing little bodies inside of ours.” Sutton’s grin was infectious.

Then it dawned on me that my steak would have to be cooked well instead of my typical medium rare. *Damn. No sushi, either.* I took Zayne’s hand and nodded at him.

“Guess I’ll need to take it well done, too.” I glanced at Sutton, her entire face lighting up.

“It’s a go?”

I laughed, finally elated that Zayne and I were having a baby together and planning our future.

“Yeah, Zayne is going to be a father next spring.”

The group erupted in cheers and congratulations, and I warmed with the feeling of love and acceptance. Zayne Wilson had saved my life, then disappeared only to return to save my heart.

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### One Year Later ~ Zayne

**I**f someone had said that working for Donovan Lambert would lead to the happiest days of my life, I would have told them they were fucking crazy. Yet here I was, staring into the golden eyes of the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She looked stunning in her white wedding dress that fit every curve of her upper body and flowed out around her legs. It had taken two people to carry her train as she walked down the church aisle to meet me. Even though neither of us were religious, Giselle had always dreamed of getting married in a big chapel, so I made it happen.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Pierce said, grinning.

“Hell yeah.” I lifted Giselle’s veil, noticing her tears. One slipped down her cheek, and I wiped it away with the pad of my thumb. “I love you, Giselle Wilson.”

“I love you too.” She smiled, melting me on the spot.

My lips descended on hers, our first kiss as husband and wife and in front of all of our friends. Everyone stood and cheered, clapping wildly. I nodded at Vaughn and Holden, my groomsmen.

Giselle gave her bouquet to Sutton. Giselle had been elated to ask Sutton and Claire to be her women of honor, and they beamed at us while in their matching lilac dresses.

I took Giselle's hand and walked back down the aisle, then led her to the reception hall.

"I can't believe we're married." Her smile reached her eyes. She glanced behind us. "I forgot Ashley and Nicole are carrying my train. I should slow down."

"I'm glad Sutton and Claire's cousin was able to join us. I think it's good for Ashley to have someone her age here." I squeezed her hand. Ashley had only moved in four weeks ago, and we were still adjusting to parenting our son, Steele. Ashley had fallen in love with her nephew, and she'd been an amazing help.

The girls chatted and giggled as they helped Giselle with her dress.

I hurried to grab the door to the room we had reserved for the reception and propped it open for the ladies. Sutton, Claire, Gemma, Mackenzie, and River were not too far behind us. Mackenzie had our three-month-old on her hip while she held Hollister's hand. Hollister had just turned two, and her big amber eyes would melt the boys' or girls' hearts when she was older. Cade would have his hands full.

Mackenzie's diamond-encrusted wedding band and engagement ring caught the light, and I remembered the first time I'd met her. She was energetic and had zero filters, but I immediately liked her. Not long before, she'd snagged August Clover's lead guitarist, Cade Richardson, and the rest was history in the best kind of way.

Once everyone was inside the room, I turned to Gemma Harrington.

“I’m so happy for you, Zayne.” Gemma, the lead female singer for August Clover and my good friend, gave me a big hug. Her red hair was piled on the top of her head with little butterfly pins in place.

“Thanks, Gem. And thank you for being so kind and candid about your past with Giselle. She thinks the world of you.” I released her.

“Just take it slow with her. Hendrix was supportive and patient with me, and that man healed my broken soul. You’ll do the same for Giselle. In the meantime, I’m thrilled to have her collaborating with Claire on the choreography for the band’s next tour.”

“She’s stoked.” I glanced over at Mackenzie, who was talking Giselle’s ear off, then she spotted me glancing at them.

“Dude, what do you feed your little monster? He’s heavy for three months!” Mackenzie gave me an exasperated look as she made her way to me. “Here, Gemma, take Steele. I gotta hug Zayne.” Mackenzie shoved my son at Gemma and laughed as Gemma carefully took him.

“Congratu-fuckin-lations. Someone finally got you to settle down.” Mac flashed me a toothy grin, then threw her arms around me. “So happy for you.”

“Thanks, Mac. Me too.”

Mac partially covered her mouth, shielding anyone from reading her lips. “She’s gorgeous. Like one of the most stunning women I’ve met.”

I peeked over at my new bride as she greeted the other guests. As if she could feel my gaze on her, she glanced over

her bare shoulder and blew me a kiss.

“And she’s all mine.”

Hendrix Harrington hopped on the small stage where the band had set up. We’d asked August Clover to play at the reception, but there was one thing we needed to do first.

“Mac, can you remove Giselle’s train? Ashley and Nicole can help, too. Then everyone can have a seat. I have something I want to do for my wife.” *My wife. Holy shit. My wife.* Grinning like an idiot, I motioned for the men to meet me in the hall.

Hendrix, Cade, Pierce, Vaughn, and Holden excused themselves from their conversations and followed me.

“You guys ready?” I rubbed my chin.

“Hell yeah. I can’t wait to see the ladies’ faces.” Hendrix chuckled.

“These dress shoes are perfect, too.” Cade demonstrated by sliding down the tiled hall.

“Hey, I’m just glad you learned to dance before my wedding, man.” Holden laughed and punched me on the shoulder.

“Yeah, you can thank Claire and Giselle for that one.” I took a breath, glancing at my gold band with a ruby in the center, two small diamonds on each side. The red stone would always burn brightest, just like my Giselle.

Hendrix unbuttoned his tux jacket, then grabbed a hair tie from the inside pocket and pulled his hair up.

I rubbed my hands together. “Let’s do it.”

“Is someone recording this?” Pierce asked.



“Claire. She was in on it from the beginning and helped, so she’s making sure she gets the ladies’ expressions.”

“It’s going to be epic,” Vaughn said, laughing.

We hurried down the hall, then Vaughn texted Claire to start the music. As soon as “Pony” by Ginuwine began to play, we entered the room and started our choreographed group dance.

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### Giselle

**T**he second I heard the song, I knew something was up, but never in my wildest dreams would I have expected Zayne and his friends to dance for us.

The beat pulsed through the speakers, and I was on my feet, laughing and loving every minute of the gorgeous guys' moves, especially my husband's.

They dropped to their knees and shucked the tux jackets, rolling their hips. I sank my teeth into my bottom lip, glued to every sexy move Zayne made while counting the minutes until I could remove his clothes myself.

We all cheered as they continued.

“Ohmigosh! I think I just got pregnant watching them. They're sexy as hell.” Mac fanned herself.

Gemma, River, and I burst into laughter. I was quickly learning that Mac was constant comedy, and I loved her for it. For years, I'd forgotten how to laugh, but the fantastic people in my life showed me what real love and fun were all about.

I glanced at Gemma, who was holding my son. She bounced him to the music as she watched the men, grinning.

“Well, I guess if we ever need some extra cash, these guys can find a strip club.” She giggled and shook her head. “I think someone else is going to have to take care of your baby, Giselle. I’m taking Hendrix somewhere for a quickie before we sing.” She blushed as she continued to stare at her husband.

“Go for it. I want to grab Zayne, but I’m afraid with all the layers of this dress it will make it impossible.”

“Nah, just flip the skirts over your head,” River suggested, laughing. “I think all of the guys will be missing for a little bit. Damn, Holden is fucking hot.” She fanned herself.

The song came to an end, and all of the guests stood and cheered. Zayne hurried to me and planted a searing kiss on my mouth.

“Wow, you guys were amazing. I can’t believe you did that.” I smiled so hard my face hurt.

“It was fun.” Zayne pressed his lips to mine again, then took my hand and led me to the middle of the room.

“Save This Dance for Me,” by Alexander Nate, began to play, and Zayne pulled me against his muscular body. He slipped his free arm around my waist, then threaded his fingers with mine.

“You’re beautiful in your wedding dress, but I can’t wait to take it off you.” He pressed his forehead against mine, then spun me around.

I glanced over to see Vaughn and Claire dancing, too.

“Those two are spice,” I said, glancing at them. “As Mac said, I think I just got pregnant again from watching the chemistry between them. You don’t find that often in a dance partner.”

“I’ll show you some chemistry when we’re out of here,” he whispered against my ear, and my core throbbed with his promise.



AS SOON AS the reception was over, Zayne and I headed to a bed and breakfast in Sandpoint, Idaho. Since we had Steele, we decided to stay nearby and only leave for an evening. We felt best about that decision, so I intended to make the night memorable.

Once I was out of my dress, I hurried to the bathroom to change for him and grab some fun things I’d stashed in my purse.

Hopefully, he liked my plan. I’d worked with my therapist for a year and wanted to try more things with Zayne. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. It was strange how I’d been sold, tortured, and raped, but had nerves about being with my husband, who would never hurt me. But I wasn’t fearful. I was excited.

**Zayne**

**W**hile Giselle was freshening up, I removed and tossed my tux jacket and shirt on the chair. Even though it was dark, I could still make out the view of the lake. It was more spectacular than the one from the home we'd built over the last several months. I was looking forward to when Steele got a little older, and we could take him out on the boat.

The sound of the bathroom door opening grabbed my attention, and I caught the sight of my wife in black, barely-there lingerie. My cock gave her a full salute as she strutted by me in black high heels. She bent over, then slipped a small bag into the nightstand drawer.

“You look amazing. And you're all mine,” I growled.

“I am.” She crawled onto the king-sized mattress, her sweet little ass in the air. “Have a seat.” She pointed to the chair I'd just tossed my clothes onto.

I threw the items on the floor, then sank into the chair, my gaze glued to my wife as she settled against the pillows.

“I want to watch you stroke yourself.” Her words were silky smooth, sending chills straight to my balls.

I unbuttoned my slacks and freed myself from my boxer briefs.

“Take your pants off.”

I rose, then removed the rest of my clothes. Sitting down again, I palmed my erection and gave it a firm stroke. Her hazel eyes darkened, and her tongue licked her bottom lip.

“What do you want, Zayne? If you could have me any way that you want, what would it be?”

*Oh shit.* I’d done a lot of things with other women and held back because I didn’t want to hurt or scare her, but if she were asking, I would be happy to show her.

“I want you bent over my lap with your sweet ass sticking up, ready to be spanked.”

Giselle’s eyes widened. “What if I like being spanked?”

My dick throbbed with the idea. “Do you?” I stroked my shaft and sucked in air.

“Why don’t you find out?” She crawled to the end of the bed, then joined me on the chair.

I moved my arms and watched as she bent over. She glanced up at me, hunger in her gaze, as I palmed her ass and dug my fingers into her flesh. “Have you been a good girl, Giselle?”

“No,” she whimpered.

I smacked her butt, but not too hard. Since we were just starting to explore, I had to be careful.

“More.”

I slapped her again, the impact making her upper body move against my thighs this time.

“Shit, this is hot,” I said. I spanked her again, then moved her legs wider. Spreading her pussy apart, I ran my fingertip along her soaking wet slit. “You do like it.”

“A little pain will have me begging for you.” Pink dusted her cheeks with her confession.

I eased my finger inside her slick walls and pumped her.

“Oh? What else do you like that you haven’t told me about?”

“Toys.”

“I could get into that.” I removed my finger, then pushed one into her tight little ass.

“Oh, God, that feels so good. I brought some toys.”

I stopped what I was doing, and she had my full attention. “Show me.”

She crawled off my lap, then headed to the nightstand. Giselle removed a brown bag and tossed several items from it onto the bed.

“Bring me the vibrator and a butt plug.”

She picked both up and handed them over.

“Bend over.”

Once she was settled, I parted her folds and turned on the vibrator. I rubbed it over her sensitive flesh, then pushed it inside her. She moaned, and my cock jumped.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

“Yeah,” she whimpered as I fucked her with the toy.

I gave her ass a little spank, watching her pussy take in the toy’s shaft. I left it in her while I grabbed the lube, then

worked the plug into her tight ass.

“Oh, God. Zayne. That feels so good.”

I watched as she wiggled against my lap while I continued. She dug her nails into my thighs, her lips parted, and moans of pleasure filled the room.

My cock ached to be inside her, but I had to taste her first. I removed the toy and tossed it on the mattress.

“Get on all fours.”

She did as I asked, then I knelt at the edge of the bed and pulled her to me. I buried my face in her and ran my tongue along her clit. She rocked against me as I worshipped every inch of her, licking and sucking until she screamed my name.

I flipped her over on her back, causing her to giggle. “This is our first night together as husband and wife.” Her expression grew serious, and her comment told me everything I needed to know.

It was time to slow the pace and show her how much I loved her. Our gazes collided, and the longing in her hazel eyes made my breath hitch as a raw and vulnerable hunger etched her face. I entered her slowly, and every emotion that I saw—all of the love ... it was for me.

We found a gentle rhythm as I thrust into her. She lifted her hips, and we consumed each other. I grabbed her wrists and moved them above her head, then threaded her fingers with mine as I nipped at her lower lip. A little whimper escaped her when my mouth brushed hers.

“I love you,” I whispered as my climax built inside me.

“I love you, bodyguard.” She wrapped her legs around my hips, pulling me deeper into her until her core clenched my



shaft, and a soul-obliterating orgasm rocked me as she cried out with her own.

I kissed the tip of her nose, gazing into her eyes. At that moment, while I remained inside her, time stood still. Giselle Wilson, the love of my life, had chosen to spend eternity with me, and I vowed to protect her and our children for the rest of my days.

\*\*\*

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### Epilogue ~ Gemma

I pulled the pins from my hair, allowing it to cascade over my shoulders, then placed the small butterfly clips on the dresser of my bedroom.

“What?” I asked, suddenly shy in front of Hendrix.

“I’m just watching my beautiful wife.” He smiled at me as he removed his tux jacket and white shirt.

My eyes traveled over the dips and valleys of his abs and rounded biceps. “It was really nice to see Zayne so happy today.”

“Yeah, it was.” He sat on the edge of the bed and toed his black shoes off.

“Will you unzip me?” I swept my long strands off my back, then pulled my form-fitting navy dress over my knees so I could kneel in front of him.

“You should wear this more often. You’re beautiful.” He lowered the zipper, then slipped the straps off of my shoulders. I turned slightly, holding the material in place as I placed my arm over his thigh. Looking up at him, I fell in love with Hendrix all over again. From the second I’d heard him sing at the college to watching him dance with the guys earlier, I

treasured every special moment we had together. I still wasn't sure how I'd ended up with such an amazing man.

"Are you okay?" He smoothed my hair from my face, the love in his blue eyes nearly undoing me.

"Yeah. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." He stroked my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"Do you still want kids, Hendrix?"

Surprise registered across his gorgeous features.

"All of our friends have kids. Claire, Sutton, Mac, Giselle ... do you feel like we're missing out by putting our careers before a family?"

Hendrix inhaled, and I suspected he was trying to choose his words carefully. "Babe, I've told you that if you don't want kids, I'm fine with that. After what you lived through, I know it's a difficult topic."

"But?"

"But I would love to have kids with you." He offered me a kind smile full of understanding.

I stood, my dress falling into a soft heap on the carpeted floor as I slipped between his parted legs. Tilting his chin up to look at me, I swallowed over the dryness in my throat.

"I didn't want to take away from Zayne and Giselle's big day, but it's a special day for us too." I studied his expression, wondering if he would latch onto my words. A beat of silence hung in the air. "Hendrix, I'm pregnant."

"Wh-what?" His blue eyes widened, then he gave me the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. He stood so fast that he

nearly knocked me off balance but caught me before I toppled over.

“Are you sure?” Hope and excitement laced his voice.

“Yeah. After I took the home pregnancy test, I saw the doctor this morning before the wedding. I’m three months along.” I couldn’t wipe the silly smile off my face. “I’m so ready to start a family with you. At one time, I never thought I could, but I love you with all my heart, and I *want* this baby. You’ve helped me heal, and being around Hollister and now Steele ... I want this with you.”

Hendrix wrapped his arms around me, lifted my feet off the floor, and swung me around. “We’re having a baby!”

My giggles filled our bedroom air as we basked in the moment together.

He gently set me down. “Dad and Mom are going to be thrilled.”

“I’m excited, too, Hendrix. Thank you for being patient with me.” Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed that I was ready to start a family, but I was.

He cupped my cheeks, then placed a sweet kiss on my mouth. Backing me up against the bed, he flashed me a smile. “I think this calls for a celebration.”

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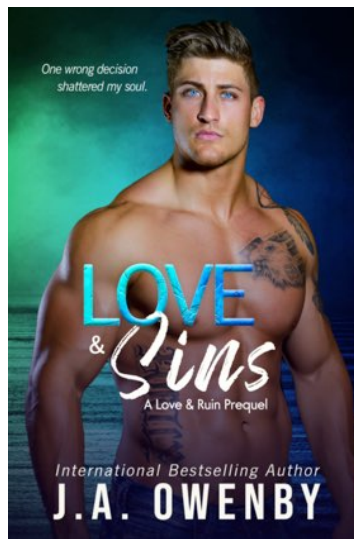
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This book may contain sensitive material for some readers. River and Holden's story is considered a dark romance with language, sex, and violence.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author J.A. Owenby grew up in a small backwoods town in Arkansas where she learned how to swear like a sailor and spot water moccasins skimming across the lake.

She finally ditched the south and headed to Oregon. The first winter there, she was literally blown away a few times by ninety mile an hour winds and storms that rolled in off the ocean.

Eventually, she longed for quiet and headed up to snowier pastures. She now resides in Washington state with her hot nerdy husband and cat, Chloe (who frequently encourages her to drink). She spends her days coming up with ways to torture characters in a way that either makes you want to throw your book down a flight of stairs or sob hysterically into a pillow.

J.A. Owenby writes new adult and romantic thriller novels. Her books ooze with emotion, angst, and twists that will leave you breathless. Having battled her own demons, she's not afraid to tackle the secrets women are forced to hide. After all, the road to love is paved in the dark.

Her friends describe her as delightfully twisted. She loves fan mail and wine. Please send her all the wine.

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