



MAKE
ME
SCREAM

A DARK ROMANCE

SANSA RAYNE

Make Me Scream

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Kindle Edition

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Prologue

TOY



When Master finishes, he reaches through the bars of Pet's cell and brushes her hair back. She almost manages to suppress her shudder. I turn away, filled with relief and guilt. He'll leave me alone this time. He got what he wanted from her.

Master sets his charcoal sketch aside, folds up a wooden easel and rests it against the dungeon's cement wall.

"What do you think?" he asks, showing me and Pet his drawing.

It's Pet, naked, on her knees, mouth open, looking up at the observer: Master's perspective. He's presented her features accurately, but infused them with desire. Lips slightly upturned, eyes focused. That's not how she really looks. Maybe he can't perceive her veiled disgust, her swallowed fury and misery — maybe he's hoping to manifest adoration, rather than obedience. We don't dare ask.

"It's perfect," Pet says, her voice raw with thirst.

She said the same thing the last two times he drew this particular piece.

“Do you agree, Toy?” Master asks me.

I force myself to look again.

“Yes. It’s perfect.”

Seated on the cell floor, knees tucked to my chest, I clutch my arms around my legs tighter. Long ago, he told me to always be honest about his art, no matter how bad it was, but we learned the hard way he doesn’t take criticism well.

He nods, staring at the drawing.

“Thank you, both. I’m very happy with it. I’ll put it in the gallery, and we’ll start a new one next week. I’ll be back then. What would you like for this week’s gift? Your usual, Pet?”

“Yes, master.”

Magazines, gum and cookies.

“Toy, what would you like?”

A big, sharp knife and a pair of boots.

I imagine myself driving the blade deep into his gut and twisting it. I hear his screams, his face contorting in fear. Then I’d kick him until his blood pools under my feet.

I’m dreaming, obviously. He won’t get me anything I could use to hurt him or escape. If it’s not edible or made of paper, I can forget it. No electronics, no clothes. Nothing I can keep — only temporary distractions.

“Nothing,” I say at last.

Fuck him. If he feels any guilt over what he’s done to us, I won’t let him assuage it with little kindnesses. As if a few

sweets could erase his sins.

“That’s not healthy,” Master sighs. “There must be something you would enjoy.”

Watching the life leave your eyes as I crush your windpipe.

“No, master.”

He can punish me if he wants. I won’t accept any shitty gift from him.

“Suit yourself, Toy.”

He beckons for Pet. She rises to her feet, then sidles over to the bars of her cell, moving as fast as her restrained ankles and wrists will allow. Once she stands with her back turned to Master, he reaches into her cell and unlocks the thick, black leather cuffs and hangs them up on their pegs. As soon as he’s done, Master steps back and Pet lurches forward, following the rules without making trouble, as always.

Before leaving, he jostles the door of Pet’s cell, making sure it’s locked. He tests mine too. Neither open.

“Have a good week, you two,” he says, then goes.

For an hour, we wait. Pet counts the seconds. I add up the minutes. After each one, she nods or taps her foot. Clears her throat. Hums. Sometimes she signals after fifty-two seconds, then again after sixty-eight. Forty-five and seventy-five. Thirty and ninety.

We can't be too obvious, in case he's still watching. The cameras above pick up everything.

We let an hour pass, then another.

When Pet rises to her feet, my stomach clenches.

Moment of truth.

She kicks the locking mechanism of her cell door, but nothing happens. With her feet bare, it can't feel good. Pet takes a deep breath, then tries again. Her heel bangs against the steel.

"It's not going to work!" I hiss.

"Shut up."

I cover my ears, but I can't look away.

Pet tries again, and again. She kicks the door so hard she loses her balance and falls over. Growling, furious, she keeps going. It took her weeks to sneak little bits of chewed gum into the lock while the door was open and Master was focused on me. Only a little at a time — she couldn't jam it up all at once or he'd notice. The door had to close, the lock had to slide — but not all the way.

There was no way to test the plan, or know when we should go. Sometime today, Pet decided.

Another kick, and this time it sounds different. Not just a thud, a scrape too.

Pet takes one more shot, and this time the door busts open.

A wave of dizziness spins the world around me. I barely comprehend as Pet races over to the dungeon control panel and unlocks my cell.

“Come on,” she says, opening the door for me.

My legs don’t want to move. If I stay here, maybe Master won’t punish me. Maybe he’ll believe I had nothing to do with this, that I only went along this far because I was scared.

“Chloe. We have to go.”

I look up at Pet. Sweat collects on my forehead. I haven’t heard that name in two years.

My name.

Master once withheld our dinners for a week to punish me for saying it.

You’re Toy, now. Don’t forget that.

“What if there’s no way out?” I say.

“Don’t think of what could go wrong. Think of what could go right. We escape, we make him suffer. We burn this place to the ground. Every single one of those fucking paintings, gone. He’ll never see them again. He’ll never see *us*, Chloe. Not ever.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She has no idea what waits for us outside the dungeon. We know we’re on Master’s estate, but where is that? What if it’s secluded by hundreds of acres? How will we find help? We have literally nothing — not even clothes.

“I know, but we have to try,” she says. “I’d rather die than stay here another day. What about you?”

“Fine.”

I agree, dying would be better than staying — but the consequences of failure will be worse than death. Pet should know that.

“And if we see him, you know what to do?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

If possible, knock him out and drag him to my jail cell. Otherwise, beat him senseless. Hurt him until he stops breathing.

“Good. Let’s go.”

She leads the way out of the dungeon, moving slowly. She stops and listens every few steps. How she hears anything, I don’t understand; my heart pounds loud enough to drown out all else.

The first failure point of the plan was getting out of our cells; the next is leaving the dungeon. But, to our luck, the stairwell doors are unlocked. We believed Master left them open when we were in our cells, and we were right. If we fail now, though, he won’t make that mistake again.

We make our way upstairs and into the lounge. It’s pitch dark, save for the moonlight coming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Exiting the lounge, we bypass the theater room and reach the main entryway. This isn't Master's home. That's somewhere else, supposedly on the property. This building, the gallery, is just for entertainment.

Pet opens a closet and grabs us two coats. They hang down to our knees, but at least we have something to wear.

The front door looms in front of us.

“Ready?”

I take a deep breath. I nod.

Pet turns the deadbolt, cutting the silence with its heavy tumbling, then opens the door.

An alarm shrieks so loud it hurts. I cover my ears but it barely blunts the high-pitched howling.

“Go!” Pet shouts, grabbing my hand.

Outside, a second-floor window in Master's mansion lights up. A dark figure stares at us for a second, then disappears.

“Move!”

We run, feet squelching in the dewy grass. Nocturnal chirps surround us as soft winds drag clouds across the moon. My throat goes dry, and I sweat hard under my stolen coat. I don't look back.

“Where are we going?” I ask, barely able to expel the words, I'm inhaling so deeply.

“I don't... know!”

Anywhere but here.

The further we get from the mansion, the harder the terrain: we reach tall grass, which hides the uneven ground below. Pet slips; I help her up. Rocks scrape our heels and catch our toes. When we reach the line of trees, we have to cover our eyes or they'll be hit by branches and leaves.

Then I hear a motor; it's not far.

“Road!” I gasp, pushing myself to go faster. “Find the road!”

Even if we can't flag down a car to help us, at least we'll be going somewhere.

Shielding our faces, we thread our way through the thickening woods until we reach a chain-link fence. It extends out in both directions as far as I can see in the dark, but the road is there, on the other side.

“Come on!” Pet growls, climbing up.

I freeze.

The fence is only a few feet taller than us, but that's too high. Woozy, I have to close my eyes so I won't see it.

“Chloe, what's wrong?”

I shake my head.

“I'm not good... with heights.”

“Now's not the time,” she says.

“I fucking know!”

“You’d rather go back?”

No, of course not.

“You climb this fence, you’ll never have to do that ever again. Just this one time.”

She won’t leave without me. I’m holding her back. She should go. Master’s looking for us. If we don’t make it, this will be my fault.

I climb. Staring straight upward, I don’t think about the ground. I focus on the pain of my toes pinching against the metal. Pet’s movements travel through the fence to me; I can feel it when she reaches the top and eases herself over.

“You’re almost there,” she says. “You’re doing great.”

“Shut up, shut up! You’re not helping!”

My hand passes through the air; I’m at the top.

The car’s getting closer; its engine’s roar rises over the chorus of crickets.

I have to look down.

Quieting my mind, I swallow a rising heave. My throat burns, but I keep my grip.

One hand over, then the other. Leg up. One more, then I’m over.

Pet drops down to the ground, and my balance goes. I lose purchase with my toes; I dangle a moment before falling.

Even with Pet reaching out to catch me, I still land pretty hard. A spasm races up my leg. It’d probably hurt if not for

all the adrenaline.

“Are you okay?” she asks, still holding me up.

I take a test step, and my ankle nearly buckles. Warm tears drip down my cheek. I’m not stopping now.

“Look!” I say, pointing at the pair of headlights cresting a hill.

Pet sees the car too, and pulls us into the road.

“Hey!” she shouts, waving her free arm at the car. “Hey, stop!”

What if it’s him? It’s too dark to see inside.

What kind of car did Master drive? That was so long ago now; I haven’t thought about it since he...

But the car doesn’t slow down. It swerves right past us, narrowly missing us.

Yeah, if I encountered two strangers in the middle of nowhere, I might keep going too.

As we turn to see, it screeches to a stop. The driver gets out.

It’s him.

“Make this easy and I won’t punish you,” Master says, approaching fast. He takes out two pairs of handcuffs. “I won’t give you another chance.”

“Fuck you!” Pet screams.

She lets me go and marches toward him, fists balled.

I try to warn her as he draws a gun from his windbreaker, but he doesn't give me time. He fires immediately.

"Anne!" I scream. She collapses, clutching her stomach.
"Anne!"

"Go, Chloe!" she grunts. "Run!"

I try.

My leg wants to crumble into dust. All I can do is hobble. Maybe that's what saves me, because Master doesn't shoot. His footsteps just get closer and closer until he's right behind me. Then my body explodes in pain, and I disappear.

—

I wake with the sun warming my face. A muffled crunching sound stirs from somewhere nearby. The light stings my eyes. It's too bright. Too much time in the dungeon accustomed me to darkness.

But I'm not there now — where am I?

We were escaping. Then Master-

Forcing myself to look, I recognize the lawn behind Master's Haven. A few feet in front of me, Master stands knee-deep in a hole, shoveling out dirt. Behind him rests a wooden coffin.

A gunshot echoes from my memory.

Oh no.

"Anne!" I gasp.

“You know you’re not supposed to use that name,”
Master says, his tone soft but humorless.

“You killed her! You fucking asshole!”

“She didn’t give me a choice. You might have gotten
away.”

I thrash against the bars of my cage, wanting to rip them
apart, take that shovel and bash his head open like a melon.
We tried so hard to escape and didn’t even get close. If I
hadn’t wasted so much time at the fence... She should have
gone without me. I slowed her down.

I should be the one in that coffin.

“Are you blaming yourself, Toy?” he asks when I don’t
say anything.

Creepy as fuck, how he does that.

“Don’t. I chose to shoot her, instead of you. This escape
attempt was her plan, wasn’t it?”

“Fuck you.”

“I could see it in her art,” he continues, ignoring me. “For
months, her drawings had a newfound essence of hope and
anticipation. It made everything she’d created before feel
lifeless. Rote. I couldn’t believe the difference. So I knew she
was planning something.”

Unbelievable.

We’d been so careful. We worked so hard to keep our
secret.

“Still, I’d be lying if I pretended that was the only reason,” Master says. “She’d been here for so many years. She didn’t activate my muse anymore. Not like she used to. It was time for her to go.”

I kick at my cage as he shoves the coffin forward, tipping it into the hole. No words, no ceremony. Not even a proper burial.

He’s an absolute psychopath.

“You’re going to pay, you fucking piece of shit.”

Master pulls off his work gloves and wipes his brow.

“I understand you’re in an emotional state right now, Toy, so I’ll forgive your outbursts. But mind yourself, or you’ll be disciplined. You’re my pet now. I expect you to comport yourself properly, and when I bring home my new toy, you will teach her how to behave.”

Not a fucking chance. I’m not going to do this to anyone else.

“Yes, master,” I mutter as he begins dumping dirt over the grave.

I’m sorry, Anne. I wish I’d been braver. But I’ll do better next time. I won’t fail you again. He won’t expect a thing. He won’t know until it’s too late. He’ll regret not killing us both last night.

I promise.

Chapter 1

GWEN



Joel and I flash our Mundell school IDs at a young hostess in a black cocktail dress, who barely jerks her head to usher us inside. After an hour waiting to get in, we rush through the Askew Gallery’s lobby, only to get stopped by two security guards.

Though they wear khakis and flattering black polo shirts, their dour expressions are all business.

“Phones,” one says to us. On the long cafeteria-style table next to him rest five cases divided into numbered slots, most of which are already full.

“We didn’t bring ours,” I reply.

One night only! the invitation read. View the Mundell Academy for Art’s exclusive collection of early work from Alistair Rat, never before shown in public. Discover the origins of New York City’s most infamous artist provocateur and gain insights into his process and development.

At the direction of the exhibit’s private owner, photography of any kind will be prohibited. All devices with a camera must be left with security or at home.

All Mundell Academy students may attend. All others will be admitted by invitation only.

Stepping outside without a phone felt surreal: a moment of mild panic, joined with a vague sense of liberation and excitement. I wouldn't want to make a habit of it, but not having a phone reminds me of my first night after moving to New York: I was on my own. There was no calling anyone for help. I had to figure things out myself.

Except, now Joel's with me, nearly crushing my hand as the other security guard guides a wand up and down us, making sure we aren't lying about our phones. We wouldn't be the first.

"Go in," the first one says at last.

Joel practically squeals; I would too if I could breathe.

I'm lucky just to be enrolled at Mundell, let alone have a scholarship. I came to the city hoping to be in the right place at the right time to experience an Alistair Rat piece — you never know where or how they'll show up: graffiti on a wall, a performance in a subway, projected from a cab...

I nearly fainted when I heard we'd get to see an entire gallery of his work, back when he painted and sculpted like everyone else. It's not the same as witnessing something new, but I'm not complaining. As it is, only a few hundred will be here tonight.

"See anyone exciting?" Joel asks as we survey the scene.

“Not yet,” I laugh. Rush Mundell no doubt invited the most influential and prestigious members of New York’s art community to grace the presence of his students, but it’s not like I’d recognize them.

“Oh, there, look!” says Joel. “See that guy in the white tunic? That’s Linus Crowley. Big-time photographer.”

“Neat.”

“And her in the yellow skirt? That’s...”

I’m not looking at the artists and socialites, I’m focused on a marble bust of Richard Nixon, depicted with a six-inch mohawk, wide gauge earrings and multiple nose piercings. It’s one of a series of statuettes; I don’t recognize most of them, except for the goth Mr. Rogers and face-tatted John Lennon.

I don’t know where Alistair Rat got the idea, but I like it. Simple, but subversive.

Joel snickers.

“Oh, there’s your favorite.”

I turn to see Lane Porter standing with Rush Mundell and several other guests at a serving table stacked with champagne flutes and cheese cubes.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” I scoff. “Porter hates Alistair Rat.”

“Maybe he had to attend. I see a lot of Mundell’s teachers.”

“I guess.”

Porter’s smiling as he sips his wine and listens to the conversation. Considering how much he must loathe this whole affair, he’s doing a great job of hiding his disdain.

“You should go talk to him,” Joel says, laughing. “I bet he’d love to be rescued from Mundell’s friends.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“He’s actually really nice,” Joel says. “And I know you’re dying to tell him why he’s wrong about Alistair Rat.”

I roll my eyes, though I can’t stop myself from gazing at his easy grin.

Joel’s not wrong, though. I’ve wanted to tell Porter that if it wasn’t for Rat, I never would have found my passion for art. Nothing good would come of it, though, which is why I avoided taking classes with him all year.

“Come on,” Joel prods. “I need you to keep him busy so I can talk to Mundell. You know you want to. He’s hot as fuck.”

Unbelievable.

It’s bad enough that I sneak glances at Porter every time I spot him at the academy. I don’t need Joel getting on my case.

Much like the artwork on display, Lane Porter could be chiseled out of stone: tall and broad-chested, with impeccably developed arms and legs. A stylish, gray sports jacket strains

to contain his entrancing physique, while his smile brings out dimpled cheeks and a cleft in his chin. His light, blue eyes elicit a soulful intensity that never appears in his manner: I've only ever observed him in good humor, which makes hating him so much harder. Joel's not helping, pointing out the obvious.

"I'm telling Martin you said that."

Joel laughs, shaking his head.

"Martin would agree with me. Come on, please? Please please?"

"Okay, okay!"

Might as well get this over with. I came for Alistair Rat, not socializing.

Joel and I start weaving through the exhibit, which is filling up more by the minute. Before we can join the conversation, Rush Mundell breaks from the group and climbs up onto a small stage.

I'll have to thank him later.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention!" he shouts, projecting his deep voice throughout the room. I freeze in place with Joel, who sighs. Mundell is on the older side, but he's handsome for his age, with sharp features free of wrinkles and a head full of thick, peppery hair. Not a knockout like Porter, but still.

"Thank you all for being here. For many people, standing in the presence of true artistic genius and learning from an

undisputed master happens once in a lifetime. Unless you're one of my students, then it happens every day.”

The crowd laughs politely. Joel lets out a loud hoot.

“Today we've gathered to appreciate a body of work that has known nothing but dispute. Alistair Rat is the kind of artist that leaves an impression on everyone, for better or worse. No one hears about him, or her, and fails to develop an opinion, one way or the other. Most people first learned the name Alistair Rat after that infamous opening night of *Death of a Salesman*.”

Audience members nod; some shake their heads. I grin, wishing I could have been there six years ago when a mannequin, disguised as lead actor Francis Bentham, fell from the rafters in the middle of the final act, its neck in a noose.

“Some have called Mr. Rat nothing more than a prankster. Others have praised him as an incisive auteur.”

The entire cast, crew and audience screamed as if the mannequin was real; they had no idea it was fake. However, no one acted right away. Some said they assumed it had to be a prank. Some said they were too scared. A few fainted, so they had an excuse. Everyone else sat there and watched the mannequin swing for a full minute and forty-seven seconds.

“He's inspired countless arguments about whether his work intends to impart social commentary, or merely rouse as much attention as possible.”

The occurrence became a national sensation when a short documentary went viral online. Alistair Rat had positioned dozens of cameras and hundreds of microphones to record the stunt from every angle; his compilation of reactions and the aftermath racked up millions of views within days. However, Alistair Rat never came forward to claim the stunt, so his identity has remained a mystery. Art critics have offered their theories, but none have panned out.

“However you feel about Alistair Rat, his work has resulted in an explosion of interest in the New York art scene, and for that we can all be grateful. So, please enjoy yourselves. You have my word, we’ve swept the building — tonight is an exhibition of Rat’s past work, not a current piece.”

The audience applauds and laughs as Mundell raises a glass.

I try not to glower. Alistair doesn’t make art for people like this to enjoy — his art is meant to challenge them — to scare them.

To disturb them.

“Come on,” Joel says. “I promised Martin I’d talk to Professor Mundell.”

“Yeah, okay. Then we’re checking out the exhibit.”

“Deal.”

We head over, passing a series of abstract watercolor paintings. Nobody’s really looking at them, and for good

reason: compared to Rat's usual work, they're bland and perfunctory — as if he felt obliged to produce them.

Commissions, perhaps?

To get past the next display, we have to fight our way through a sizable audience. I glance between them, spotting an interactive exhibit — a casino slot machine that plays sex noises instead of chimes and whistles.

I'll have to circle back to that one.

Finally, we find Mundell surrounded by students. As soon as he sees us, he smiles at Joel.

“All I'm saying is, Pollock was a drunk. He got himself and an innocent woman killed. That's not someone I want to emulate, in life or art,” says a guy I recognize from my History of Animation course.

Mundell sighs.

“No one is saying you should emulate anyone,” he replies, “but it is important to separate the art from the artist, and learn about what made them great. Would you discount Picasso because of his character flaws?”

“Sure, why not?”

Mundell glares.

“If that's your approach to an education in art, you should consider whether or not you've enrolled at the right school.”

I can't help chuckling at that. I kinda see the guy's point about Pollock and Picasso, but Rush Mundell is the last

person I'd tell.

“Does that mean we should learn as if we didn't know anything about the artist's life?” I ask. “After all, we're literally in a gallery of an artist we know nothing about, outside of his work.”

“Perhaps,” Mundell replies, smirking at me. “Although I'd be careful about learning too much from Alistair Rat. Personally, I think we'd all be better off with Mr. Franklin here as a role model.”

Joel blushes.

“Thank you, Professor Mundell,” he says. “It means a lot that you believe in me.”

“You have an enviable talent. We're lucky to have you here.”

Fuck yeah. I pat Joel's shoulder.

“Thank you, sir,” he says. “I was actually wondering if we could discuss my new portfolio-”

Mundell gestures for Joel to come with him.

“Let's. Excuse us, everyone.”

I wave Joel goodbye and flash him a thumbs up.

Mission accomplished.

Finally free to wander, I take in a walled-off platform labeled “Rat Race.” Six toy cars, decorated with sponsor logos like real race cars, speed around a track endlessly,

occasionally bowling over spring-loaded placards depicting men, women and children.

Thematically, it's a little too on-the-nose, but it does demonstrate Rat's penchants for utilizing technology as a medium. It must have taken some skill to build and program this piece.

"Mr. Rat was never known for his subtlety, was he?"

I turn to the speaker to find Lane Porter holding two champagne flutes.

"No, I guess not," I say, forcing my expression to stay neutral.

"Care for a drink?" he asks, offering me one of the glasses.

I hesitate.

"You're twenty-one, right?"

Again, I don't answer right away.

He winks.

"I won't tell anyone, in case you're worried. I'm not a bouncer."

"Honestly, I'm not much of a drinker."

He smiles and sets the extra glass aside.

"Fair enough."

I try to think of an excuse to leave before he can flirt some more, but my mind goes blank when I meet his eyes.

“I’m sure I’ve seen you before. Are you a Mundell student?” he asks, turning back to “Rat Race.”

“I am.”

Toy cars run over flat, plastic people and continue on, ready for another loop.

“First year?”

“Yeah.”

I wish he’d take the hint and leave me alone. Or, I wish I could summon the nerve to really let loose.

Fuck it.

I grab the champagne glass and take a sip. It’s strong, making me cough, but it tastes good.

“What’s your name?” Porter asks.

“Gwen.”

“That’s pretty. Adjusting to city life okay?”

Wow.

“What makes you think I’m adjusting to anything?”

He looks me up and down quickly.

“An educated guess. Most of Mundell’s students are here on scholarships from all around the country, and maybe it’s my imagination, but you still have the look of someone who hasn’t witnessed something unspeakable on the L train.”

I snort, despite myself. Once I saw a homeless man pissing in a corner at Astor Place, but that’s it.

“I’m from Ohio, and I’m doing just fine, thanks.”

“What are you studying?”

“Illustration. I’d like to write graphic novels.”

“Nice. I’m Lane, by the way. You’re not in any of my classes, but I teach Figure Drawing and Hands and Heads.”

The alcohol bubbles in my stomach. A spark travels up my body. I turn to face him.

“I know who you are, Professor Porter. I’ve read your critiques of Alistair Rat.”

Lane nods and takes a step back.

“That’s what it is,” he says. “That’s why you’ve been... guarded. You’re a Rat fan and you disagree with me.”

“That’s right.”

“In what way?”

I take a deep breath, reminding myself to keep it respectful. It’s not a personal attack, it’s an academic disagreement.

“You like to say Alistair seeks notoriety without having to answer to criticism, that he enjoys going viral and shocking people, but ultimately his work doesn’t have a cohesive message.”

Lane smiles. He rubs his chin, eyes lit with eager curiosity.

“And you believe he does?”

“I believe it has a purpose,” I say. “Rat’s art shows people who they really are. He puts people in situations that break our self-illusion and reveal our true nature.”

“Interesting,” Lane replies. “It’s a romantic idea, I’ll admit. Do you believe Rat succeeds in his purpose? Do you think his art really affects people?”

It’s a fair question.

“I don’t know. But does that matter? Artists have to follow their vision, don’t they?”

He chuckles.

“That’s convenient.”

“It’s easy to criticize,” I snap. “Not so easy to create something meaningful.”

“True. Tell you what: I’ve got an exhibition in a couple weeks. I’ll put you on the guest list at Galleria Carnale and you can tell me if I’ve succeeded.”

“Never heard of the place,” I say, admittedly just to be derisive. I’ve lived in New York for less than a year. It’s not like I’m aware of every niche gallery.

“They specialize in exploring eroticism, and my work is intended to disturb. Viewer discretion advised.”

A warmth stirs inside me.

“Is it going to be about shocking people, or is it going to have a cohesive message?” I ask, my voice coming out deep and sultry.

“Ideally, both. I think you’ll-”

Before he can finish, a deafening bell sounds, and an icy deluge rains from above.

Lane grabs my hand and pulls.

“That’s the fire alarm, everybody out!”

Chapter 2

GWEN



The sprinkler system soaks me through in an instant. Shivers set in immediately. I scan around the room for Joel and quickly spot him racing toward the exit with Professor Mundell.

“Gwen!” he shouts, waving at me.

“Come on!” Lane barks. “Let’s go!”

“Wait! I don’t see a fire. We have to save Alistair’s art!”

I try to grab one of the marble busts, but Lane doesn’t let go.

“Are you crazy? Fuck that, this is an emergency! Move it!”

His grasp is too hard to break, and my shoes begin to skid on the wet ground. If I didn’t give in and follow him, I’d fall.

People move quickly, but in an orderly fashion; I’m sure they’d hurry up if anyone saw an actual fire. Before long, Lane and I reach the street and he finally lets go. Without saying a thing, I work my way through the sodden mob until I find Joel.

“Are you okay?” he asks me, huddling in close.

“No, I’m fucking freezing!”

“Me too. You want to go home?” he asks.

I do. I want to jump into a hot shower as soon as humanly possible, although the last thing I want to do is ride the subway looking like I just came out of the sewer. I also wasn’t done checking out the exhibit.

“Do you think they’ll let us back inside?”

“Uh, no, Gwen. I don’t think so. Don’t they have to, like, clear the building?”

A wailing siren drowns him out as a firetruck rounds the corner.

“Hey, do you have any idea what the hell this is?” a woman asks us. “Did you smell smoke or anything?”

“No, nothing,” Joel answers. “Something must have set off the alarm, I guess.”

I groan, leaning my head on his shoulder.

Maybe those marble busts would be okay, but so much of Alistair’s art is being destroyed by those sprinklers. The paintings, the electronic stuff... and if there wasn’t even a fire, then it was for nothing!

I’m sure Lane fucking Porter will have a nice laugh about that.

Sighing, I look around for him. He’s at the door, still helping to usher people out of the Askew Gallery, even though the firefighters have mostly taken over.

I suppose I should go thank him for getting me out of the building, even if it was a false alarm.

I ask Joel to give me a minute and start to make my way over to Porter, who's wandering away. I hurry, not wanting to miss my chance.

He slips under the awning of a Mediterranean restaurant next door and reaches into his jacket. I open my mouth to call his name, but stop as he pulls out a small, clear plastic bag.

What the fuck?

I duck behind a trash bin and watch Porter carefully open the bag and take out a phone. I nearly gasp when the screen turns on.

Did he have that on him the whole time? There weren't supposed to be any phones at the exhibit. And why was it in a Ziploc bag?

Did Porter know about the fire alarm?

That son of a bitch.

I stand up to march over when the squawk of a megaphone chirps from behind us.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Rush Mundell says. "My apologies but due to this unexpected disruption, the exhibition has been canceled. The NYFD has asked everyone to please clear the street while they investigate. If you've left any personal property inside the building, please come back tomorrow to claim it. Again, I'm very sorry."

For fuck's sake.

I turn back to Porter, but he's not there — he's at the corner, and then he's gone, down into a subway entrance.

Pissed, I find Joel so we can go. With a few hundred people leaving the exhibit all at once, we have to walk three blocks before we can hail a cab. At least the driver blasts the heater for us.

Joel takes pity on me and lets me shower first, though we've mostly warmed up by the time we get home. While I wash, he calls Martin, who didn't expect us to get back for at least another hour. I'm drying my hair when he arrives with a bag of groceries and a case of White Claw.

When I get out of the bathroom, Joel and Martin are cooking dinner: a spicy Thai basil beef stir fry. Hearty, filling and sure to bring the heat long after we're done eating.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to see all the art," Martin says to me. "That's a real bummer."

"Thanks. It's really nice of you to cook for us on short notice. It smells amazing."

Joel pauses from cutting peppers and leans over to kiss Martin's cheek.

"He cooks like an angel and he *is* an angel," Joel says.

Martin blushes.

"Aww," he says. "I was going to have canned chili before you called, so this was definitely a step up."

I crack open a hard seltzer and take a long drink. Maybe I should take it easy until I've eaten, but whatever.

“At least Joel got to talk up Professor Mundell,” I say.
“How did it go?”

Joel sucks in his breath.

“Well, I think, but we'll see. He liked my concept of classical nudes with original art as tattoos. ‘A timeless subject with a modern twist,’ he called it. Mundell didn't make any promises, but he said I should get to work on it, immediately.”

“Oh my god, that's amazing!” I say. “Congratulations!”

“Gwen, would you be willing to model?” Martin asks.

“Hey!” Joel snaps. “I wasn't going to, you know, presume anything.”

“I'm not presuming, I'm just asking. If she wants to say no-”

“I'd be happy to,” I interrupt. “I'm not shy. Especially not for a talented artist. Will you show me what the tattoos will be first?”

“Of course,” says Joel.

“Great. And no butterfly tramp stamps.”

He laughs.

“Sure thing. So, what about you? I saw you talking to Professor Porter. How'd it go?”

I sigh, then summarize our discussion of Alistair Rat.

“So it was about as expected. But there was something else, after the fire alarm.”

After I explain about the cell phone in the bag, Joel asks, “Are you sure it wasn’t a case of some kind? Don’t some people use those?”

“Who?” I say. “Fishermen?”

“Porter isn’t an underwater videographer or something, is he?” Martin asks.

I shake my head. Their suspicion is understandable but I know what I saw.

“No. It was definitely a plastic bag. And again, no phones were allowed, so why did he have one?”

“You think he knew the sprinklers would go off,” Joel says. “I’m sorry, but that sounds kinda crazy.”

“How could he have known?” adds Martin.

“Maybe he set them off,” I say.

Why not? The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. What better way to send Alistair a fuck you than to rain all over his exhibition?

“How though?” says Joel. “Weren’t you talking to Porter when it happened? How could he have done it?”

Hmm.

“That’s true,” I say.

Martin chuckles softly.

“Maybe Alistair did it,” he surmises. “It would be a great prank.”

“Alistair doesn’t pull pranks,” I say. That’s the sort of bullshit Porter likes to say when he dunks on Alistair. I’m sick of hearing it. Martin is a great guy, but unfortunately he’s on Porter’s side in this regard.

“Sorry,” Martin mumbles. “Just spitballing.”

Although, it *is* an interesting idea. Alistair didn’t host this exhibit; did Mundell have permission to show those pieces? Maybe Alistair wanted to quite literally wash away those early works, which don’t really have the same impact or meaning. Admittedly, I do enjoy the idea of Alistair anonymously wandering around, observing people reacting to his art. It would be funny, in a way. But it’s impossible to prove.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say at last. “Look, unless someone has a better theory, I’m convinced Porter knows something. I’m going to talk to him and find out.”

—

Throughout the rest of the weekend I try not to obsess over what happened at the Askew Gallery, but it’s not easy. I’m too fucking pissed. Sketching helps me channel the anger, but it doesn’t take my mind off things. Working at Cafe Vitolo passes the time much better. Business is too busy to get distracted by life, and a forced smile puts more tips in the jar.

On Monday, Joel and I begin Mundell Academy's infamous final crunch week. We each have a couple of exams, plus our course portfolios are due. At the same time, Martin has an engineering final project at NYU, so he'll be gone until Friday.

I spend all of Monday afternoon cramming for my Art History test, but take a break for my first yearly guidance appointment with Rush Mundell.

Considering he owns the school and the Mundell family has been an artistic institution going back generations, I'm not surprised to find Rush's office looks more like a gallery and studio, featuring wall-to-wall paintings by several great masters, as well as some of his most accomplished students.

I could easily see Joel's work fitting right in. Mine, on the other hand...

"It's like being in a museum isn't it?" he says, grinning.

I shake my head, smiling at my silliness.

"Yeah, kinda."

Mundell nods.

"It's a lovely collection, but I don't want you comparing yourselves to someone else, or thinking you're not up to another's standards. What you see here is the work of students just like you. If I didn't think you possessed this level of talent, you wouldn't be here."

"Cool," I say, sitting down. "Thank you."

“Let’s see what you’ve been working on, Ms. Carpenter.”

I try to act casual as I pass him the drafts of *The Ohio Zoo*, my graphic novel-in-progress. He awarded my scholarship; I don’t want him to think it’s gone to waste.

He flips through the pages slowly, not reading each one, of course, but taking a good look. As tempted as I am to comment on what he’s seeing, I keep my mouth shut.

“Your illustrations are very evocative,” he says as he gets to the end. “I love your technique of illustrating from Allison’s direct perspective in those tense moments between her and her mother. It conveys what she’s experiencing while also allowing the reader to have their own reaction. I think that’s very effective.”

I exhale.

Wow.

“Thank you, Professor Mundell. That means a lot.”

“You’re welcome. It’s a very solid effort for your first year. You have a lot of growth ahead of you, though. I wonder if you’ve considered branching out into other forms. At your age, you don’t have to commit to graphic novels.”

I grip the armrests of my seat and etch my smile.

He doesn’t know it, but he sounds like my father — a polite, caring version, but like him nonetheless.

“I’d like to tell stories,” I respond. “That’s really important to me.”

“In some form or another, all art tells a story: the artist’s. What does *The Ohio Zoo* say about you?”

I frown, glancing down at my feet.

“Forgive me for asking, but I’m getting a strong sense that your work is loosely autobiographical,” Mundell says.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I reply.

He nods, his expression stoic. Eyes, pitying.

“I understand why you’d want to tell that story, Gwen. The best artists in any discipline draw from their personal history to power their creativity. I believe you will too. My advice to you for now is to expand on where you draw inspiration from. Dig new wells, and drink from them. Expand your studies to creators outside your current scope.”

Maybe I’m making the mistake of interpreting his advice in the worst possible way, but it sounds like he wants me to steer away from graphic novels. I don’t want to assume the worst, but the way he’s taken Joel under his wing... is it because Joel has the talent to be the next Vermeer, or because Joel aspires to be a classical painter like Mundell?

I could have it all wrong, but the idea angers me.

“Well, I do have a great interest in Alistair Rat,” I point out, against my better judgment. “I’ve been following his career since I was old enough to appreciate it. The way he digs into the psyche is seriously brilliant. It’s blunt at first, right? But the aftermath has so many layers: the immediate response in the moment, followed by the backlash, and then

the criticism of the backlash. It all feels impossibly calculated, like Alistair knows exactly how the world will react. It's on-

I'm babbling. Mundell listens politely, but he shifts impatiently.

"Another level," I finish.

He smiles, emitting a tactful hum, as if humoring a precocious niece.

"I've never really understood the public's appreciation for Alistair Rat, but that's an elucidating explanation," he says. "Still, I think you ascribe far greater talent and ambition to Rat than he actually possesses. He knows how to make headlines, I'll grant that, but I don't think the world will celebrate his art decades from now."

I hold back any trace of a reaction. Anything I would say, I'd probably regret.

"You, however, have the potential to create work that will live in readers' minds in a positive way," Mundell continues. "You can leave something meaningful and inspiring. Stay focused, Ms. Carpenter."

"I will," I lie, getting up to leave. "Thanks so much."


Plans and plots swirl in my mind as I exit his office and take the stairs down to the street.

I'm not going to stop working on *The Ohio Zoo*, but I've got a new project.

Mundell and Porter are wrong about Alistair Rat's art, and I'm going to prove it.

Chapter 3

LANE



Mundell uncorks a bottle of Cabernet and fills my glass, then Tichenor's, Vina's and his own. Tichenor strokes his beard as he examines a student's charcoal drawing. Vina drinks half her glass and groans, rolling her eyes at a photograph in her hands.

"That bad?" I ask, sipping my wine. Earthy tones, not overly dry.

She shows me the photograph: a black-and-white rendering of a grainy cell phone photo apparently taken in a strip club. A single dancer stands on a stage, her face blank, eyes trained on nothing.

"It's called 'Misery,'" Vina replies. "The rest of the series gets increasingly pretentious and pornographic."

Mundell and I laugh.

"There's one like that every year," he says, shaking his head. "Hopefully his final portfolio will have something good."

I'd ask whose rich dad got that guy into the Academy, but Mundell wouldn't appreciate the jab.

“How’s yours?” Vina asks Tichenor.

He passes around a couple of the drawings. The one I get is called “Void Relic.”

“They show promise,” Tichenor says. “Her command of shadow is quite skillful.”

I examine the nicely contrasting gradients and nod, then pass the drawing back.

“What’s that one?” he asks, pointing at the graphic novel in my hands.

“*The Ohio Zoo* by Gwen Carpenter,” I say. “It’s good.”

“I would hope,” Mundell cuts in. “You’ve been reading it, instead of evaluating it and moving on.”

Have I?

Fuck. I didn’t even realize. My mind’s been on that night at Askew Gallery.

I made more than one mistake.

Talking to Gwen about Alistair Rat was not smart. I knew how she felt about his art from the way she lingered over an exhibit as amateurish as “Rat Race.” Nothing I could say to her was going to be taken well. I should have left it alone, but I wanted to chat with her and that meant Rat would inevitably become the topic.

I don’t regret it, but it was still a mistake.

Where I really fucked up, though, was being careless afterward, outside. Did she see me take out my phone? She

was looking right at me until Mundell interrupted. I should have stayed and found out, one way or another. Of course, what I really should have done was made sure no one was watching before taking the phone out, but it was time to call Rory to pick me up.

“Is the narrative as good as the illustration?” Mundell asks. “She told me it was semi-autobiographical.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, flipping back through the pages. “It’s very compelling, for someone so young.”

If even half of it is based on her life, she’s seen some shit. I haven’t interacted with her much, but whichever parts are true, I wouldn’t be surprised. Back at the gallery she wasn’t afraid to stand her ground on the subject of Alistair Rat. She wasn’t afraid when the sprinklers came on; when everyone was running for the exit, her priority was protecting the exhibit.

She’s smart, too.

Rat’s art shows people who they really are. He puts people in situations that break our self-illusion and reveal our true nature, she said.

Well-put, way more eloquent than I expected. She makes a good point. Hopefully I’ll get a chance to tell her so.

If I’m being honest with myself, it doesn’t hurt that she’s hauntingly beautiful. Allison in *The Ohio Zoo* is clearly a stand-in for Gwen, but she exaggerates Allison’s features in self-effacing ways. Gwen’s lovely, large brown eyes could

stop a man's heart, but Allison's bulge in their sockets, almost insectlike. Gwen's radiant red hair turned as many heads as her slim body that night, flattered by a tight, sea-green dress. Allison's frame looks stretched — a bending willow branch always on the verge of snapping, with a wiry frond atop her head.

I hope Gwen's illustrating Allison to give the impression of inner turmoil, insecurity and repulsion, rather than subconsciously portraying herself through a lens of low self-esteem. She has no reason to see herself so uncharitably.

Tichenor grabs Gwen's sketches from my grip.

"I think I should take a look at these," he says, sitting back down, "seeing as how she's my student this fall."

"Yeah," I mumble, reaching for another portfolio. "Sure thing."

Fucking hell. I'm doing it again. Fixating on an attractive student.

I try to make myself thumb through a folder full of earnest but boring still-life drawings, but my mind returns to Askew Gallery. There's no way I'll be able to focus on these evaluations. I know what I have to do.

I apologize to the group, feigning a little queasiness, and walk home. It's more than twenty blocks, but the distance doesn't matter. In my mind I'm already hard at work building the setting and imagining her pose.

Strung up, arms over her head, cinched at the wrists?

Caged like an animal, compressed and confined?

Bound to a chair, legs spread invitingly?

Clothed?

Nude?

Frightened?

Resilient?

By the time I reach home, I've decided.

Full-length, white gown. Standing up straight. Manacles around her wrists, each one chained to the ground, keeping her arms extended. Head, craned all the way back.

With her face largely obscured, I could deny that it's Gwen, but I know the truth, and that's enough. I shouldn't be doing this without her knowledge. One could argue that every man undresses women in their minds, but this crosses a line.

I don't care.

My brush strikes the canvas, etching the contours of her sublime form. The gentle curvature of her hips and breasts contrast the sharp ridges of her dark restraints. Behind her I draw a dank dungeon of cold concrete. I lighten the shading of her upper body with subtle patterning, as if to simulate rays of sunlight peeking through a small, barred window.

Finally, I draw a key above her head, suspended from a string. In her sight, but utterly out of reach.

The meaning is clear: Gwen imprisons herself in darkness. She prefers it, even though her art could lift her into

the light.

Taking in my work, I frown.

It's not right. I barely know Gwen; my depiction is based on assumptions made from examining her art, like words translated from one language to another and then a third. I could be way off-base, but I don't think I am.

My apartment's intercom buzzes while I contemplate the painting, Gwen and the future.

Rory's right on time.

I head downstairs and find him waiting on the sidewalk, leaning against a cardboard box taller than him.

"Freight elevator?" he asks.

I point around the corner to the auxiliary entrance, then grab one side of the box. Together, Rory and I carry and load it until we've reached my apartment. We don't speak until I've shut the door behind us.

"How did the restoration go?" I ask.

Rory smirks as he retrieves a box cutter from his pants pocket and proceeds to slice the open cardboard.

"Took some doing. The water damage was pretty severe. All the electronics and moving parts had to go."

Not a big surprise.

"Did the gallery give you any trouble?"

"I slipped the cleanup crew a hundred bucks apiece," Rory says. "Instead of putting it in the dumpster, they took it

to my van. No one's gonna miss it.”

Nodding, I sigh. So much money could have been made selling off all those pieces to Alistair Rat's fans, but Askew had to hoard them all. If they understood Rat's work in the slightest, they'd have realized that his true art couldn't be owned — all they had was his warm-ups. His scribbles. The shit he made while still trying to find his voice.

Rory finishes cutting the box, revealing the item within: “Pay to Play,” my favorite from the exhibit. If any piece was worthy of salvaging, it was this one.

“It'll work like it did before?” I ask, examining the machine. It looks just like it did days ago; who would guess it had been doused by an emergency sprinkler system?

“Oh yeah. I already reprogrammed it,” Rory says. “Let's set it up.”

We carry the machine into what used to be the guest bedroom, but now serves as my private gallery space. I've already cleared a spot for “Pay to Play” next to a power outlet. Before long, we've got it plugged in and functioning.

Yeah, just like that, the machine groans in a male voice as I yank the lever.

Rory laughs.

Jackpot! the machine screams, now in a sultry female voice, as the three reels align.

“Great work, man,” I say, patting Rory on the back. “You'll bill me for the work?”

“Yeah, eventually.” He takes a turn playing the machine.
“I know you’re good for it.”

“Of course. Come on, let’s relax. Want a beer?”

“Definitely.”

We head for my kitchen, but before we get there, he breaks off and peers into my home studio.

“You been painting,” he says, sniffing the air.

Shit.

“Yeah.”

Rory enters the studio and finds my painting of Gwen.

“This is good, Lane. Much better than your usual crap.”

I laugh.

Dickhead.

“Thanks. It needs work.”

Rory shrugs.

“If you say so. Is she someone you know?”

I gesture for him to follow me out, and he does.

“She’s the one I was talking to at the gallery,” I explain, taking out two bottles of Ommegang. “She’s a student.”

“Uh oh.”

I smile ruefully as I open our beers. He takes his and we sit at the kitchen table.

“You said *a* student, not *your* student. Does that mean she’s fair game?” he asks.

“Technically, no. But since when has that stopped me?”

He nods, glancing back at the studio.

“She’s hot,” Rory says. “If she’s down, why not go for it?”

I snort, then take a long sip of my beer.

“I could get fired.”

“Please. Mundell doesn’t care.”

“Probably not,” I admit. Rush knew about the others. He always let it slide as long as they weren’t in my class or weren’t going to be, and we didn’t cause some kind of messy scandal. “Things change, though. It’s always a risk.”

Rory drinks, savoring the bitter, craft brew.

“How long has it been since the last one?” he asks. “You could stand to get laid.”

“You’re not wrong. But there’s a twist: she’s a Rat fan.”

“Oh, is she?” Rory laughs, a loud hoot. “That’s too bad.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I chuckle.

“All right, all right. Listen, Lane.” He sets down his bottle and sits up straight. “You’ve known her how long, you’re already painting her? You need some fresh inspiration, and it looks like you’ve found it.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

He means well, and it's true — my art has stagnated lately. I need to fill my creative well, but that's a flimsy excuse.

I'm not interested in Gwen because I need a muse.

I'm going to claim her because I want her.

Chapter 4

GWEN



On Friday morning, Joel and I jitter on our way to hand in our final portfolios, wired after a night of pounding Red Bulls and coffee. With our exams out of the way, we drew and painted until our hands cramped into rigid claws. My heart pounded and I had to pee what felt like every ten minutes, but pages of *The Ohio Zoo* came together as the sun rose.

“Ready?” he asks, holding his meticulously wrapped portfolio.

“Ready,” I say.

We step inside Mundell’s administrative office. It’s empty, save for the expansive sea of projects just like ours stacked on a series of desks. We add ours to the piles marked for our teachers.

“That was a little anticlimactic, huh?” Joel says.

“Yeah. I was hoping there’d be a choir of angels to sing or something.”

“Exactly.”

He gets out his phone and snaps a picture of his portfolio among the rest, then sends it to Martin. I take a shot of mine

too, just in case I need proof I handed it in on time.

“Come on,” I say. “We gotta go.”

The adrenaline rush of finishing our finals slips away as we head for Cafe Vitolo. My body aches to crash into bed and sleep for a week, but we have the morning shift to work.

“I’m going to pass the fuck out,” I tell Joel, leaning my head against his shoulder.

“I’ll make us espressos when we get there.”

The thought of drinking more coffee right now turns my stomach.

“Thanks, but no.”

I can’t take any more caffeine. I need food. Neither of us have eaten. We were so focused on finishing that we forgot. However, we are right outside Jumbo Bagel Express. So long as I live, I will never eat another Ohio bagel again. There’s just no comparison. There’s food at the cafe, but it’s expensive and we don’t get any kind of employee discount.

Pausing, I tap Joel’s shoulder.

“Do we have time for bagels?” I ask.

He checks his phone.

“No, Gwen! Our shift starts in five minutes. We don’t have time!”

“We do if we eat and run. We’ll be out of there in thirty seconds, I promise.”

“This is a bad idea, Gwen!” he shouts, but I’m already racing inside.

Four minutes later, we haul ass down the street, trying to chew and swallow without tripping or choking.

“You had to... get yours... toasted?” Joel growls.

“Lightly... toasted!”

There’s warm cream cheese stuck to my upper lip. We are going to be late. I do not fucking care. I’m too hungry and it’s too delicious. My only regret is that if we’re going to be late anyway, I should have gotten my bagel with eggs and bacon.

Kyle, our manager, glares at us when we arrive, but doesn’t say anything. We’d told him finals were due today, and as an aspiring screenwriter fresh out of film school, he’s been there. For the first few hours, the breakfast rush keeps us too busy to feel tired. Once it’s done, Joel leans back against the counter and droops his head.

“Hey, wake up,” I whisper. “We’ll be done soon.”

Joel whips his head back and forth, shaking off his drowsiness.

“Yeah,” he mumbles.

“Just think about how nice it’ll be to see Martin later. I bet you two will have an amazing night.”

He smiles. They’ve barely seen each other this week; Martin has spent every waking second finishing his engineering finals at NYU.

“It’ll be nice. If we can stay awake.”

I get into the cabinets below the register and grab packages of napkins, straws and stirrers to restock the dispensers.

“Nap this afternoon,” I say. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Gwen, are you sure you don’t mind me spending the night with Martin? I feel like I’m ditching you.”

He’s so sweet I could cry.

“Joel, we’ve spent the last thirty-six hours together! Go be with your boyfriend! Don’t worry about me. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Good, good. Anything exciting?”

I don’t answer right away. I have to tell him eventually, especially if I’ll need his help. Still, it’s a lot to ask. I’m saved by a frazzled-looking man in a badly-fitted suit, who comes in with a lunch order for his entire office. By the time Joel and I finish making the sandwiches, smoothies and coffees, I’ve built up my nerve.

“So, remember how I met Professor Porter at the gallery last week?” I begin.

“Yeah. You got into it about Alistair Rat,” Joel says.

“Right. So, I had a similar talk with Mundell earlier this week.”

“Uh oh.

“I want to do something. Like Rat. I want to show them his kind of art is meaningful.”

Joel sighs.

“You mean, like, a dissertation?”

I laugh. Yeah, that would be the smart thing to do, I guess.

“No, I mean, make my own art, in Rat’s style. I mean, he hasn’t done anything in years. I’d like to think he wouldn’t mind if I followed in his footsteps, if I did it well.”

“Maybe,” Joel says. “Rat doesn’t seem like someone who’d care what other artists do, good or bad. But what about *The Ohio Zoo*?”

“I’ll still work on it. Like, it can be what I do for Mundell, while my real art would be under some other name. Like Alistair.”

“You have a pseudonym?”

“Not yet,” I say, as a couple our age enters the cafe. While Joel and I make their orders, I think about possible names.

“More importantly,” Joel says after we’ve served the customers, “What sort of statement are you going to make, and how are you going to make it?”

“Oh, I already have ideas. You can’t imagine how many times I’ve daydreamed about what I’d do if I were like Alistair. I could be ready to do something in, like, a few days. Especially now that finals are done. Except, I can’t do it alone. Someone has to get it on video.”

Joel hesitates, as if considering what that would entail: recording some kind of strange, unpredictable real-world situation, and somehow not being too obvious about it. However, his contemplation only lasts a second, then he breaks out into a big, bright smile.

“Okay, Gwen. You’re on,” he says. “You said you’d model for my paintings; this is how I’ll repay you.”

Oh.

“Joel, I’m going to model for you anyway. Because I want to, not as a favor. You don’t owe me for that.”

“Yeah, I know. So I’m going to do this for you too, not as a favor...”

“You know this is different-”

“As long as I don’t appear on camera,” he finishes.

His mind’s made.

“That’s totally fine. But, you, ah, don’t want to run this by Martin first?”

“Why?”

I roll my eyes.

“You know. He’s not a fan of Alistair’s. What would he say about you helping me do, like, something in the same style?”

Joel shrugs.

“I mean, probably nothing. It’s your art. I’d just be helping out. You know, like whoever helped Alistair.”

He makes a good point there. A lot of critics believed no single person could really coordinate all the moving parts of an Alistair Rat stunt, and presumed that Rat was actually more than one person.

“What if we get in trouble?” I ask. Alistair Rat would have faced a variety of infractions if anyone knew who he was. I can’t promise something similar won’t happen to us.

Joel shakes his head.

“I’ll be careful,” he says. “If things get out of hand, I’m just a bystander and you will take full responsibility.”

“Fair enough.”

“Good. So, tell me about this idea of yours.”

I grin.

“Well, it starts like this...”

—

I spend most of Saturday making my outfit while Joel and Martin spend some time together. Apparently Martin did not love my idea, as expected, but he always encourages others to chase their dreams, so he gives Joel his blessing to help me out. He even lends us his Bluetooth microphone and helps us program it. I thank them with a sumptuous chicken fettuccine Alfredo dinner made from scratch, then Joel and I go over the plan over and over. We discuss what we’ll do if things go wrong, and where we’ll rendezvous if we get separated. By the end of the night, we’ve got it down from top to bottom.

On Sunday, I watch YouTube tutorials on video editing and practice on old recordings until I'm confident I can do a decent job. It doesn't have to be Oscar-worthy: just good enough for the Internet. At the same time, a little technical learning serves as a good distraction for my nerves. By the end of the day, I feel ready.

In the early afternoon on Monday I emerge from the subway in Union Square wearing a thrift store wedding dress split in several places and splattered with fake blood. I've darkened my face, especially under my eyes, to simulate bruises. I haven't seen myself in a mirror, but the looks I got on the R after taking off my poncho told me I'd achieved the look I sought.

At first I simply stand still, letting the flow of foot traffic wash around me. New Yorkers have seen everything; there's plenty of space in the square for people to slip past, so most of them pay no attention to me. A few tourists stop and stare; some take pictures.

I don't consider myself an actress, but I've imagined doing this performance so many times. I've had the dress for years, and I've rehearsed. I'm as ready as one can possibly be.

At the start, my biggest concern is the police. This whole show could be over very quickly if any approach and ask me to leave. A few eyeball me, but as long as I don't cause a disturbance, they keep their distance.

When I catch sight of Joel taking a seat on a nearby bench, I whisper, “Can you hear me?”

Martin’s microphone, now sewn into my dress, has a short range. Joel has to stay somewhat close, or this won’t work. Thankfully, he flashes a quick thumbs-up, his phone charged and ready to record, so I begin.

I start turning toward men in suits, staring them down as they go by. Most ignore me, some laugh. A few walk faster.

When one gets so close he nearly brushes my shoulder, I say to him, “She remembers.”

“Excuse me?” he asks, turning around.

“She remembers,” I repeat.

The man shakes his head.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” he mutters, then keeps going.

His reaction isn’t unexpected. There will be many who won’t have any clue what that’s supposed to mean. I get three more like him before my first success.

“She remembers,” I tell an old man walking at the pace of someone half his age. His black briefcase matches his suit, and he wears his hair slicked back.

He freezes in place, then eyes me up and down.

“What did you just say to me?”

“She... remembers.”

He grunts a laugh, his upper lip rising in a sneer.

“No shit, she remembers. I told her what would happen if she didn’t shut up.”

Fucking hell.

Is he making a sick joke, or is he serious?

As much as I’d like to find out for sure, I hold back, glaring at him until he grunts and leaves.

For more than an hour, I continue the act.

“She remembers,” I tell dozens of men. Several get angry.

“Do you want to remember, too?” a middle-aged man says, balling his fist. “You should mind your own business.”

There it is, the cue to up the ante: a threat.

“She remembers!” I growl, loudly enough for passersby to take notice. I hold my ground, chasing away all thoughts of running.

Alistair Rat wouldn’t run.

“You’re a crazy person,” he says, backing away.

“She remembers,” I whisper one last time before he’s gone.

It kills me not to glance over at Joel every time someone reacts to me. Is he getting good footage? Have I stayed in range for the microphone? I can’t tell. However, he hasn’t whistled to signal he’s been forced to leave, or that I should, so I can only assume we’re okay to continue.

The crowd thickens as rush hour draws closer. Men in suits become plentiful, but they’re in more of a hurry. I have

to speak louder to be heard, and no one stops. I consider calling the act off early, but finally I get a hit.

“She remembers,” I say to a man about my age. He’s moderately handsome, with highly angular features and closely cropped hair. His suit fits perfectly, likely custom-tailored. There’s a false confidence in his manner, though: he glances around constantly, as if waiting for a fight he knows he can’t handle. Did his father get him his job? Does he know he’s in danger of getting fired? Does he sense his female coworkers despise him?

When I deliver my line, I expect him to keep walking, but he stops.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks.

“She remembers.”

He fakes a laugh.

“What are you, some kind of witch?”

I don’t answer, I just stare back.

“Did Kim set this up?”

I’d love to know who that is.

“She remembers.”

“Hey, fuck you. She said we could do it.”

I don’t reply.

“What did she tell you? She said she wasn’t going to make a thing about it, so if she said something else, she’s lying.”

All I do is stare back.

He seethes for a moment, then laughs.

“This is bullshit. You’re nobody. You don’t know Kim. You don’t.”

“She remembers,” I say.

Rage reddens the man’s face. He reaches back, balling a fist. It happens too fast for me to react.

Chapter 5

GWEN



“Hey, whoa, dude,” Joel says, stepping between us.
“Leave the crazy lady alone, okay?”

The spell breaks. The man retreats, especially when he notices Joel’s phone is pointed right at him.

“Yeah, whatever,” he says, turning to go. I watch him until he’s out of sight.

“You okay?” Joel asks, pocketing his phone.

I nod.

“That’s enough. Meet me at home.”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer; he slips a MetroCard into my hand and goes.

I wait five minutes in silence, then head for the subway and make my way home.

Aside from almost getting assaulted, that went really well. Regardless of how the footage looks, I got a reaction out of a lot of people and didn’t get arrested. That’s a win. More importantly, whether or not anyone appreciates what I did, it was fun. It felt like something I was supposed to do.

—

I don't even bother showering or changing when I arrive. Joel's already downloaded the video; I hug him, then start editing. Joel picks us up a pizza for dinner and is the first to find photos of me on Twitter. I nearly scream when I see the hashtag: #SheRemembers

Hundreds of New Yorkers have posted pictures. As far as the Internet goes, it's nothing — barely a surface ripple. However, that's just the beginning.

By midnight, I have a completed piece. Joel and Martin don't say much after seeing it.

“What, you don't like it?” I ask, confused. As far as I'm concerned, Joel did an amazing job filming me. The audio came through perfectly. I think I did okay editing, for a beginner.

“I'm just not sure I really understand it,” Martin says. “Like, are you expecting these men to confess to something?”

“Maybe? They're supposed to know that we haven't forgotten the things they've done. Whatever that means to them.”

“I guess. I'm just not sure it'll come off that way.”

Martin could be right about that, but it's for the public to decide. Alistair never told anyone what to think of his art — he let it speak for itself. I opt to do the same, and post the footage online with dozens of fake accounts I've created across Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. I include a spree of

hashtags in each one, every variation I can think up for #SheRemembers.

Then I let the Internet do the rest.

I try to sleep that night, but I'm too wired, wondering what I'll do next.

—

The video builds steam on Tuesday, gaining dozens of views in the early hours, then hundreds of views around lunchtime. By the end of the working day, thousands have watched. Joel and I even see people showing it to their friends and coworkers at Cafe Vitolo.

Most importantly, it's all over my feeds — people I know and follow have engaged with it through reposts, comments and likes. I can't tell how far outside of the New York City art scene it's spread, but the people who I care about most have seen it or will soon.

Wednesday morning brings an e-mail that I should stop by Professor Mundell's office during afternoon office hours to pick up my portfolio. To kill time until then, I help fulfill my arrangement with Joel and pose for a painting.

Standing still for hours, my mind wanders. Usually I dive into plans for my graphic novels: plots, characters and especially the illustrations. I imagine specific scenes and how each panel will look, and as soon as we're done I rush to sketch them out. It's a huge benefit to my process. Today,

however, it kills me not to be scrolling social media. I could spend all day reading comments — even the negative ones.

Is this supposed to be art? one user asked.

She looks like a Walking Dead extra got drunk and wandered off the set.

You think she remembers what it's like to have a job?

Everyone's a critic, I guess. At least some people appreciate what I was trying to do.

This was a haunting reminder of how many people suffer in silence, one wrote. *I hope this artist keeps going.*

Another said, *I can think of a few men who ought to hear that #SheRemembers...*

Who is this? Does anyone know where to follow her?

Damn.

I need a pseudonym. Alistair Rat had the benefit of producing physical artwork at the start of his career; he could sign it. Reading through the posts turns up several crowd-sourced ideas, some better than others. The Bloody Bride isn't bad. Ghost of Girlfriends Past makes me laugh. I might call the performance that, but it won't be my name.

Figuring that out, as well as what my next piece will be, weighs on my mind over the next few days. Between working at the cafe and posing for Joel's paintings, I have plenty of time to brainstorm, but my thoughts turn to Lane Porter and his upcoming art show.

I feel a little selfish, but I can't help wanting to know if he saw my video, and if so what he'll say about it. This is his show, and maybe I'll like it, but in all honesty it's not the reason I'm going.

When Friday rolls around, I pick out the same sea-green dress I wore to the Rat exhibit — it's the nicest one I own, and it should help Porter recognize me.

Except, when I get to Galleria Carnale, I find he didn't need any help.

Right inside the lobby, hanging from a wall behind the reception desk, there's a painting of me. I think it's me, anyway. The title reads "Awakening." There's a figure with hands chained to the ground and her head pointed at the sky, hiding most of her face. I can't be positive who it is, but on gut instinct I recognized myself. Am I just being self-centered? I don't think so. It's not like I see myself in paintings all the time.

Maybe I want the painting to be me because of the shiver running through my body. She looks so beautiful in that white gown, and so helpless... She's not looking up because she's scared, though. Her mouth's closed. She's in ecstasy.

If this is Lane's art, I have to see more.

"First time?" says a hostess at the gallery's main entrance.

"Huh?"

"Is this your first time here?"

"Oh, yeah," I say.

“Great. Welcome. I’m Donna. I’m afraid tonight’s show is a member-only event. If you’d like to join-”

“I should be on the guest list,” I interrupt.

Fuck. I didn’t mean to be curt, but my heart’s pounding.

“Sorry. I’m... Gwen Carpenter.”

She opens a folder resting on a podium by the door, then nods after a moment.

“Yep, you are. Here’s a disclaimer about the exhibit,” she says, handing me a slip of paper. “You should read it.”

I give it a glance. Something about safety, then eroticism and viewer discretion.

“No photography, no videos. Got it?” says Donna.

“Sure.”

She smirks, and doesn’t try to hide it.

“Okay, you can go in. Enjoy!”

What’s that about?

Does she know it’s me in the painting? Or did Porter say something to her? Is there a note next to my name on this list? I peer over but she shuts the folder.

Whatever. I head inside, and then I see what the disclaimer tried to tell me.

The only painting in this gallery was back out front. The exhibits inside are alive: naked women, all of them restrained in some manner, all of them visibly suffering. Judging by the

behavior of the gallery visitors, this is completely normal. Men and women, mostly older than me, take in each “piece” as calmly and analytically as if they were sculptures.

I count six “exhibits” in total. Four of them are bound in place, standing or sitting on miniature square stages. One has her hands bound at the wrists and chained to the ceiling, pulled so high she barely stands on her tiptoes. She’s completely naked, her oiled, glistening body fully on display. An ornate calligraphy inscription on her flat stomach says “Intern.” No one seems to care that she’s in obvious pain: she whimpers and groans while sweat drips down her forehead. I assume if she needed to be let down, someone would help her. I hope so.

Another woman dangles from her arms and legs by scarlet red ropes, her body pointed at the ground like a torpedo so she rests on her head and chest. Unlike the first “piece,” she sighs and smiles, despite the matching red gag in her mouth. Face buried in a thick, white pillow, she closes her eyes — for all I know, she’s actually asleep. A wiry gold tiara rests in her tousled nest of blonde hair. A placard on the stage reads, “The Favorite.”

Someone nudges my shoulder, so I turn around. I nearly scream, seeing the next exhibit: a woman covered from head to toe in skin-tight black leather. Her arms have been strapped behind her back, and a heavy hood leaves only her nostrils exposed. The only non-black leather part of her outfit is a silver necklace and a heart-shaped pendant. I have to look closely to read its inscription: “Finders Keepers.”

The woman — I assume it's a woman based on her figure — mumbles something at me. I stare at her, jaw hanging, not sure what to do. Is she asking me for help?

“Gotta watch out for that one.”

I turn to find Lane Porter. A knowing smile lifts his stony features.

“Excuse me?” I say.

Tonight he wears a sharp, gray suit with a blue and gold, diagonally striped tie; it's a bit formal for the gallery, but then again it is his show and he is a professor. I'm not complaining; he looks impossibly gorgeous.

“That's Finders Keepers,” he explains, gesturing to the leather-clad woman. “She's here to be played with, but she'll get lost on her own, so she'll wait for someone to show her around.”

Wow.

Tremors pulse within. Heat builds unbearably inside me.

I'd like to pretend it's just Lane, but I've been churning since I entered the building. His painting of me, followed by the exhibits... It's too much.

“And... uh... how am I supposed to... interpret that?” I ask.

“You're asking the artist for a direct explanation of their intent?” he replies, a single, amused brow rising. “You know that's frowned upon, Ms. Carpenter.”

Something tightens inside of me. “Ms. Carpenter” is what Professor Mundell would call me. Lane works at Mundell but he’s not my teacher.

“I do know, but I’m asking anyway, Professor,” I say, gesturing around at all the other exhibits. “I’d love to understand your process and how it resulted in this unique presentation.”

“It was a collaborative process, in fact. Galleria Carnale commissioned this program and hired me to put it on. Then I interviewed the models and talked to them about their lives.”

Lane points to the woman marked “Intern.”

“Take Darcy over there. She’s about your age, and she told me about her year as an intern in the financial sector. She said it was the most humiliating experience of her life.”

Darcy loses her footing and swings freely by her wrists for a moment until her toes make contact with the stage. Her predicament draws muffled laughter from the gallery audience, and her cheeks redden.

“So this, in comparison, is not as bad,” Lane finishes.

Huh. It’s a nice sentiment, I’ll give him that. There’s one problem, though.

“Okay. I like it, but how are people supposed to know this was your intent?”

“Well, that’s a person, not a painting. You could try asking her,” he says.

Oh. It didn't occur to me that she was allowed to speak. I wouldn't have thought...

Maybe that's part of the idea.

Despite myself, I stare at the "intern." Is she enjoying this state she's in, or is it just a welcome escape from that terrible job? I suppose it can be both.

"I have to thank you, Gwen."

"Oh?"

Lane nods.

"You saw the painting out front?"

"Of course. It was hard to miss, and... I thought it was beautiful."

"Thank you. Artistically, I think it's much stronger than anything in here. I'm proud of these pieces, but I did them as a favor to the gallery. I painted 'Awakening' because I felt inspired — thanks to you."

I was right. That was me.

"You're... you're welcome. And thank you — it's a lovely work. It's an honor to have... been involved, I guess."

"You weren't disturbed by it?" asks Lane.

I laugh.

"No, not at all."

Maybe I should have been. He did paint me chained and alone, helpless to resist the artist's gaze...

“I hadn’t painted anything good in a long time,” he says. “When we met, I admit I felt captivated. You have such an expressive face, especially when you’re speaking your mind.”

“Well, thanks,” I scoff, “but you didn’t paint my face.”

Laughing is good — it helps distract from the bubbling boil between my thighs.

“On the contrary, I did — from a bit of an angle.”

“Yeah, a bit.”

His eyes could shoot right through me, they’re so focused.

“I didn’t want to try capturing your face without being able to see it,” he says, brushing my cheek with his fingers. His thumb caresses my lip. “I’d like to get it right.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever posed for a painting before?” he asks, leaning toward me, his lips nearing mine.

“As a matter of fact-”

“Hey, Porter!” a man belts, approaching us swiftly. “You’ve got a sick mind!”

Lane pauses. I turn aside, needing to breathe.

Whoa.

Did that almost happen? I could smell the sharp mint on his breath, we were so close.

The man who interrupted us is about Lane's age, though he looks like a beatnik, dressed in all black except for his red beret.

"Sorry if I'm intruding," he continues. "You've outdone yourself, Lane. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Preston," Lane says, shaking the man's hand. "This is Gwen Carpenter, by the way."

"Hi, yes, nice to meet you," Preston says to me, barely glancing in my direction as he takes his phone out of his white blazer's inside pocket. "Lane, do you think I could record a small clip with you for my channel?"

"Later, happily," Lane replies. "Gwen, we have a lot more to talk about, but I need to mingle with the other guests. Are you free after the exhibit?"

"Yes," I answer, without hesitation.

Lane smiles.

"Good. Enjoy the gallery. I'll see you soon."

Chapter 6

GWEN



What do you mean, you ALMOST kissed?

My face flushes. I'm hiding in the bathroom. I needed a minute to compose myself after my encounter with Lane.

What if someone had seen? There could be other Mundell professors here, or students! I've been so focused on Lane and his art, I haven't paid attention to anything else.

We got interrupted, I text Joel back. Like, it was going to happen.

It didn't happen, though, so there's nothing to worry about.

Explain everything, he says. Now.

How do I even begin?

And where are you? Joel adds.

Still at the gallery.

I type as fast as I can, getting it all down in a string of texts.

He painted you? Can I see?

I'll try and get a picture, I say.

Great. Now, do I have to explain why seeing a teacher in private, after hours, on a Friday night might look bad?

No, he doesn't. I consider a snarky answer but he's not wrong to be concerned.

We're just going to talk art. Nothing's gonna happen.

So if he tries to kiss you again?

Yeah, what then, Gwen?

I won't let that happen, I write. Whether or not it ends up being true is another story.

If you say so.

Whatever.

I head back into the gallery and blend into the audience. I'm tempted to watch Lane work the crowd, maybe even hang around the periphery of his circle, but it would look... clingy, I guess. Plus, I do want to explore the rest of Lane's art. I've never seen an exhibit that used living people as the medium — and certainly never one that involved active, non-simulated sexual activity.

For example, one model traipses around, her wrists and neck locked into a yoke. Dozens and dozens of clothespins pinch her bare skin, all over her body. A slip of paper hangs from each pin, each one listing a single task.

Compliment the hair of a man wearing blue jeans.

Kiss the hand of a femme.

Let a man pat your head.

When she completes each task, the pin can come off. According to the dog collar around her neck, her name for the night is “Gig Economy.”

I shudder, trying not to imagine how all those clothespins must feel. The woman mostly maintains a smile, but I can’t tell if it’s part of the performance or if she’s really enjoying herself.

For the final exhibition, however, there’s no question: the cute, innocent model is definitely not having fun. A sign on a table next to her stage reads, *The subject of this piece has given her consent to participate. She will appear to be in distress, but audience members are not to interfere with her performance. Should she require assistance, a staff member will see to her needs. Thank you.*

Sure enough, a guard built like a refrigerator stands alongside the stage, watching the audience.

The woman is locked in a wooden case barely large enough for her to fit inside. The lid of the box has been replaced with a glass panel so the audience can see. Metal fasteners bolted into the sides hold her wrists and ankles. Finally, a piece of wood has been slotted into the case and fitted around her neck, sealing off her head. She’s completely helpless, naked and shivering. All she can do is watch as an uncomfortably large spider builds a web right in front of her face.

Chest-high stenciling on the glass lid reads, “Exposure Therapy.”

“That thing isn’t poisonous, is it?” I ask the guard.

He doesn’t answer except with a sharp glance.

The model peers at me, wide eyes pleading.

They wouldn’t put her in real danger, would they? Maybe she has some severe arachnophobia, or claustrophobia, and this is Lane’s very extreme way of making her face her fears.

She is afraid, though — very much. Her skin’s so pale I’m amazed she hasn’t passed out, and her body trembles in its bindings. Whether or not she’s signaled for help, she clearly needs it.

“Get her out of there,” I tell the guard.

He gives me another look, then shakes his head and points to the sign.

Should she require assistance, a staff member will see to her needs.

“She’s suffering. You have to do something.”

He sneers at me.

“She has a safeword,” he says.

With his head shaved bald and a small, pinched face, he could be almost any age. He’s broad in his upper body but underdeveloped in the stomach and legs. If he wore a singlet instead of a suit, I could picture him in a wrestling ring.

“Maybe she’s too scared to say it,” I say.

“That’s her problem. Now fuck off.”

My jaw drops at the audacity.

Seriously?

What am I supposed to do, just trust a roided-out goon knows what's best for a woman he's probably never met? Three padlocks seal the lid shut; there's no way I could open it myself. Is there a manager here who could help?

I'm not the only one at the exhibit; a dozen others watch as the spider weaves strands of silk, gradually getting closer to the woman's face. The web shifts and bounces, like a rowboat moored to a dock, as her breath pushes and tugs at it.

Now I know what it must have been like to be in the audience at Alistair Rat's staging of *Death of a Salesman*. This is clearly fucked up, but... it's part of the show, isn't it?

No, fuck that.

I turn to go find Lane when the gallery's house lights dim and a spotlight shines on "Exposure Therapy." Chatter ceases as Lane approaches, replaced by excited whispers and soft laughs.

Lane gently knocks on the exhibit's glass.

"Tabitha, are you okay in there?"

She nods, lips pressed together so hard they could be glued shut.

"Are you still afraid?"

Tabitha nods again.

"You are? You're handling it beautifully."

She smiles.

He fishes a key from his pocket and unlocks the lid. The guard reaches behind the case and produces a small, glass terrarium, then gathers the spider in the palm of his hand.

A wave of weightlessness moves through me; I spread my legs to find my balance.

Breathe.

I look when the audience claps, and see the spider's been put away safely. The guard even clears away the webs.

"Do you think Tabitha here has earned her reward?" Lane asks the audience.

They cheer, causing Tabitha to blush deeply.

"Eugene, please do the honors," Lane says.

The guard takes a black, rubber glove out of his pocket and slides it on. Then he drives his fingers into Tabitha's pussy. She moans, closing her eyes and tilting her head back as much as the cramped case will allow. Within seconds, she climaxes, howling and shaking so much her case rattles against the stage.

Holy shit. I could tell Galleria Carnale was something else when I got here, and that sex was key to the art on display, but I didn't expect they'd make someone orgasm live in front of so many people. They don't stop with her, either. One by one, Eugene works all of Lane's "exhibits" with a vibrator, his fingers or — in Gig Economy's case — a feather.

As soon as they finish, the audience gives one last round of applause and starts heading for the exit. Apparently, life *does* imitate art.

I wait for Lane to say goodbye to his fans — more than a few are women interested in what he has planned for his next show, which sends a twinge of anger rising up my back. However, he sends them on their way, then directs the gallery staff in caring for the models and breaking down his stages.

I should have spent the time texting Joel some updates, but found the whole display absorbing. It's the nuts and bolts of the art world one doesn't see until they've been behind the curtain, so to speak.

When all is finished, at last Lane comes to me.

"I'd invite you for a cocktail but you said you're not much of a drinker. Want to go to a diner? Dino's is close."

A glass of wine might not be so bad, actually... but I am famished.

"Sure, sounds great."

Mental note: get a fake ID.

"So, what do the other professors think of you doing art like that?" I ask as we walk.

"We have a bit of a rule among faculty: if it's not your thing, just be polite or don't mention it at all. Rush likes his classical media, but he accepts the broader pursuit. Art can be dirty, provocative, disturbing... as long as it isn't bad. Derivative. Shallow. Amateurish. Quality over form."

As Lane said, the diner's only two blocks away. It's busy and loud, but there's room for us, and a host seats us immediately.

Lane doesn't even look at the menu the waitress hands him.

"Coffee and a slice of apple pie, please."

"Coffee and..." I say, scanning the list. "You have a chocolate cake?"

"Sure. I'll put that in."

"I'm really glad you came to the gallery," Lane says as the waitress leaves. He lays his hands on the table, one covering the other. "I wanted you to see 'Awakening.'"

My cheeks warm.

"I'm glad I did," I say, trying not to fidget. "I've been painted before, by my roommate, Joel. And they're beautiful, but yours was different. It wasn't just... appreciation. There was..."

"Desire."

Yeah, that's it.

He doesn't blush or look away, as if regretting being so blunt.

"What was it that convinced you to attend the show tonight?" he asks.

The waitress returns with our coffees, giving me a moment to try and think straight.

“I saw you,” I say. “At Askew, that night. After the fire alarm. You had a phone in a bag.”

He leans back, sipping his coffee.

“You knew the sprinklers were gonna go off,” I finish.

“No. I gave security a decoy phone so I could keep mine on me. I don’t like not having it.”

“Bullshit. Why was it in a fucking waterproof bag?”

Our desserts arrive, interrupting us once more. The cake looks delicious but I stay focused on Lane.

“It was an Alistair Rat exhibit,” he says. “You never know what can go down at one. And I figured that since I’ve been such a vocal critic, I might bear the brunt of any sort of... surprise.”

That’s possible, I suppose. Normally he’d sound pretty paranoid, but sure enough there was an incident that night...

“Are you saying Alistair set off the sprinkler?”

Would he really do that? Was I part of a piece by Alistair Rat and not know it? It can’t be — how was it art? Because he destroyed a bunch of his past works? That doesn’t sound like him, especially since he’s been accused of being a mere prankster and this would certainly reinforce that idea.

“I don’t know,” Lane says, cutting into his slice of pie. “It could have just been a malfunction.” He eats a forkful, then looks away.

What are the odds it was really a malfunction? It just happened to go off in the middle of an Alistair Rat exhibition? No way. Lane is smart enough to know better.

“I saw your video,” he says. “Bloody Bride.”

And now he’s changing the subject. Very smart. I’ve wanted to ask him what he thought all night, which he probably figured.

Whatever.

I’ll let the Askew Gallery go — for now.

“Be honest. What did you think?”

“Your intent was obvious, but you accomplished what you set out to do, so it wasn’t bad for a first effort.”

“Thanks,” I say, though it wasn’t a full endorsement.

“Alistair’s influence was clear,” Lane adds. “Though he liked to surprise people, you know? He showed up in ways his subjects didn’t expect. You stood out in plain sight, waiting for the world to come to you. I’m not saying you need to mimic Alistair, but catching people off-guard was a part of his method that really worked for him.”

True.

“I think you can do better next time, Gwen.”

“You’re assuming there will be a next time.”

He smiles.

“There will be. And I’ll make you a promise: if your next piece is good, I’ll do a write-up. You’ll get real attention from

serious art critics — the kind of people you want to impress. But it has to be high-quality, because I'm not putting my name on hype.”

I taste a delicious sliver of my chocolate cake and consider the offer. Is he being pompous, like he's doing me a favor, or is this truly generous? I don't know. Perhaps it doesn't matter. If I'm serious about becoming the next Alistair Rat, good press could be exactly what I need. And Lane's not asking me to do anything I wasn't planning on already.

“Okay,” I say. “It's a deal.”

Chapter 7

GWEN



Even with nothing but time to think about my next project, coming up with one takes a week. Between working at the cafe and posing for Joel's paintings, I try to imagine how to do what I did with "Bloody Bride" — I still haven't given the piece a real name, but that's what stuck on the Internet — and develop it further.

I conceptualized "Bloody Bride" for ages before ever dreaming of doing it for real. The idea of creating another one within a few days, weeks or even months and having it be even better... it's impossible to imagine. Yet, it has to be better, or it won't impress Lane.

"You can't force inspiration," I tell Joel while he paints me.

I'm sitting up in bed, gazing out the window, a knee raised modestly.

"No, but you can seek it out," Joel says. "Revisit your favorite Alistair pieces. Remind yourself of why they inspired you in the first place."

"Maybe. I'm worried if I do that I'll end up copying something."

“You won’t. But I get it. What about spending more time with Lane?”

I chuckle, biting my lip.

“You want to feel that inspiration, right?” Joel asks.

“He’d put some in you.”

Yeah, I’ll bet.

I try not to think about the women at Galleria Carnale; I’d never be able to concentrate.

“You’re not helping.”

Joel sets aside his paintbrush and sits down next to me.

“Look. If you want to make a great piece of art, it’s not just about finding inspiration. You need to hone your craft. I’m not painting you because I think your portrait will be the one to propel me to stardom. I’m doing it so I can get better at painting. I’m doing it so that if I get commissioned to create art and make a living, I’ll have confidence. This next piece of yours doesn’t have to be a stroke of genius. It just has to show artistic development, technical improvement or both.”

That’s rich coming from him — all of his paintings look like they were made by a master, not a student. Still, he has a point.

“Thanks.”

The wheels in my head start turning. Lane’s words come back.

He showed up in ways his subjects didn't expect. You stood out in plain sight, waiting for the world to come to you.

When Joel finishes, he turns the canvas around to show me.

“What do you think?”

He's made me look beautiful, as usual — but also pensive.

Mysterious.

Almost haunting.

“It's amazing,” I say. “Inspiring.”

—

Dark, diagonal lines crisscross my lips; if I keep them sealed, they look sewn shut. Red face paint runs down my cheeks, starting from my eyes. No one can see my face, though — not with the hood of an oversized sweater draped over my head, which I let hang down.

Behind my back, metal handcuffs grip my wrists. I clutch a string in one palm, careful not to let it go. My arms wrap around a pole on the uptown R. Yes, I'm taking up the whole thing, making sure no one else can hold onto it, but it's past rush hour and the car isn't full, so no one complains.

Joel sits across from me, pretending to read his phone. He has to be close this time. A GoPro camera he stuck to the wall records me, saving the video to my cell and uploading it to the cloud. Should anything go wrong, he has the keys to my

cuffs, and will grab the camera. It cost me too much to leave behind.

Lane Porter would point out that I am once again standing out in plain sight, waiting for my subjects to come to me — but they're not going to expect what I have in store.

It takes a few minutes to land the first one.

All I see are black, tightly laced, leather dress shoes stopped in front of me.

“Hey, can you move?” the man says.

It's not exactly the right opening, but it's good enough.

I pull the string in my hand and look up at the same time, revealing my face to him. Joel taps a button on his phone, activating a Bluetooth speaker in my pocket.

My voice screams out, “Is this what you want?”

Between the lips, the fake blood and the scream, he rears back, nearly tripping over another passenger. A few people laugh at him. Somehow I manage to keep a straight face, glaring at the man until he turns around.

“Fucking freak,” he mutters, pacing to the other side of the car. “That's not funny.”

I dip my head again, allowing the hood to fall back into place.

It doesn't take long for most of the riders to reach their stops and disembark. Soon we have a mostly new crowd, and new subjects.

For over an hour I act out “What You Want.” The four more men and one woman react with some combination of fear, disgust or anger. I can sympathize. No one likes to get tricked, and I look like a nightmare come to life.

However, at Astor Place, two pairs of feet approach, their matching navy pants igniting a gout of fire inside me.

“This is it,” one says.

Joel, to his credit, doesn’t activate the speaker to play my voice line. When I look up at the cops, they don’t flinch at my appearance.

“Miss, can I see some ID?”

Fuck. Fuck!

Joel has my wallet. I wasn’t going to keep it in my pocket with my hands cuffed, just in case.

“I don’t have it with me,” I say. “I left it at *home*.”

Joel motions for his pocket. He could give them my wallet, but then he could get in trouble too. That’s not going to happen. I shake my head as subtly as I can and repeat, “It’s at *home*.”

Frowning, Joel gets up and backs away.

“Well, that sucks,” says one cop, a bald, no-necked middle-aged man. He reaches into a pouch at his belt and retrieves a pair of handcuff keys. “I was going to just give you a ticket. Now I have to bring you in. Do you have any idea how much extra fucking paperwork that is?”

—

Despite the cop creeping on me in the rearview mirror all the way to the station, I force myself to remain calm. I didn't commit a serious crime. I'm not resisting arrest. Once they see I'm not wanted on some other offense, it should be okay.

Once we reach the station I call Joel and tell him where to bring my ID. When he arrives, the police charge me with disorderly conduct. It's a \$250 fine — not even a misdemeanor. It's not like I have a ton of money to spare, but I'll make it work. If I have to get a second job for a few weeks, I'll survive.

Note to self: Alistair Rat never got caught. He had the right idea. Or maybe I should just get a permit or something next time.

Thankfully, I learned a few lessons from “Bloody Bride.” Editing the video together goes much faster, and this time when I post it, I title it “What You Want.” Also, I post it under my new artist name: Enmity Jane. With some thorough hashtagging and widespread posting, the video picks up steam as quickly as “Bloody Bride.”

Joel, Martin and I go out for drinks to celebrate; throughout two bottles of Malbec, we chat and watch my phone blow up from thousands of likes, shares and follows. It's only after we've returned to the apartment that Joel's face falls.

“Gwen, you need to see this,” he says, handing me his phone.

There's a comment on our video rapidly rising in user engagement: another video. We watch it to find it's a clip of my arrest, clearly taken by someone else on the subway.

Looks like someone had enough of Jane's shit. Probably not the first time, the user commented.

"Fuck," I mutter. "What an asshole."

"Maybe it'll help," Joel suggests. "People like it when artists take risks."

"But no one likes people who are annoying on the subway," Martin counters.

"You think I was being annoying?" I ask.

Joel takes my hand.

"Yes, sweetie. You kinda were. But that was the point. You're not there to amuse people, you're trying to disturb them."

"Yeah, I guess."

Sobered by the arrest video, I slump onto the couch. The night's drinking weighs on me, and before long I pass out.

—

My buzzing phone wakes me in the morning. Daylight scalds my eyes. Head aching, vision bleary, I try to focus on the phone. I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?" I say, swiping to answer before it can go to voicemail.

"Good morning, Ms. Carpenter. This is Rush Mundell."

A spasm squeezes my gut, a tiny whiff of nausea lingering from last night. I take a deep breath, but start padding my way to the bathroom.

“Hi. What’s... uh, what’s going on?”

“Ms. Carpenter, a few hours ago a matter came to my attention that required me to contact you immediately. I take it you are aware of the online videos created by an artist calling herself Enmity Jane?”

Great. That’s just great. Secret’s out, I guess.

“I am,” I reply.

“That’s you, correct?”

Something tells me I’m going to regret not disguising my face in these videos.

“Uh, well. I’d like to... plead the fifth, sir,” I say, clutching my head.

“Now’s not the time to get cute, Ms. Carpenter. This isn’t court. I can clearly see that that’s you. And in case you didn’t know, it’s not hard to access public arrest records, and sure enough, there was one for you, dated yesterday.”

“It was just a violation,” I say. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Legally, yes. But as I said, this isn’t court. My concern is for the Academy’s reputation.”

Is he fucking kidding?

My chest tightens. I hold back a belch.

“Because I was arrested?”

“No, not exactly. The issue isn’t the legality of your work, nor is it the message you were trying to impart. I found both pieces laudable, Ms. Carpenter. That’s the truth. The issue is that my academy is synonymous with fine, classical art — not... what you’re doing. Commuters on the subway may not care about what art school you attend, but my peers do, and I cannot have them connecting your work to my academy.”

Unbelievable. Is this normal, for a prestigious art school?

A fire erupts inside me, pushing aside the nausea.

“Isn’t it your goal to support free expression?” I ask.

“Isn’t that a necessity, for art?”

“I’m not looking to impede your free expression-”

“With respect, that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

Mundell sighs loudly enough to be heard through the phone.

“If you wish to be respectful, then don’t interrupt, Ms. Carpenter. My academy has standards, and as long as you are enrolled, your work serves as a reflection of what you’ve learned here. Thus, it falls under my purview.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying? If I could reach through the fucking phone...

“So if my art was good enough to meet your standards-”

“Do you know how many students at this academy drop out?” he asks, cutting me off. “As many as half of a class, some years. Most of them are excellent artists. Talent isn’t

always enough to succeed, Ms. Carpenter. Like many of them, you're here because of a scholarship based on the promise you showed in your application. If your work no longer reflects that promise, the scholarship will be revoked. Is that clear?"

This isn't fucking fair.

"Ms. Carpenter?"

"Yes, Professor Mundell. It's clear."

He hangs up.

This can't be fucking happening.

Without my scholarship, I'm out. I can't afford the tuition here, or the shared apartment.

I can already hear my mother's bitter cackle.

Welcome to the real world, Gwen!

She could be right, but I don't care. I'm not going back. I'm staying here, one way or another.

What I need is a way to get Mundell to back off, or better yet, to champion my work, instead of deriding it. I can think of one person who could possibly make that happen.

We need to talk, right now, I text Lane.

He writes back, *I'll be at my studio in one hour. Meet me there.*

His address follows.

Fine, I text. *See you soon.*

Lane better know how to fix this, because if I go down,
I'll make sure everyone knows the truth about Rush Mundell
and his academy.

Chapter 8

LANE



Based on Gwen's initial expression, I doubt my studio fits what she imagined. Yes, there's an easel with canvasses, brushes and bottles of paint, but that's just one small corner of the former broadcast news office. The rest is devoted to A/V equipment: monitors, sound and video editing stations, a workbench for custom electronics...

"What is this place?" she asks, taking a tentative step back.

I slide around a former reception desk facing the entrance, giving her space.

"It belonged to a news channel that went bankrupt. They needed to offload their property, quickly, and I was in the market."

"Why?"

"I needed it. I'll explain why soon. First, I want to talk about your work. That's why you're here, right?"

Gwen's face darkens.

"I'm here because I just spoke to Mundell. He wants me to stop, or he'll kill my scholarship."

Fuck.

He couldn't let it go, could he?

Rush just couldn't let one of his hand-picked recruits deviate from the Mundell doctrine. Doesn't he have enough to work with already? This is one of our most talented crops of new students in years. He's just being petty about her choices.

Unless this is really about me.

I rub my forehead and squeeze my eyes, This is not how I wanted us to start, considering what I've been mentally preparing myself to do.

Should I call it off?

No, I can't. Now I have to go ahead, in fact. I owe it to her. This is partly my fault.

"Unfortunately, I'm not surprised," I say after a beat. "Rush believes in strict adherence to the fine arts. He didn't open this academy to support artists who want to carve ice sculptures or design Rube Goldberg devices. He's barely willing to have classes on illustration and graphic design. I doubt he appreciated your intent to draw graphic novels, even if you are good at it. The last thing he wants is the next Alistair Rat coming out of his school."

Gwen steps close to me, driving her stare into mine.

"Can you get him to back down?"

That's a good question.

“I don’t know,” I answer, truthfully. “He’s not often open to persuasion when it comes to Mundell Academy. Maybe if your work was garnering enough praise he’d be tempted to take credit, but-”

“It’s not good enough,” she finishes. “Is it?”

I motion for Gwen to follow me to one of my computer workstations, a high-end desktop with three extra-wide monitors. When I bump the mouse, they wake up, displaying her video from the subway, the online comments and the piece I’ve written.

“You’re a good artist,” I say as she sits down to read. “You’re addressing difficult subject matters, and the public response is generally positive. That’s something to be proud of.”

“Thanks,” she says, allowing a thin smile.

“The problem is, you’re young. The talent is there, but you need time to develop your voice and to better understand your audience.”

She nods.

“So, you’re saying I need to get better? With more experience?”

“Yeah,” I sigh, already knowing where this is going.

“But I can’t get more experience, because I’ll lose my scholarship. Do I have that right?”

“Probably,” I admit. “There are some possible workarounds, though you may not like them.”

Then again, maybe she will if she’s really such a fan of Alistair Rat.

“Why can’t you just talk to Mundell? You’re friends, right?”

There’s an opening here for me to pump the brakes on where this is going — to buy some time to forge a new path. Except, the idea of pressing on as planned doesn’t fill me with dread and uncertainty, the way it has in the past. Now it’s exciting. I want Gwen to know. Maybe I’m a fool, thinking with my cock and not my brain, but a good artist knows when to follow their instinct.

“I’d be lying if I told you it would help,” I say. “I don’t believe he’d listen. This isn’t the first time he’s held a student hostage through their scholarship.”

“He can’t do that.”

“It’s his school and his money, so, yes, he can.”

Gwen works her jaw, shaking her head in disbelief. I don’t blame her for being mad — it’s repugnant behavior. No one criticizes Rush on it publicly for fear of landing on his shit list.

“This is bullshit,” she growls, curling and uncurling a fist. “I shouldn’t have to give up my art.”

“I agree. It isn’t fair.”

“You mentioned... workarounds? What does that mean?”

“Nothing you’re going to like,” I say, getting up. “Come with me.”

We head into a small kitchen area, little more than a fridge, sink and microwave. I open the fridge, as well as the cabinet above it, for Gwen.

“Want anything?”

There are jugs of tea and filtered water, cans of beer and energy drinks, vodka, dark rum, blocks of cheese, apples, bananas, bread and jelly. In the cabinet I have peanut butter, Triscuits, pretzels and rice cakes.

“Fuck it,” she mutters, pulling out the bottle of rum.

I don’t blame her.

Getting out shot glasses for us both, I also take out the pretzels and a bowl.

She slams the first shot I pour in one gulp, cringing as it goes down. I push the pretzels close to her, then get us both a glass of water.

“Okay,” she says. “Stop stalling. What am I supposed to do?”

“The first option is to transfer to another school, but I take it you’d need to find one that will also offer you a scholarship.”

“Yeah. And it wouldn’t be as good a school,” she says.

“No, it wouldn’t be. Your next option is to make Mundell happy — keep your scholarship. Write down your ideas and perform them later. You’re just getting started, you have all the time in the world.”

Gwen rolls her eyes.

“I really don’t want to let Mundell win. Fuck that guy.”

I chuckle.

“Understandable.”

“Look, three years is a long time. What if something were to happen to me, and I could have done something great, but I didn’t because of him? I can’t let that happen.”

Pretty grim for someone her age. What would make her think like that?

“Are you worried something will happen, Gwen?”

She looks away, saying nothing. Anger burns behind her eyes.

“Your work is very personal, isn’t it?” I say. “Am I wrong in thinking both *The Ohio Zoo* and *Enmity Jane* come from a place inside? From your past.”

“They do,” she says, pouring herself a second shot of rum.

“What happened?”

I drink when she does, then give her a minute.

“Are you asking if I was abused or something?” she asks.

“If that’s what’s driving your art.”

Gwen shakes her head.

“My home life sucked, okay? It could have been worse, but I got out of Ohio the minute I could.”

I could have guessed.

“Tell me about your family.”

“My dad’s a psychopath, my mom’s a bitch and my brother’s a freak,” she said, counting them off on her fingers.

I nod.

“Go on.”

“Dad’s such a zealot, he’d make the Puritans look like hippies. I could dress like the Amish, he’d still call me a whore. The first time I told him I’d like to go on a date, he locked me in my room for a day. He cut up my library card when he caught me reading *Ghost World*. I couldn’t buy leggings until I moved to New York. I had to send out my art school applications through my high school. And when I told them I was leaving, he told me not to come back.”

“Fucking hell.”

Gwen sneers.

“Yeah, that’s where he said I’m going, pretty much every day.”

“He ever do anything physical?”

She drinks her next shot, grimacing. She’s going to make herself sick. I take the bottle and pour myself another, and

leave it out of her reach.

“No, he left that to Mom. She’d smack us upside the head, slap us, throw things at us.”

I don’t even know what to say.

“Not enough to put us in the hospital, you know? But we’d have bruises. I’d feel my heart race when I heard her climb the stairs fast. If me or Dennis got emotional, she’d laugh in our faces, tell us to get used to the real world or some bullshit.”

“That’s horrible, Gwen. Both of them should be... I’m not even going to say.”

She points at the rum.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking sure.”

I pour her one last shot.

“I’ll say it, Lane: they should both die in a fire. They’re dead to me.”

“Yeah.”

She has every right to resent them, to condemn them. If I grew up in a home like that, there is zero chance I’d be as well-adjusted as her.

“And fuck Dennis, too,” she adds. “He still lives with them but spends most of the time with his schizo friends. Larry and Matt. Fucking douchebags. Dennis let them hit on me, didn’t give a shit. They’d set off fireworks in the middle

of the night, do whip-its, vandalize homes. Dennis once tried to steal beer for them and got caught. Mom and Dad lost their minds, screamed at him all night.”

“Did you have anyone you could turn to for help? Any friends, or other relatives?”

Gwen shrugs.

“There were people I hung out with, but I wouldn’t call them friends. Horny guys who wouldn’t leave me alone. Girls who wanted the same thing as me: to get out of Ohio. No one I could count on if I went back.”

“I see.”

Nodding, I wonder how much of this Mundell knows, or suspects. How much of her past could he recognize in her art? It’s ghoulish to believe he’d use that desperation against her, but considering Gwen’s defiant personality... he would go as far as needed.

Well, he’s not the only one.

“You can’t go home or leave Mundell Academy, and putting your artistic dreams on hold is not a palatable option,” I say. “There’s one other possibility to consider.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You take a page out of Alistair Rat’s book and stop appearing in your pieces personally. You set them up and observe the results, like he did. And you don’t take credit for them as Enmity Jane. You create a new persona.”

Gwen leans back in her seat, taking in the idea. Distaste claws at her expression, but it's paired with a burgeoning sense of reluctant acceptance.

"It wouldn't be the same."

"True, but think of Alistair. His early work wasn't the same as his later work. He evolved as needed. And, unless Enmity Jane is willing to wait a few years to resurface, she needs to evolve too."

She grunts, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Her pout stirs a dark thirst inside me: those taut, little cheeks and thin, pressed lips burn into my mind's eye. I want to capture that pure, beautiful malice with paper and coal.

"How am I supposed to do it?" she asks. "Alistair knew all kinds of-"

"I'll teach you."

This is the last exit. The point of no return.

Only if I'm sure.

"You? Just because you know Rat's work doesn't mean you can teach me-"

"I'm Alistair," I say.

She stares in stunned silence. It's the reaction I'd always hoped I'd receive someday, and it's a relief to tell someone who can appreciate what I've done.

"What? You hate him," she finally replies. "You've called him a hack. You've called his work 'derivative stunts.'"

“And that’s why no one suspects I’m him, as far as I can tell. Plus, people in our circles love to criticize Alistair Rat. Being his foremost critic keeps me in their good graces.”

She takes a moment to process this, eyeing me with suspicion.

“That’s... like... fucking psychopathic! Do you like lying to people? Is it funny, tricking everyone you know?”

“Sometimes, yes. You see how people like Mundell dismiss my work. I absolutely enjoy making them look like fools, even if no one knows it but me.”

“Uh huh. But how do I know you’re not playing a joke on me right now? Can you prove you’re Alistair?”

“Sure.” I lead us back to the workstation and open up the folder marked *Salesman*. “Have a look.”

Gwen pulls up her seat and scrolls through a folder full of numbered video files. She opens one, an overhead shot of an empty theater starting to fill up as people arrived.

“What is this?”

Before I can answer, she skips to the middle of the video, showing the full audience. The stage isn’t visible from this angle, but we can hear the actors. She closes the file and opens another: a video of the same length, but from the left balcony of the theater.

I hide a grin. Does she recognize the play, or maybe Francis Bentham’s nasal voice?

Gwen gasps.

“No way! It’s *Salesman*?”

She jumps forward in the video several minutes at a time until she’s nearly at the end. She passes the moment the mannequin dressed as Bentham halts in the air, suspended by the noose. Gwen startles from the sudden screams, then backtracks in the video until she sees the moment for herself.

“I don’t believe it,” she says, opening another video from yet another camera. “This is the raw footage.”

“Proof enough for you?” I ask.

“How did you do it? How did you get all the cameras in place?”

“I had a little help.”

“Like, an accomplice?” she says.

“More like a partner in crime. He also helped me rig the sprinkler system at Askew Gallery.”

May as well come clean about that too.

“Holy shit. Is he another art teacher? Have I met him?”

“No,” I chuckle. “He doesn’t really fit in with the art crowd.”

“Then who is he?” Gwen asks. “Why does he keep all this a secret?”

“His name’s Rory, and we met in high school. He was the kid who sold weed out of his locker and got suspended what felt like every week. I was one of the rich kids who bought

his weed. We bonded over mutual hatred for the school principal, Millvane.”

She scoffs.

“His name was Millvane?”

“His *first* name was Millvane. Principal Millvane Casper, and he looked as old and stodgy as he sounds. Not a friendly guy. Rory and I thought it would be funny to interrupt his morning announcements with audio from a sex tape. I could pay for the portable, remote-controlled DVD player and wire it into the PA system; Rory was cool with breaking into the school’s office and keeping watch. The next morning, I kept the remote in my pocket and let a second or two of it play every time Millvane talked.”

Laughing, Gwen asks, “Did you guys get in trouble?”

“Nope. Millvane burst into our homeroom, madder than anyone I’ve ever seen. Face as red as a ripe tomato. Tried to pin it on Rory but he was just sitting there, pretending he had no idea what was going on. They couldn’t prove he did anything. When it was over, Rory told me he’d be down to do shit like that any time. I tutored him so he could finish high school and apply to college. He got me into working out. Been like that ever since. When I have an idea for a piece, I give him a call.”

She sighs, turning back to the computer and scrolling through the files.

“Okay, maybe that’s true. Here’s the problem: for all I know, you made Rory up and you downloaded this footage from some darkweb site. How am I supposed to know for sure?”

“Well unfortunately I don’t film myself committing crimes, so-”

“Tell me about the inspiration behind it,” she interrupts.

I chuckle, recalling our encounter at Galleria Carnale.

“You’re asking the artist for a direct explanation of their intent?” I repeat, just as I said it then.

“Tell me, Lane.”

“Fine. I wanted to explore and contrast an audience’s response to the real and the unreal. When we attend a play, we know that what we’re seeing isn’t real: the people on stage are performers. However, if the play is good, the emotion we feel is real. We ache for the characters of a tragedy, we cry over their plight. We do this knowing it’s just a story.”

“Okay.”

“However, when that mannequin fell, it disrupted the audience’s departure from reality,” I continue. “This unexpected occurrence created a schism in their minds: was what they just saw part of the play, or was it real? Did someone actually just fall and die? The irony is that attending a play is a perfectly normal activity — but witnessing a fatal fall is completely unexpected. The audience had to contend

with an abnormal scene in a place where they were used to seeing things that weren't real. As the footage showed, they didn't know what to do. Very few people reacted immediately.”

Gwen nods.

“Do you think that came through?”

“For the people there, sure. I did my best to portray that in the video I released, but I think for the full effect you had to be there.”

“Yeah. I sorta figured.”

Without asking, she backtracks through my computer system, finding other archived files from my past pieces. Audio files from “Pay to Play,” sketches from “Feral Hogs” — building schematics and subway maps with escape routes drawn through them.

“Okay,” she says at last. “You're really him. Why would you tell me? What's stopping me from telling everyone who you are?”

I keep myself from laughing.

“First of all, no one would believe you. Mundell would say it was retaliation for threatening to revoke your scholarship. It's enraging, because you'd be telling the truth, but sadly that is what would happen.”

Fury burns behind Gwen's eyes; she knows I'm right.

“However, I don’t think you want to tell anyone. I think you want to follow your passion, and I can teach you how. I also think you like me, and you want me to like you. And not just because I’m Alistair Rat.”

Fidgeting in her seat, she looks away. Almost too quick to see, she bites her lip, then stops herself.

“What do you want in return?” she asks.

“Inspiration. I want to shock you — I want to disturb you, and then I want you to do the same to the world. I want you to take what I have to give you, and make something out of it that is truly your own.”

Gwen stands up and steps toward me. She asks, “When can we start?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Okay.” She turns to leave. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Somehow I let her walk out. She’d stay if I told her to, but it’s okay. She’ll be back.

I should tell her I made a mistake, to forget everything. I shouldn’t let this go any further; keeping one big secret is hard enough. But I can’t stop now.

I’m going to teach her. I’ll mold her into the artist she’s destined to be. Then I’m going to make her mine, and not let go.

Chapter 9

GWEN



Joel is out with Martin when I get home, a lucky break for me because there's no way I can tell him what the hell just happened, and I hate lying. I eat a bowl of ramen for dinner while sitting at my laptop, watching every YouTube and TikTok video I can find about Alistair Rat and the question of his identity. Hundreds of art critics, popular culture commentators and criminal investigators have posted their theories. Not a single one imagined it was Lane Porter. In fact, most of the haters quote Lane's more insulting write-ups.

No wonder Lane enjoys making them look like idiots. He must love these videos.

I'd like to think that he at least freaked out a little over the idea of finally revealing his secret identity. It was a big deal. Maybe people would laugh if I told the truth, but some would think it's just crazy enough to be true. Certainly more people would suspect him than they do now, and he definitely doesn't want that.

No, he wants me.

This is, without question, the stupidest thing I could possibly do. Mundell wants to kick me out; getting caught with one of his teachers would seal the deal. And to sit on one of the art world's biggest secrets... It's too much. I should be running far, far away — but I'm not scared. I'm excited. I get to learn from a master — and maybe he'll do more than teach...

I can already imagine pulling off my next piece of art and laughing as Mundell whines about some new Alistair fan. I'm starting to get why Lane likes yanking their chains. They're so arrogant, so convinced Alistair's beneath them, but he's sitting at their tables, drinking their wine, and they're totally clueless.

The next day I sleep late, nearly missing my shift at the cafe with Joel.

“I need you to keep a secret,” I tell him after work. “I'm seeing Lane tonight.”

“Really? Why?”

I've debated telling Joel about Mundell's threat, but I can't. Joel's counting on Mundell to gain the recognition he deserves. Sure, Joel has the talent to go far on his own, but to be found and supported at such a young age... I couldn't live with myself if I somehow accidentally interfered.

“I kinda like him. It's not a big deal. Just don't tell anyone. The whole student-teacher thing, you know?”

Joel says he does.

I feel bad about omitting so much of the truth, but I think he'd understand. There's nothing I'd love more than to tell the world what a piece of shit Mundell is.

Lane texts me when he's ready and says he'll have dinner for us. When I get there, he's set up a foldout dining table, silverware and dishes, a bottle of red wine, a massive bowl of Caesar salad and a tray full of lasagna. The food smells delicious, but I ignore it all, staring at a pair of cuffs and chains hanging from the studio ceiling.

"What's that?" I ask.

"You'll see later," he says, taking his seat. "Sit. Help yourself."

We both start with the salad. We eat, neither of us say anything at first.

"Are you nervous?" he asks after a bit.

"Yes. What are we doing?"

"Well, tonight you're going to learn the value of humility."

I meant that rhetorically, but his answer swells a warmth within me. I'm reminded of Galleria Carnale; specifically, the piece labeled "Intern."

"And, I'm going to paint you," he adds.

Both the salad and lasagna are delicious. I only eat a little, since my stomach won't stop twisting. I get the sense I'll be ready for the leftovers after what he has planned.

“You know, I told you all about my past last night. I don’t know much about yours.”

I’ve always wondered what kind of person Alistair Rat would be. Did he call himself Rat because he was small and ugly, hiding in the shadows? Apparently not. Sometimes a name is just a name. But then what made Lane the artist he is?

“What do you want to know?” he asks.

“I told you about my fucked up family. What’s yours like?”

He sighs.

“Fucked up, but not in the same way. They weren’t physically abusive, and they supported me financially, so I’m not complaining. There’s no bad blood. We’re not close, though.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs.

“We went our separate ways a while back, and I think we all feel it was for the best. Have you heard of the Harris Porter Supply Corporation?”

I shake my head. It doesn’t ring a bell.

“They’re one of the top five medical supply companies in the country, but outside of a hospital, doctor’s office or nursing home, they’re not famous. My parents always hoped I’d be interested in taking it over someday, or at least pursue a

career in business. I never wanted to. I've been an artist since I was a kid, and my folks learned early on nothing was going to change that. So, they reluctantly got out of my way and let me do what I want, as long as I didn't embarrass them."

Sighing, I say, "That must have been nice."

"I guess. In a way I almost wish they'd fought harder for me to join the business, just to show they cared. They've shown no interest in my career or art, outside of praising me for teaching at a prestigious art academy. As long as I'm excelling in my field, they can consider me a success."

"I take it they don't care for Alistair Rat."

Lane laughs.

"They've never heard of him. They could not give less of a shit about art or pop culture. You think your family has seen your Enmity Jane videos?"

"No, I don't. They'd be blowing up my e-mail."

Dad would have a fucking coronary. Mom would call me a whore. Dennis would show his scumbag friends, as if my videos somehow made him cooler.

"I guess they wouldn't appreciate your work," Lane says.

I chuckle.

"Nope."

When we finish eating, he clears the dishes and puts everything away. I text Joel to say things are going okay. Then we head back into the studio, to the stage where the

chains and cuffs hang down. A black, cushioned mat covers the floor. White and gray soundproofing tiles line the walls. Lighting and recording equipment have been set up on three sides of the studio; at the center, there's an easel and a table of paints, brushes, pencils, canvases, sketch pads and a professional-grade camera. The room isn't as cold as it looks, and an earthy scent lingers in the air. There are no windows, and only the one entrance.

“Ready to begin?” Lane says.

“Yes.”

“Take off your clothes.”

Even though I knew he would ask me to pose nude, the command still catches me off-guard. I do this with Joel all the time, but this is obviously completely different. It feels dangerous — like being Enmity Jane, out on the street — only I won't be in control. I won't be able to run. Should I take comfort knowing that this won't be the first time Lane Porter has chained up some girl in his basement?

My instinct tells me to do it, and that I always know, deep down, what I want. In the end, what gets me to start pulling off my shirt is one inescapable truth: I want to see what he draws. If it's like his first painting of me, then I need to see it.

Lane watches as I undress, not taking his eyes off me for a second. I try not to go too fast or too slow — this isn't a striptease, but I don't want to act like this isn't an important moment.

“You’re beyond beautiful,” he says when I finish.

“Thanks.”

I avoid his gaze, clutching my hands together in front of my hips.

“Turn around. Let me see the back.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks, but I do as he says. If he wants to teach me humility, this is a good start. He may like what he sees, but who likes to feel so... examined?

I do, apparently — wetness gathers inside as he scrutinizes me closely.

“Good,” he says after two rotations. “Let’s begin.”

Before I can react, he takes my wrist and locks it into one of the cuffs. Squealing in surprise, I try jerking my arm away, but the chain holds it tight.

“Having second thoughts?” Lane asks.

I force myself to be still and compliant.

“No. It was just a reaction.”

“You sure?”

“I am.”

Lane nods, then locks my other wrist; I don’t fight him. The chains pull my arms out wide, nearly to full extension. More than enough to render me helpless, but not so tight that they start to hurt.

“That’s an important lesson, Gwen. I think you learned on the subway that when you do art in public, you aren’t going to be in control. If your piece isn’t going the way you thought it would, or how you wanted it to, you won’t be able to do anything about it.”

I test the cuffs, pulling against them as hard as I can. They’re completely inescapable. Whatever Lane has planned next, I’m helpless to stop it.

“More importantly, you should have the mindset of not interfering, even if you want to. Sometimes you have to let the results speak for themselves. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll be back soon and we can get started.”

“What?”

Lane turns and walks out.

“Hey!”

I’m at a loss for more words than that. He just left. Like I’m not here, hanging from the ceiling and naked. What the hell am I supposed to do?

He said “soon,” so I calm myself down. He’ll be back in a minute or two, I’m sure. Maybe he had to go get something.

Wondering where he went keeps my mind busy for a little while, but the problem with waiting around in a state like this is that it’s impossible to tell time. Counting the seconds makes them take longer, so I stop after two minutes’ worth.

That's still more time than I thought Lane would take.
What's keeping him?

What if he doesn't come back? What if he's waiting for me to pass out to do something terrible?

Is he watching me?

I look around, searching for a hidden camera, but don't see one.

Frustration bubbling over, I yank the cuffs hard, but the chains hold firm. Their unbreakable grip releases a surge of hunger within me. My core drips at the thought of what Lane could do while I'm stuck like this. Fighting the chains only makes the sensation grow stronger. Now that I can't get away, my body doesn't want to.

Will Lane be able to see what his bindings are doing to me? Did he know this would happen? Is he just waiting until I've driven myself into a state of desperate need? What if I can't stop myself?

Relax, Gwen.

I'll go insane if I keep this up. Lane wants me to accept giving up control. I'm naked and bound, so I literally have no control over anything, at the moment. When Lane returns, he's going to draw, so I'm going to be stuck like this a lot longer. I need to find a way to be patient.

When I pose for Joel, and I have to remain fairly still and quiet, I let my mind wander — sometimes aimlessly,

sometimes focused on art. The only difference between then and now is being chained up.

So, I turn to my art. How will I expose people to their own unspoken darkness, like Alistair Rat? How will I do it without getting caught? What if I stick with the viral video aspect, but without the public spectacle? Film scenes that aren't real but release them online as though they are... get people to react without knowing for sure...

I'm still brainstorming when Lane's footsteps rouse me. He's carrying a metal briefcase, but he doesn't say anything about it. Without a word, he sets the briefcase down, sets up a portrait-sized sketch pad and begins drawing.

The first time I posed, I hated not being able to see the work in progress. Gradually that feeling went away, and I learned to enjoy the surprise of seeing a completed project. Now, however, I'm desperate to catch a glimpse of whatever Lane's doing.

Fuck it.

"Can I see?"

"When it's ready."

Figures.

"What were you doing before?"

He smirks.

"What were *you* doing?"

I swing in my bonds, sneering.

“What do you *think* I was doing?”

“You seemed to be in a good place when I got back, so I’m not sure,” Lane says.

“I was thinking about my art.”

“That’s good. Keep doing that.”

“Fine.”

I try to do that, but it’s harder with Lane in the room with me. My arms have started to tire from being held up for so long, stealing my concentration. The question of how long he needs me to maintain this position tingles on my tongue, but I don’t let it out.

At least Lane’s remained quiet about the glisten on my thighs. There’s no way he’s not aware of it. He’s seen me squirming as I languish against the cuffs and chains. If Lane knew the things he could be doing right now instead of drawing...

Clearly, I’ve gotten over being naked and exposed to him. It helps that he doesn’t stare while drawing. In fact, he hardly even glances my way. He works at a high tempo — never pausing or even slowing down. The scribbling sound fills the room until, after what seems to take hours, Lane finally stops.

He stands up and steps back to view his sketch. After a minute, he tears off the sheet and turns it around to show me.

It’s the Eiffel Tower. He’s done an excellent job capturing its grandeur, but it’s the fucking Eiffel Tower. Not me.

“What the hell, Lane?”

“A warm-up sketch. And from here on in, you’ll address me as ‘professor’ or ‘sir.’ Both are fine.”

No fucking way.

“Do you think this is funny?” I snarl as Lane opens the briefcase. “I’ve been standing here for-fucking-ever, being as patient as I can-”

As I speak, Lane takes from the case a large, red ball attached to a belt of some kind. Before I can react, Lane slips the ball into my mouth and buckles the straps behind my neck.

“Hey!” I whine through the gag.

Every nerve in my body sizzles at once. Thoroughly degraded, furious while powerless, I ache in a way I’ve never imagined. Lane makes me want to scream with rage and howl for his touch all at once.

“I told you before,” he says, taking my chin in his palm. “This is about teaching you humility, Ms. Carpenter, and you still have a lot to learn.”

Chapter 10

GWEN



I grunt a mumbled swear at him, shaking in my bonds.

“Perfect,” Lane says. “Let me see that fire.”

With a fresh page ready, he gets back to work. This time he peeks at me constantly, though he works as quickly as before.

Is this how he’s going to draw me? Gagged, with warm juice trailing down my inner leg? Is he capturing the hot blush brightening my cheeks? Is he creating a backdrop that further conveys my yearning?

I don’t have to wait long to find out: within just a few minutes Lane shows me a sketch of my face. Seeing my lips curled around the rubber ball elicits a fresh spasm of excitement deep inside. I look miserable in the most intoxicating way. My hair’s a mess, my jaw’s stretched wide. He drew enough of my shoulders to convey that my arms are raised and I am not in a comfortable state.

“Such expressive eyes,” Lane says. “There are so many conflicting feelings happening at once, it’s not easy trying to capture all of them. I think what will help is to... narrow the focus.”

Lane reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a thin chain with two metal clips at each end. He holds it out so I can see, then attaches the first clip to my pebbled nipple.

Oh, fuck!

The clamp pinches down hard, a lance of throbbing pain. Grunting, I turn my body as much as possible, trying to shield my chest.

“You’re only making this more difficult on yourself,” Lane says, fastening the second clip. “Humiliation leads to pain. You will learn to endure both. Is that understood?”

I inhale in ragged, shallow breaths, gazing down at my tormented chest. A line of drool spills from my lip, and even when I lift my chin, it doesn’t stop right away.

“Look at you. Poor thing,” Lane says. He pulls a kerchief from his pocket and wipes my lips. “Be honest with me now: do you think the lesson is over?”

I shake my head, not breaking eye contact.

If he wants me to back out now, I won’t give him the satisfaction. As humiliated as I may feel, it could be far, far worse. There’s no one else in the room with us — no one outside of it will see me like this. And-

Fuck.

That’s the problem.

If I’m here to learn humility, I’m not there yet. Not if I can still summon so much defiance. I came here to learn —

and so far, I haven't.

“You sure, Gwen?”

I nod. My breasts ache from the clamps, but I breathe in and let the sensation flow around me.

Satisfied, Lane returns to his sketch pad. He works for a bit longer this time, though just as fast. When he's done, he shows me the drawing, which starts at my navel and stops just below my nose. Now I can see the nipple clips from his perspective: how the chain between them hangs in a crescent, almost like a smile. He's added a line of saliva on my lower lip, like there was before.

It's sexy as fuck. I can already imagine people looking at it, framed in a gallery. I could be there, watching everyone, enjoying the fact that they'd have no idea they were looking at my breasts.

“You like?” Lane asks. His tone suggests he already knows the answer.

Despite myself, I chuckle.

“Oh, you're in a much better mood now. Those clamps did the trick, huh?”

I roll my eyes.

“Let's try something new then.”

Lane takes a black, leather collar from his briefcase and seals it around my neck. It's tight, and a thick, metal loop hangs from the front. Next, Lane disconnects the cuffs around

my wrists from the chains that lifted my arms to the ceiling. Before I can move around too freely, he connects the cuffs together with a padlock, securing my arms behind my back.

The relief of having them released from the ceiling lasts only a minute. Long before they have a chance to recover fully, Lane hangs them back up, but barely higher than my shoulder level. It's not until Lane uncovers a metal ring bolted into the floor that I comprehend what's coming.

He takes one more chain from his briefcase and locks it on my collar, then drags the chain down so I have to bend over and my arms are pulled taut. Once he locks the chain to the ring on the floor, I have no choice but to maintain the stringent position.

Within minutes, the strain leaves me sweating. My pussy clenches, fluid dripping. The chain dangling from my nipples gently sways, evoking a fresh buzz of pain.

This time, Lane draws my whole figure, from top to bottom. In the sketch, my eyes are closed, and the look of bliss on my face couldn't be clearer. Is that what he sees? I'm sore in so many places, and moving even a little makes things worse, but no part of me clamors to escape.

"Gwen, I can see what's going on between your legs," Lane says, standing behind me. "There's no hiding it. I've known since we started. I can practically smell it."

Oh, fuck.

“I’m starting to worry you’re learning the wrong lesson, because you’re enjoying yourself far too much.”

I grunt at him. Am I supposed to be sorry?

He leans over me until I can feel him breathing against my ear. It takes every ounce of willpower not to grind against him.

“You’ve left me no choice but to take corrective measures,” he whispers.

Anticipation tingles within me, growing stronger as I hear Lane walking back and forth to his briefcase. What the hell did he mean by that?

I get my answer right away: a sharp slap of something hard but flexible against my exposed rear. I squeal, bobbing against my bonds as a burning sensation heats my skin. It hurts, but the shock of getting spanked affects me more than the pain itself.

“Sometimes successful artists begin to think that they can do whatever they want and people will love it. Then, when everyone hates their new album or movie or book, they fall flat on their faces. They don’t know where they went wrong or what to do next. They turn resentful and blame their audience, which only drives them away further. That’s why it’s important to always work hard, and stay humble. You’re a talented artist, Gwen, but even a prodigy can be taken down a peg. I want you to remember this if you ever think you’re beyond criticism or failure.”

I try to listen to him, but I find myself just waiting for the next swat. It's coming, and it's going to hurt. I want to be ready.

“Gwen, are you listening?”

Humming an affirmative, I nod, trying to meet Lane's eyes.

“I hope so. If we have to repeat the lesson, we will. Trust me, I don't mind.”

Yeah, I'll bet.

Lane shows me the paddle he's using: black rubber, with a miniature reproduction of the “Venus de Milo” on it. Then he smacks my ass, once on each side. I yelp with each one, shaking in place.

“If you can take this, you can take bad reviews.”

He'd better be right about that.

Each slap of the paddle releases a mixture of pain and pleasure; it all swirls through me, adding to the ache from my nipples, arms and jaw. My thoughts turn to what will come next — and what must. He has to let me relieve the need swelling within me, right? Is that the final humiliation? A sexual climax while in a state like this? At this point, I don't care if I should be embarrassed by my need. So be it.

Lane paddles my ass harder as he goes along. He maintains the same deliberate pace, giving me time to anticipate each impact, but when he finishes I'm wincing and whimpering after each slap. Just when the pain intensifies to

the point that I'm dreading any more, Lane rushes to his sketch pad and draws.

Waiting for him to finish, I process as much of the pain as I can. He can take as long as he needs as far as I'm concerned. The sound of lead on paper becomes a source of comfort: while it continues, I don't have to worry about what else Lane has planned.

I'm not surprised to see Lane's next drawing centers around my rear; if the dark shading is true to what he saw, my ass must look as red as it feels. However, seeing the result makes me oddly proud. I took a harsh punishment and didn't let it break me. That said, I will definitely think back on this moment often — and hopefully it will keep me humble.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Lane says. He runs a finger over my rear, leaving a tingling trail along its path.

I nod, blushing.

“You should be, Gwen. You've done well today. I put you through a difficult challenge and you've risen above it.” His finger travels down and around my backside, stopping just short of my inner thigh. “You've earned a reward, if you want it.”

He reaches around my neck and releases the gag. I gasp as the hard rubber ball slips past my lips. My jaw hurts like mad, but it starts improving right away.

“So, do you want it, Ms. Carpenter?”

“Yes!” I grunt.

Lane slaps my ass, this time with his bare hand. I shriek out loud, twisting against my bonds.

“Is that how you address me?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, cursing myself for forgetting.

Crouching down in front of me, Lane puts his hands on my shoulders.

“You know you’re extraordinary, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

He keeps leaning forward until his lips meet mine. My eyes widen in surprise for just a moment, then close, riding a rush of bliss that drives away all the pain. I thought my reward would be something else, but this is very, very nice. It’s also wrong, in so many ways. Everything we’ve done this far was, technically, supposed to be about developing as an artist. This kiss is not. There’s no way to pretend it’s somehow part of the lesson.

I have no doubt Joel would have yelled at me to run when I first saw the cuffs. My mother would have said I was an idiot for thinking Lane is really Alistair Rat, that it’s just his way of sleeping with gullible, young students. Dad would probably lock me in my room until I repented. Maybe I’m a fool for putting myself into a situation like this, but his kiss tells me no matter how wrong this is, it’s still right.

Lane’s tongue touches mine, and his grip on my shoulders tightens. The salty taste of his lips seasons the aroma of his cool cologne, the flavor of him burning into my mind.

I sigh when the kiss finally ends, savoring the lingering sensation of his lips and hands. I don't ever want to let it go.

Then Lane's fingers caress my swollen, sopping pussy. The aches all over my body return, but so does the unquenchable hunger inside me. I shudder at the sound of a pants zipper, followed by the flop of fabric. He steps in front of me, naked. His body proves to be everything I imagined: bulges of hard muscle from chest to thigh, with flawless skin, free of tattoos. His thick, long cock stands erect; looking at it nearly makes me dizzy. The thought of trying to fit it inside me elicits fear, but also craving. After everything I've endured today, his enormous rod could be what finally breaks me.

"I've met artists who claim nothing feels better than composing a masterpiece," Lane says, brushing my hair out of my face. "But I think this will always come first."

His hot tip presses against my soaked lips, testing them, not even probing inward. It's enough to make my body spasm. Lane chuckles.

"I've never seen anyone this wet, and that's saying something."

He brushes my entrance again before sliding inward, just a little. I groan as his girth spreads me open; my inviting channel welcomes him in, but he's too big to take in with ease. The slight twinge is a small price to pay for the pleasure of feeling Lane inside me, though. I want more, and he obliges. He withdraws a little each time before sinking in

another inch, giving me some time to adjust to his overwhelming presence.

When at last he plunges in his full length, I mewl and whine, disbelieving that he managed to go so deep and fill me so completely. I can hardly believe the cock inside me is the one I saw; it feels so much bigger than it looked.

“That feels so good,” he says.

I grunt in agreement, my brain already too scrambled to form words.

Then he begins thrusting. Going slow at first, he pulls almost all the way out before driving back in. The motion is enough to release hours of pent-up desire.

“Are you already going to come?” asks Lane as he speeds up his rhythm.

“Yes,” I squeal. I shouldn’t be embarrassed, but I am. He’s barely gotten started and I’m already on the brink of eruption.

“Has it been a while since you were with anyone?”

“Yes.”

More than a year — and back then it never felt this good.

“Then there’s no need to keep you waiting.”

Lane works even faster, pumping until I scream. His strong hands clutch my hips, keeping me in place as he bucks against my body. With one hand he reaches for the chain hanging from my nipples and pulls, reigniting the pain. It had

dulled to a mild ache, but it comes right back. Instead of combating the pleasure, however, the dose of suffering elevates my euphoria. It's like flakes of cayenne pepper in a chocolate brownie: heat and sweet, all together, and I want the whole tray.

“I'm going to... I'm going to...” I mumble, barely aware I'm even speaking.

“Come for me, Gwen. Let me see.”

With one sharp tug, he yanks the clamps off my nipples. As if he'd flipped a switch, an explosive orgasm detonates in a blossom of ecstasy. Lane shoves into me with abandon; its steady, loud slapping noise fills the studio. I don't even realize I'm howling until the unbelievable bliss begins to subside.

When Lane pulls out, I dangle in place, insensate to anything but the brilliant afterglow.

“How was that, Gwen?” he asks after a time. Maybe a minute, maybe twenty.

“Amazing,” I moan, not wanting to lose the feeling of my hole gripping his member. He steps around me, holding his wet staff in front of my face.

“You want more?”

“Please!”

Lane sighs.

“Not today. No one likes art to be too self-indulgent. A good artist knows when to stop.”

No. He can't!

“But you... you didn't...”

“That's true,” Lane says, stroking his cock. “But I can wait. This was about teaching you humility, and I think this was a good start.”

Fuck.

Whining won't help, so I keep my mouth shut as Lane lets me out of my bonds. When he uncuffs my wrists, I nearly collapse — I've been holding the same position so long I can barely move. Lane keeps me from falling, collecting me in his muscular arms. He doesn't seem to mind that I'm covered in sweat, and he lifts me up like I weigh nothing at all.

I let him carry my limp body to wherever he's going — I have no idea. We go up a flight of stairs, then enter some kind of basic living space. There's a queen-sized mattress on the ground, covered in only a plain blue sheet, with two thin pillows. A couple shirts and pairs of khakis hang from a clothes rack in the corner. There's one small desk with nothing on its surface. Most notably, the far wall is made up of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a stage.

“This was a... news station?” I ask.

“We're in the control room,” he says, setting me down on the mattress. “I turned it into a place to rest if I work late and

don't want to go home. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. That was an intense session."

Laughing, I turn over. My ass still stings from the paddling. I can't even fathom trying to move my arms or legs.

"It sounds like you enjoyed this lesson," he says, lying down next to me. He strokes my hair, earning a soft sigh from me.

"It was incredible, sir."

"Yes, it was. Were you ever scared?"

"No, not really."

The whole day feels like a blur now, but fear stays with a person. Even a conquered fear leaves its mark.

"You never asked me to stop what I was doing. Did you want to, at any point? Be honest."

"No, sir. I trusted you."

"That's good. Trust is absolutely essential," he says, climbing around so he can face me. "We're going to have secrets to keep. I don't have to tell you what happens if they get out. It's important we communicate very clearly."

"I totally agree, sir."

"Good. You stood up to this challenge remarkably well, Gwen. Too well. I think I'm going to have to push you harder, because you still have a lot to learn."

"I understand, sir."

“You’re sure? You remember what I said when we started this thing?”

There is no doubt in my mind that if Lane Porter, the man behind Alistair Rat, wants to shock and disturb me, he will. The reward of becoming a better artist started this arrangement, but now I want more. One orgasm isn’t nearly enough. If we could do this again every day, I would never want to leave his studio.

“Yes, Professor Porter, I’m sure.”

I’m not going anywhere.

Chapter 11

GWEN



Lane and I stay up for hours talking about *Death of a Salesman*. Why he picked that play, how he practiced putting the pieces in place, his contingency plans if things went wrong... The major takeaway is the need for extensive planning and troubleshooting. Looking for points of failure, both practically and symbolically. I could have guessed that it took months of work to pull off, but I never would have imagined all the more intricate factors.

When the evening gets late, and we haven't eaten in hours, we decide to go out on what neither of us dares call a date. First, we take turns showering in a small stall left over from what used to be the news studio's wardrobe and makeup rooms. Lane goes first, and he's there when I finish to towel me off. My body still aches with every move, but it feels good to be clean.

Lane's also brought my clothes, though he stops me as I bend over to pick them up.

"One more thing," he says, holding out a short length of rope.

Oh no.

What now?

“Hands on your head, Gwen. Spread your legs.”

I do as instructed and watch as he ties the rope around my waist, then pulls a line down between my legs and up the back. He tightens it until it digs into me, exerting an intoxicating pressure on my still-tender pussy.

“Do I even want to know what this is for?” I ask.

“It’s to remind you of the day’s lesson. Think of it as homework, if that helps.”

“Oh.”

“Now get dressed.”

Stomach rumbling, I hurry to put on my clothes. However, the movement causes the rope to shift around. The resulting sensation revives my need — I can already feel my panties dampen between my legs.

How long does Lane expect me to keep this thing on? When he called it homework, did he literally mean I’m supposed to wear it home? That would be... a problem. The idea of wearing it around with no one besides us knowing already goes straight to my pussy. Add to that the stimulation it’ll cause when I walk... This will be interesting, for sure.

Considering what else he could have in that briefcase, maybe I should be glad a little rope is all he’s having me wear.

Mercifully, the eatery Lane has in mind is only three blocks away: a Vietnamese noodle place about as big as a shoebox, little more than a serving counter and a cooler full of drinks. There are only two tables, and both are empty. It's not much to look at, but if there's one thing non-art-related I've learned since moving, it's that in New York these kinds of places often have the best food. Surely enough, the excessively large bowls of pho we order are nothing short of delicious. I keep eating long after I should stop, unable to get enough of the thin slices of delectable beef, crunchy shoots and hot, spicy broth.

While we eat, we talk about our top influences. To my surprise, he's read two of my favorite graphic novels: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*.

"What about you?" I ask him. "Who influenced..." I mouth, *Alistair Rat*.

"Banksy and Sacha Baron Cohen, obviously."

I laugh.

"Obviously."

"And the Marquis de Sade."

Of course.

I bite my lip, picturing Lane reading an antique copy of *Justine* in a grand armchair, a tumbler of whiskey at his side...

The food and conversation almost manage to get my mind off the rope between my thighs, but there it is again, pressed

into my tender skin.

“So, what do we do next?” I ask after leaving the restaurant.

“Rest. Relax. Get a good night’s sleep. Come back to my studio tomorrow and we’ll continue.”

Oh.

“You want me to... go home?”

Smiling, he takes my hand.

“You’re welcome to come back to my place. I know we’ll have fun, though we probably won’t get much rest.”

I blush and glance down at my sneakers.

He’s not wrong.

Honestly, after the day I’ve had, my bed sounds pretty appealing — and I’m sure it won’t be long before I find myself in Lane’s.

“Okay. But what about the...” I wave my hand in front of my crotch.

“Try to keep it on. But you have my permission to take it off if you absolutely must.”

His *permission*?

The audacity of him telling me what I can do once I get home...

And yet, I do feel relieved. As strange as it is, I want to please him — to make him proud — and not just as his

student. If he wants me to keep the rope in place, I will try.

“I’ll give you a special reward if you succeed,” Lane adds. He bends over and kisses me.

I melt into his arms. As subtly as he can on the city street, he slips a hand into my pants and tugs on the tight rope, digging it in deeper. Groaning, I sway against his body, feasting on the pleasure.

“Yes, sir,” I wheeze.

He paws at my ass, reminding me of the earlier spanking, and I almost wish he’d smack it, even if people would see. That’s probably why I want him to.

Maybe someday, as Enmity Jane — not tonight.

When our kiss ends, Lane walks me to the subway platform, wishes me goodnight and heads home.

I make my way to my apartment in a complete daze.

The last time I felt this way was when the bus I rode from Ohio exited the Lincoln Tunnel and I saw Manhattan in person for the first time: I knew from then on my life would be different, and I couldn’t wait to live it.

Lane definitely got my mind off of Rush Mundell, another reason to be grateful. As mad as I am about what he did, now I feel like there’s an even better way forward.

I’m so wrapped up in my thoughts that I barely notice walking in on Joel painting Martin.

“Oh shit!” Martin squeaks, covering himself up with a couch cushion.

Joel peers around the canvas in front of him.

I spin around, covering my eyes.

“Sorry!”

“Gwen! What are you doing back?” Joel asks. “Weren’t you staying the night?”

I never said that, but considering how long I was gone, it wasn’t an unfair assumption.

“Let’s just say there was no need,” I chuckle. “We already... uh... completed the lesson for the day.”

“Does that mean what I think?”

Partially, I suppose. But Joel can’t imagine the half of it.

“It means I’m pretty tired. I’ll get out of your way.”

“No, it’s okay,” Martin says. “You can turn around now.”

He’s put on his clothes while Joel turned the canvas to the wall. I had no idea Martin was so shy.

“Come on,” Joel says. “Tell us about it.”

Martin makes us mint tea while I tell them both as much as I can. For Joel’s sake, I leave out the bit about Mundell threatening my scholarship. For Lane’s, I obviously don’t mention that he’s Alistair Rat. I do tell them that he drew several sketches of me in some compromising positions.

“Oh I’d love to see them,” Joel says. “I’ve seen some of his work at school. He’s really good.”

The thought of having people see those drawings makes me squirm. It would be kinda hot... but maybe too much exposure for the time being. If anywhere, they’d have to be shown in Galleria Carnale; they’d fit right in there.

Perhaps I should have had a talk with Lane about what will happen to his drawings. I trust him not to show them to anyone, but still. I should also be firm with him about my limits. If all the crazy shit we did today was just the beginning, who knows what he has planned next? I can think of a few things that are a hard no.

Another idea: I should establish a time frame for conceptualizing, planning and executing my first artwork as Lane’s protégé. Whether he means to or not, I won’t let him string me along. If Enmity Jane has to disappear until I’m done with school, I can’t accept just waiting around. A good project will take time to figure out, but I ought to be making progress soon — even if I am enjoying our “lessons” in the meantime.

As Joel, Martin and I talk, I try not to move around too much — the pressure from the rope between my legs never goes away, but staying still helps. The temptation to take it off grows the more I think about it, so I need to keep myself distracted.

Eventually, Joel makes it clear to me he’d like to finish his painting of Martin, so I excuse myself. Every step of the

way to my room the rope rubs against me. By the time I get there, my pussy smolders, and all I can think about are Lane's cock and his drawings.

Stripping down carefully, I lie down in bed and spread my arms out at my sides. I could use the rope to get myself off, but should I? Would Lane approve? If he asks me tomorrow, I don't want to lie. But it's all I can think of.

I know what to do.

If I'm going to be horny and fixated on Lane, I may as well be productive. Grabbing a pen and a blank journal, I let my mind go wild. If I want Lane to give me all the orgasms I can handle, instead of just one, why not give him a few fun ideas?

I throw on a pair of headphones, play some Olivia Rodrigo and get cracking. Like Lane, I don't spend too long on any one sketch — I have a lot of ground to cover.

Lane kissing me and teasing my clit while I'm tied to a chair, arms and legs pulled wide, totally exposed...

Lane holding my leash as I crawl on all fours behind him...

Lane spanking me with a ruler as I'm bent over his knee...

Lane drilling me from behind while I attempt to draw...

My pussy quakes, soaking the tight rope within, but I don't stop working until my hand tires. I'm far from out of

ideas, though, and when the day's exhaustion catches up with me at last, I dream some very pleasant dreams.

—

Joel gets me up twenty minutes earlier than usual in the morning.

“What the hell?” I mutter, cringing at my alarm clock.

“How late were you up last night?” he asks, opening my drawers and throwing me my clothes.

“Late. Let me go back to sleep, I'll get up in a bit.”

“Gwen, are you going to want to get a bagel and coffee on the way to work?”

Fuck, that does sound really good.

“Yeah...”

“Do you want to have to sprint and eat, like last time?”

I'm still under the covers — Joel hasn't seen the rope. If he had, he'd know running is not an option.

“No.”

“Do you want to be late?”

I see where he's going with this.

“No, I don't want to be late.”

“Then get up,” he says. “Or I *will* leave without you.”

“Fine.” I shoo him out with both arms. “Go on, I'm getting up, I promise.”

Forcing myself out of bed, the rope awakens all the need I suppressed when I went to sleep. Every move I make to wash up and dress releases new jolts and tingles. It would feel so good to relieve the pressure, one way or another. At this point I'd probably only need a minute...

No.

I'll wait for Lane. It'll be worth it.

However, I do need the bathroom. I have no choice but to take off the rope, but as soon as I'm done I put it right back. I don't tie it with the same finesse, but I pull it just as tight.

As soon as I'm ready, Joel and I head out. We get bagels, we don't have to rush and we get to work on time. The cafe is pretty busy, which I'm thankful for: it keeps me distracted until my shift is over. Once we're done, I head straight to Lane's studio.

He stands in the doorway, not letting me in at first. Without a word, he checks me out, up and down.

"You're still wearing it, aren't you?" he asks.

How does he know? Is he just guessing, or do I have a tell?

"Yes, professor."

"Show me."

I pull up my top just enough to let him see the band circling my waist.

“You took it off,” he says. It’s an observation, not a question.

“Only for a minute.”

He tugs at the knot, but it’s taut.

“Good. Come in.”

He leads me into the studio and points to the center of the room.

“Undress,” he orders. “Toss your clothes to me. Then cross your arms behind your back.”

I do as I’m told, giving Lane a sordid show. If I entice him enough, maybe he’ll skip the art and go straight to giving me the release I need.

Once I’m done stripping, Lane tosses my clothes out the door of the studio, then comes up close to examine the rope.

Isn’t he going to undress too? Just because I’ve been turned on for hours, it doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like to see that gorgeous, masculine sculpture.

“I’m really impressed,” he says, examining my skin. “You must be pretty sore.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Were you tempted to stop wearing it?”

“Yes.

“Why didn’t you?”

“You said there’d be a special reward.”

He pauses.

Is that bad? Was that the wrong motivation? It's the truth. After only getting one orgasm, I absolutely wanted more.

"I did say that."

Lane bends over and unties the rope, then gently pulls it through my legs until it all comes through the other end. I moan as the fibers' friction fills me with bliss.

"Spread your legs. Keep your arms where they are and open your mouth."

I obey instantly, trying not to quiver in my anticipation.

To start, Lane takes the still-warm rope and winds it between my lips and around the back of my neck.

"Bite down."

I grip the sodden rope between my teeth, shuddering as my thick scent gathers on my tongue.

Lane retrieves a wand vibrator from his briefcase and presses it against my sopping opening. He flicks the switch to turn it on and holds the device tight against me. The vibrations immediately launch me into a state of overwhelming intoxication.

In a matter of seconds, I'm close to a much-needed climax. Breathing hard, I suck air around the rope in my mouth, tasting my dank desire as I climb toward my peak. Lane clasps my wrists in his other hand, holding me steady and under his control. He doesn't let me lose my balance

when I totter on my feet, but he also doesn't let me grind against the vibrator. If I try to push forward, he pulls the toy back, then tugs on my wrists. Lane also keeps the wand on low power. He could turn it up any time, but holds off.

I hope that means what I think it means.

“Don't come until I say so,” he says. “Tell me when you're ready.”

“Yes, sir,” I pant, my words slurring around the rope. I can barely comprehend what he means. Does he or does he not want me to come? I waited so long for this. I need it so badly and-

“Don't come yet!” Lane barks, releasing my wrists and slapping my ass. “Not until you have permission!”

My breath comes out all at once, leaving me gasping for air. A river of joy laps at the dam, on the verge of breaking through. This is a fight I'm going to lose.

As if I'm not already struggling, Lane slips his fingers inside me, spreading my flesh just enough to silence any resistance I had left. My orgasm erupts. My hands shoot toward the vibrator so I can massage myself and turn the toy on full blast.

“Very naughty,” Lane hums, swatting my hands away. “You're lucky this is a reward or you'd be in deep trouble, Ms. Carpenter.”

I don't even care. The tides of bliss washing over me are all that exist in this moment. Lane keeps my hands away but

he doesn't stop probing my folds and maintaining pressure on the vibrator. He doesn't let it go until my wails give out. He lets me enjoy every second of the mind-melting orgasm, but as soon as I stop shaking, he shuts off the wand and smacks my rear again.

“Compose yourself, Gwen. We'll get started once you've recovered.”

Only one? Again?

If I hadn't gotten greedy could I have had more?

Whatever.

I take deep breaths and maintain my position, trying not to steal glances at the bulge in Lane's dark trousers.

“When you went home last night, I thought for sure you'd have given in to temptation,” he says, dragging a stool out in front of me and taking a seat. He slips the wet rope from my mouth. “But after what I just saw, I trust you were being honest. You needed that pretty bad, didn't you?”

“Yes, sir,” I sigh, still thirsting for air. My chest heaves, heart pounding within.

“Did you struggle with temptation?”

“A little, sir.”

“How did you deal with it?”

I look at the door to the studio.

“It's in my tote bag, I'll show you, sir.”

Lane grins, his brow raised.

“Stay.”

He goes and gets my bag and holds it out in front of me.

“There’s a journal, sir.”

He finds the book and flips to the end. Slowly browsing through the pages, his smile grows.

“This is how you distracted yourself?” he asks. “Seems like this would only make things worse.”

“It’s what I was going to be thinking about anyway. I figured I should put it to good use.”

“That you did. They’re very nice. Perverse but beautiful. There’s a longing in your expression I hadn’t managed to capture — a self-admonishment, almost, but paired with an unwillingness to change.”

Admonishment?

“Is that what you see?” I ask.

“Am I wrong? Look at these lines,” he says, pointing my sloping eyebrows in the drawing of me on a leash. “It’s almost as if you’re mad at yourself for enjoying being treated like a pet.”

Am I?

I don’t know. However, the word “pet” coils around my spine and slithers down my back. It shouldn’t sound so enticing.

“I think that’s what we’ll explore today,” he says. “Let’s see how you react to your fantasy in reality.”

Oh.

It's possible I may have fucked up.

Chapter 12

LANE



The first thing a pet needs is a collar, so I lock one around Gwen's neck, then attach a leash.

"Get down on all fours."

She obeys, immediately. Blood fills her cheeks. Shutting her eyes, she bows her head. I have no doubt that if I fingered her tight little pussy it would be fully soaked.

"Head up. Eyes open. I want your full attention, pet."

"Yes, sir," she says. Her voice comes out throaty.

She likes being told what to do. Good. That's the kind of disposition she'll need.

"Gwen, today you're going to learn about one's artistic vision. Specifically, how it may or may not play out in practice. Sometimes a concept works, eventually becoming a quality piece of art. Often they don't. That's true in most areas of life: science, business, politics... But we have to try them out, or we won't know. Experimentation is an essential part of the creative process."

"Yes, professor."

Every time she answers like that, her sultry, submissive voice goes straight to my cock. She looks perfect on her hands and knees, gazing up at me. I don't consider my students beneath me, or feel they should treat me like a superior — but in this context...

“Walk,” I say, holding her leash.

Gwen looks around the studio.

“Sir? Where?”

I motion a circle with my free hand.

“Yes, sir.”

She crawls, going around me so that I'm at the center of her path. I turn to watch at first, savoring the sight of her shapely ass swaying as she moves. After a few circuits, I stand still, passing the leash around my body so I can listen. Gwen's grunts and groans etch into my mind. They're quiet, but full of yearning. She knows we've only started, and there's so much more to come. I could probably watch her do this for hours without getting bored. Maybe someday I will, just to test how long she'll do it.

So slowly she barely notices, I gather up the leash until her circles turn into a spiral, drawing her closer and closer. When she's practically at my feet, she glances up at me and I tell her to stop.

“Stay.”

My cock's so fucking hard, it pulls my pants fully taut at the crotch. I ought to take them off, but if I do I'll either

stroke myself off or fuck Gwen silly. We're still building up to that, so I bottle my hunger and put it away for later.

I sit down on the floor next to Gwen and run my hand through her hair. Patting her ass, I ask, "My pet has a collar, but there's something else she's missing. Do you know what that is?"

"No, sir."

I spool the leash into a loose bundle, then leave it on Gwen's back. Then I get up and retrieve two items from my briefcase.

"Do you know what this is?" I ask, showing her our next experiment.

Gwen stares at the toy in my hand, her eyes following an extensive length of long, dark hair extending from a thick, metal bulb.

"A... a tail?"

"Yes. Do you know where it goes?"

Her lips part. Her thighs clench. She nods.

"Have you ever had something like this in your ass before?"

"N-no. No, sir."

I show her the second item: a bottle of lube.

"You're going to feel some discomfort. I'll go slow."

She yelps when I pour lube between the cheeks of her ass. It's understandable she's tense if she's never worn a plug

before. I take my time rubbing the lube all over her unexplored hole; if she wants to refuse the plug, she has ample time. Instead, she spreads her legs, giving me easy access.

“You’re going to look so pretty with such a nice tail,” I say, brushing the hair across her face.

“Yes, sir,” she says.

When I’m satisfied she’s ready, I touch the tip of the plug to her puckered bud.

“Relax, Gwen. It’ll go in easier.”

“Yes, sir.”

She takes a deep breath and unclenches as best she can. I ease the tip in slightly, earning a sharp gasp from her.

“Be calm. Just relax.”

It’s easier said than done, I know, so I give her all the time she needs. I let her squeeze the plug out if it’s in too far. Once she’s ready, I urge it in a little deeper. A half an inch at a time, the tail sinks inward. She moans when the thickest part finally eases its way past her tight ring and drives home.

“How does that feel?” I ask.

“It hurts, but... it’s kinda nice.”

“You know as well as anyone that good art can be painful for the artist. I’ve seen you tap into your past for *The Ohio Zoo*. But when you’re really feeling something, your audience will too.”

“Yes, sir.”

I unfurl her leash and give it a tug.

“Walk.”

She takes a few tentative steps, cringing as the plug jostles in time with her movement. I fall into step behind her to get a better view. Fluid coats her inner thighs; she leaves drops in her path as she goes. I watch for a few rotations, then step in her way.

“Hold this,” I say, slipping the leash between her teeth. She bites down, inhaling its leather scent.

I head over to my stool and begin drawing.

My goal for the sketch isn't to portray her gorgeous figure or her enticing submissiveness. This work has an audience of one. I want Gwen to see herself through my eyes: a fearless student eager for all the wrong lessons. What she'll do with my depiction is up to her, but I hope it will inspire her. I hope it'll give her confidence to be her authentic self in her art, even if she has to hide behind another identity.

I draw as fast as I can, not wanting to tax her too much at one time. After I finish, I tell her to stand up so she can give her knees and elbows a rest. She bites her lip when she sees the drawing.

“Getting used to the tail?” I ask, giving it a soft pull. She squeaks and whines until I let go.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

Maybe later we’ll experiment with a larger plug. The thought of driving my cock into that tight, little hole...

“I could use a drink before we continue. Are you thirsty, pet?”

“Uh... yes, sir.”

“Put your hands up, like paws.”

I show her how I mean; she lifts her arms and lets her hands hang limp.

“Stick out your tongue.”

Her cheeks glow scarlet, but she obeys.

“Okay. Lead the way.”

Groaning, she starts walking. I can’t take my eyes off her ass, mesmerized by the tail waving back and forth.

While Gwen watches, I pour myself a glass of water from a filter jug. I drink it down, letting her wonder why I haven’t gotten her a glass as well. She gets her answer when I take out not a glass, but a bowl. I fill it, then motion for her to return to the studio.

Whatever she may be thinking, she says nothing. Not one complaint.

Back in the studio, she doesn’t need to be told to get back down on all fours. When I set the bowl on the floor, she already understands.

I draw her lapping up the water like an animal. Whether she realizes she's doing it or not, she wags her tail. My cock twitches, begging to be thrust into her. I try to ignore it, focusing on drawing, but the whole scene is just too unbearably sexy for me to wait any longer.

The second I finish the sketch, I unzip my pants and unbutton my shirt. Gwen looks up at me, a smile spreading across her face.

“Let me be clear, pet. I'm not doing this now because you've earned a reward. I'm not trying to teach you any sort of lesson. You're just way too fucking hot, and I can't help myself.”

I reach between her legs and find her core utterly sopping. Degrading her, humiliating her — it's only made her wetter. There's no reason to think using her will be any different.

Sitting on the floor, I bid her to crawl forward.

“Use your mouth. Show me how badly you want to come.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, staring at my rigid cock. There's trepidation in her tone.

“Have you done this before?”

“Not a lot, sir. And it's been a while.”

“Don't worry. I'll tell you what to do.”

“I know what to do, sir,” she says. “I don't think I can... fit that in my mouth.”

I laugh, leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

“You’ll be fine, pet.”

Taking my cock in her mouth will be much easier than taking it in her ass, but I’ll let her worry about that another time.

She starts by licking my tip, teasing it until it spasms. I grab her leash to keep her from lifting her head too high. As her lips slide over my shaft, a small voice in my mind tries to remind me of what will happen if word gets out I’ve got a first-year student sucking me off. As if I could stop now.

It’s all academic anyway. I’m not going to break this off. Whatever happens, happens.

Gwen makes incredible sounds when she takes my rod down the length of her tongue. Her sigh rises into a gasp, then settles into a moan. She coughs, gagging as she goes further than she’s ready. I loosen her leash, giving her enough space to let my cock out.

“You’re doing great. Catch your breath and continue when you’re ready.”

She nods, inhaling slowly.

While she collects herself, I reach around and grip the base of her tail plug. Eliciting fresh groans from her, I ease the plug in and out, stretching her muscle until she squeals. I could come just listening to her.

“I’m ready, sir,” she says, wincing as I let the plug slide back in.

“Then continue.”

Opening wide, she drops her mouth down over my cock, gripping tightly with her soft lips. I don't stop playing with her tail, establishing a rhythm of withdrawal and insertion. She grunts in protest, the noise vibrating through my rod.

“If you want relief, earn it.”

On command, she works harder. Her lips seal around me, and she bobs her head so fast I can feel her strain against the leash. She still hasn't taken me in all the way, but I'll train her to go deeper. There's no need to push her further than she can go — it already feels so good. I could come at any time, but I hold back. Eventually Gwen's stamina wanes and she starts to slow down, so I pull out.

Climbing behind her, I flip the length of her tail across her back, then feed my saliva-coated cock into her jealous channel.

“How's this, pet?” I ask, driving my cock in deep, pressing against the plug in her ass. Considering her desperate panting, she's close to a powerful climax.

“So... full,” she moans.

I chuckle. When I pound home she definitely feels full. I can't go too fast, I'm almost worried I might break her. She squeezes down on me though, taking all I give.

If she thinks she's stuffed now, wait until I've got my cock plunged all the way up her ass while a big, thick vibrator hums in her pussy and an extra wide cock gag

muffles her pleas. The thought of stretching all her holes to their limits sends me to the brink.

Her body rocks in rhythm with mine, and I can't help thinking that we're in perfect harmony — student and teacher, giving and taking, the connection mutual. The thrill of discovery and the honor of leading one to it. Our method is unconventional, but the result is nothing short of a masterpiece.

Before I can erupt, I pull out. Stroking myself and fingering her at the same time, I say, “You can come, pet.”

She howls as I release my milky ropes. Her walls clench around my fingers, hips bucking against my hand until she goes quiet and still. I pull her into my arms and cradle her until she catches her breath.

Like the night before, I carry her up to the mattress so she can rest.

“Be right back,” I tell her, kissing her forehead before I leave.

I get us glasses of water, but also retrieve my sketchpad and pencils. When I get back, I immediately start drawing.

“What are you doing?” she asks after a while.

“Just having some fun.”

She winces as she gets up, no doubt still sore. I show her the first two pieces: one of her and me sitting across from each other at a table in a restaurant, her in a dress and me in a

suit; the other, the two of us on the dance floor, hands together, bodies close, staring into each other's eyes.

“This is what's on your mind?” she asks, smirking.
“That's adorable.”

I clutch her ass, bumping my knuckle against the plug.

“In my mind, you've got things going on under that dress,” I say. “Hopefully one day we'll do it for real.”

She wraps her arms around me and leans her head on my shoulder.

“I'd like that, Professor Porter.”

—

Gwen's too tired to do much more today, so I call her a cab, but not before presenting her with a new plug. It has no tail, just a flared base at the end.

“Wear this as much as you can,” I instruct her. “I want you to get used to its presence. When you're ready, I'll give you a bigger one.”

She sighs, shaking her head.

“I guess I'm supposed to learn from the pain, right?”

“Of course. But it'll be hot too. I love to imagine you sitting on a nice, thick cock while we share a fine meal, surrounded by people who have no idea.”

She shivers, cheeks glowing red.

“Yes, sir.”

I take out the tail and replace it with the new plug, enjoying Gwen's reaction as she adjusts to the new size. She grunts as she dresses, then checks herself out in the bathroom mirror to make sure the plug doesn't show through her pants. There's a very subtle outline — one would have to be staring close to see it.

"Text me in a few minutes," I say as her cab pulls up to the curb. "Let me know how it feels riding around with that."

"Oh, I will, *professor.*"

I give her ass a good smack, then pull her into a hard kiss. She leans into me, lips pressed to mine, until the taxi honks at us.

"See you," she says, getting into the car very carefully.

As soon as it drives off, I get out my phone and text Rory.

Hey, you busy tonight? I could use your help with something.

There's no way I can go home and just watch a little TV or read a bit. I've got so much work to do.

I'm free, he replies. What do you need?

A tarp. Traffic cones. Hard hat, hi-vis vest. And a vehicle. I'll bring the rest.

—

I wake up the next morning still thinking about Gwen's texts.

Sitting down sucks. Walking sucks.

Poor thing.

How am I supposed to sleep?

She'll get tired.

I hope you're enjoying this.

She has no idea.

I read through them a few times, my cock stiffening all over again. It takes a while before I finally get online and check out the news coverage.

Call the ratcatcher! New street art suggests return of famed performer

Rory, dressed like a construction worker, kept watch while I painted. The tarp and cones ensured no one passing by saw the mural in progress, and that I didn't have to worry about any unexpected interruptions. However, should we get caught, Rory's van was parked close.

Is Alistair Rat back? You be the judge

Pictures of the painting have been posted all over social media.

It isn't really subtle, Rory said when it was done.

You're not wrong, I replied.

Painted on a wall adjacent to the display window of an electronics shop, the mural depicts two anthropomorphic mice eating TV dinners while gazing at the flatscreens inside the store. Behind them, the apocalypse rages on — fires and demonic black cats with green, glowing eyes. In the lower-

left corner, the interlocking A and R insignia marks it as a piece by Alistair Rat.

Rory asked, *What made you want to paint this? What are you trying to say?*

That's simple.

It says: *I'm back.*

Rush Mundell calls before too long.

"Did you see it?" he asks.

There's no point in playing dumb.

"Online, just now."

"Do you think it's really him?" Rush asks.

That's an interesting question.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I assumed he'd retired. Didn't you?"

"Yes," I lie. Publicly, that is what I tell anyone who asks. Considering Rat hadn't been active in years, and no one had a better explanation, it was easiest to keep things simple. "I guess he missed the spotlight."

"So you're sure it's really him?"

What, couldn't Rush tell?

"Sure, as much as one can be, based on the pictures."

"Right, of course. Are you going to visit the site and take a closer look?"

“As soon as possible.”

If Lane Porter is to critique the piece properly, he has to see it as “the artist” intended: up close, and from multiple angles.

“Have you been there yet?” I ask.

“No. And I won’t be going. I just wanted to know if this is really Alistair Rat.”

“As opposed to what? A fake?”

“An imitator,” Rush says. “Someone looking to capitalize on the Rat name.”

“Eh, I don’t think so. It really captures Rat’s brand of pretension and bored cynicism.”

Rush laughs.

“Good. I just wanted to be sure that this wasn’t one of our students.”

Excuse me?

“Really? Why would you think that?”

“One of our first-years, Gwen Carpenter, is a fan of Alistair Rat. How well do you know her?”

“The one from the videos, right? We met at the Askew Gallery,” I reply, glad he can’t see my scowl.

“Yes, her. I had to warn her against doing that again. She has a defiant personality, though, and I half expected her not to listen.”

I smirk. He definitely called it.

“I see. Well, I don’t have hard evidence that this is Rat’s work, but I’m pretty certain it is.”

“Good.”

I should end the call now, or at least change the subject, but there’s something I have to say. Not to play amateur psychologist, but maybe on some deep level I painted that mural just to get Rush to call and bring up Gwen. That way I could speak my piece, without having to broach the subject myself.

“Rush, did you really have to lay down the law with that student? It’s a new era — art has evolved. People liked what she did. If the public knew she went here, it wouldn’t reflect badly on the school. If anything, it could inspire more people to apply.”

“We don’t need more applicants, Lane. We need *good* applicants. Artists who have the potential to carry on our traditions. If Ms. Carpenter wants to cause a scene on the subway, she can learn her craft somewhere else.”

Yeah, that’s pretty much what I thought he’d say. I’d like to give him the benefit of the doubt and chalk this up to being stuck in the Mundell family’s ways. That’s not what’s really going on here, though.

“Will you actually leave her alone if she falls in line? Or have you taken a special interest in this one?”

Rush grumbles into the phone.

“So what if I have? She’s not your student, she’s not your business. And don’t lecture me. You’re one to talk. What was the last one’s name again?”

That’s low.

“True. I’m not innocent. But at least I never threatened to kick someone out of the school.”

“No, that’s true. You just break their hearts. I keep my entanglements purely transactional in nature and everyone gets what they want. Ms. Carpenter will too, if she learns not to make trouble.”

We’re both lucky this conversation’s happening over the phone, or in the next minute he’d have a broken jaw and I’d be unemployed.

He’s already too late. I’ve claimed her. But, if he doesn’t get what he wants from Gwen...

“Thanks for the talk, Lane,” Rush says. He doesn’t wait for me to respond before hanging up. That’s for the best.

I text Gwen and tell her to come to the studio as soon as she’s free.

We have work to do, and trouble to make.

Chapter 13

GWEN



It's a good day not to be needed at the cafe. The last thing I need is to try and work a shift with a plug in my impossibly sore ass. Lying flat on my stomach has helped: I can draw, or scroll my phone — just as long as I don't get up or go anywhere.

Just like with yesterday's rope, I consider taking the plug out. I've had it in for so long. I've only removed it twice, and then only for a minute at a time. I even kept it in while showering. Of course, having it inside isn't all discomfort: the fullness keeps me always primed for pleasure. While I do struggle to contain my need for relief, I try learning to enjoy it.

Thinking about Lane makes it easy, especially when the alerts start coming in about a new Alistair Rat mural found painted on an electronics store in lower Manhattan.

Someone was busy last night.

The project must have taken at least a few hours. When did Lane have any time to sleep? I barely got any myself, considering how hard it was to get comfortable for the night with the plug constantly reminding me of its presence.

Where did this project come from? Lane didn't say anything about wanting to revive Alistair Rat, or that he already had an idea for his first new piece in years. Did he do this to somehow help me, or was he just in the mood?

As I wait, I draw myself the way I felt since Mundell threatened my scholarship for my art: thrown in jail, locked away, hands shackled to the ground, gagged with duct tape, eyes blindfolded. I'm totally in the dark, unable to speak or see or free myself.

Next, I draw how I felt after Lane offered to help: still bound, but walking forward, on his leash. Duct tape still covers my mouth, but another pair of lips have been drawn on. Looking closely, though, reveals an outline of my smile under the tape. I may not be fully free, but I have a plan and someone who will guide me through it.

I'm just about finished drawing when Lane texts me to come over, so I leave right away. It's the first walk I've taken after wearing the plug for so long, and every step raises the temperature within me. I don't dare sit down while riding the subway and instead lean against one of the walls. The sways and jolts of the car still resonate through the plug, but I manage to not yelp or groan. New Yorkers mind their own business, but only to a point.

"We need to talk," Lane says as he lets me into the studio.

I wait until he shuts the door behind me to ask, "You mean about the mural? I can't believe you didn't tell me you were doing that. I would have come with you!"

“It was a spontaneous decision. You had me feeling inspired and I didn’t want to waste it. Don’t worry, you’ll be at the next one, because you’ll be helping.”

I can live with that.

“Okay then. Great.”

“Are you still wearing the plug?” Lane asks, eyes tracking down to my waist.

“Yes, sir.”

“You can take it out. Then we’ll talk. This is serious.”

Huh. I assumed he’d want to fuck as soon as I got here. Whatever is going on, it’s important.

While he watches, I ease the plug out slowly, allowing it to stretch my hole a little at a time. I whine as the pain spirals through me, but then relents as the toy escapes. Seeing it, I can’t believe how small it appears in my hand despite feeling so large. I don’t even want to think about going up to the next size... or having to sit down again anytime in the next forty-eight hours.

Lane leads us upstairs so I can lie on the mattress. He sits on the floor across from me.

“I got a call from Rush Mundell earlier,” he begins. “He wanted to talk about the mural. He was a little suspicious, thought it might be someone pretending to be Rat. Like you.”

I actually laugh.

“That’s insane. How the fuck could he think that? It’s so obviously yours. How can he not tell the difference?”

Lane shrugs.

“Yeah, that’s never been his strongest skill. Thankfully, he believed me when I said it was definitely Rat. After that we talked about you. I tried to get him to back off on Enmity Jane, but he wasn’t having it.”

Figures.

“Thanks for trying,” I mutter.

“There’s more, Gwen. When we last talked about Rush, I didn’t tell you everything. I’d hoped it could be avoided, because I knew it would make you hate him even harder and make your time at this school more difficult.”

“I didn’t think it was possible to hate him more.”

“Yeah, well, it is. He doesn’t wield his power over the academy just for the sake of controlling his students’ art. He uses it to satisfy other desires.”

I only need one guess.

“He fucks students.”

“Yes,” Lane says. “Especially the ones depending on his scholarships.”

What a piece of shit!

“How is he not in fucking jail?”

“As far as I know, he isn’t forcing himself on anyone. In his own words, it’s ‘purely transactional.’ He promises to get

their work into galleries or recommend them for grants, connect them with his industry contacts... Stuff like that. It's seedy but legal."

That's some fucking bullshit.

"Gwen, I think he's coming for you. I don't know what his next move will be. I'm guessing he'll find some other incentive for you to give him what he wants."

My heart stops for a second.

"Joel. If Mundell knows we're friends, he might assume that Joel helped film my Enmity Jane pieces. Then he could threaten to stop supporting Joel."

Lane nods.

"It's very possible."

"If he tries that, I'll kill him."

"I wouldn't blame you."

Nothing would make me happier than punching Mundell right in his fucking face, but it wouldn't help Joel.

"I'd rather gouge my eye out with a tooth chisel than let him touch me."

"Good," Lane says, shifting over to sit next to me. Taking my hand, he says, "You need to be ready when he tries, though. You need a plan."

"Okay. What do you have in mind?"

I doubt Mundell will take the hint if I play dumb about his intentions. I can't dodge his calls or e-mails forever.

Rebuffing him will have consequences. The devil on my shoulder whispers a diabolical fantasy of recording his attempt to exploit me and turning the situation on him; it could mark the rebirth and ascension of Enmity Jane.

A girl can dream.

“The obvious but unpleasant solution is for you to transfer to another school. Take yourself out of the situation and rob Mundell of any power over you and your art.”

Sighing, I shake my head.

“We’ve been through this. I’d need another scholarship.”

“I’d pay, Gwen. Tuition, expenses, everything. I can afford it.”

I turn aside to avoid his eyes. That’s far too generous.

“I can’t ask that of you.”

“You didn’t ask. I’m offering. I don’t want Mundell anywhere near you. It would be a small price to pay to keep you out of his reach.”

The things men will do to compete with one another...

“I get what you’re trying to do, but I’d be in your debt. Even if you never asked for a single cent, I’d still feel like I owed you.”

“Gwen-”

“And it would put me in a position where I’d feel obligated to do whatever you say regarding my art. I want to learn from you but I need to be able to push back if

something doesn't feel right. How can I do that if you're paying my way? Or if I think you could cut me off if we have a disagreement?"

Lane glowers.

"Mundell does shit like that. I would never."

"Maybe. I hope not, but how will I know for sure? And assuming we don't have an issue, what if word got around about what you're doing? Sleeping with a student and paying her way through art school? How would that look?"

"Who cares what they think?"

"Don't you? I thought you liked your job. You think Mundell will be thrilled that one of his teachers is paying to send a former student to another school?"

"He won't care about that. He'll be pissed that you didn't give him what he wants."

Hmm.

I suppose. Lane would know Mundell's motivations best.

"For what it's worth, I would support you unconditionally," Lane says. "I'd put it in writing, make it legally binding. You wouldn't have to worry. Or, if you wanted to repay me because you didn't want to be in debt, I'd make it an interest-free loan, with no payment deadlines."

He's got it all figured out, doesn't he?

"You're making this sound too good to be true. Why? If I have to handle Mundell myself, I will. I'm an adult. I'm

prepared to stand up for myself.”

Lane takes out his phone and pulls up a photo album of him and Mundell. He scrolls along for screen after screen.

“When I enrolled at Mundell Academy years ago, Rush took me under his wing. He elevated my work, like he’s doing for Joel. At the time I thought it was because he believed in my talent, that he wanted me to represent the school and live up to its prestige.”

This can’t be heading anywhere good. So, what does that mean for Joel?

“I wasn’t wrong, but Rush saw in me a chance to fulfill an obligation. Mundell Academy has belonged to his family for generations, but he doesn’t have any children of his own. He needs an heir — an acolyte, someone who he could imprint his views onto and thus leave the academy in safe hands. For a while, he thought it would be me. He introduced me to everyone in his circles, he put me on a tenure track at the school. He made me influential, and sought-after. But when he disparaged my true artistic passions, I made it clear that I’m not looking to be his spiritual successor.”

Wow.

To turn down that kind of wealth, and a position most can only dream about... I’m not sure I would have had the strength. Granted, it probably helped that he’s already from a rich family. It’s a lot easier to hold to one’s convictions when money isn’t an issue.

“I’m surprised he didn’t fire you.”

“He kinda couldn’t,” Lane says. “He’d already made me a star in his world. To reverse course after investing so much into me, it wouldn’t have served his purposes. Better to remain friends and colleagues, keep it all amicable.”

“That’s crazy,” I say, rising up onto my knees. “Did you think about taking the position and then, like, changing the school to be more receptive to modern art?”

Lane chuckles.

“I probably should have. At the time, I still considered Rush my friend. I didn’t want to betray his trust like that. Plus, I think that would have driven Mundell into the ground. Regardless of what we think about his school, it is highly successful. For a new director to take over and start changing things based on their personal preferences... that’s a great way to decimate an institution.”

“Or keep it from getting stuck in the past,” I say.

“Being stuck in the past works for Mundell. Most of his students find their way into art as a profession, others stay in academia. Occasionally, one goes on to become one of the top talents of their generation. Even the ones who drop out can still claim they studied at Mundell.”

I grin. I’d definitely put it on my resume, for sure, even if I don’t graduate here.

“Okay. Regardless. How do I get Rush off my case?”

Taking my hands, Lane stands up and pulls me to my feet.

“That won’t be easy. He’s used to getting what he wants. The only foolproof answer is to change schools, like I said, but that means letting him win. I don’t want that. I assume you don’t either.”

“No.”

“Then the next best way is to give Rush a reason not to pursue you further.”

Like, a hard punch to the face?

“How?”

“Your roommate, Joel. Mundell sees him as his rising star. If he-”

“No. I’m not getting him involved. Whatever we do, I don’t want this to affect Joel.”

Lane nods.

“That’s a tough needle to thread.”

“I know.”

“In that case, my suggestion is to achieve an artistic success so significant that Rush won’t want to risk losing you as a student and representative of his school. It would have to be something other than Enmity Jane, of course.”

“How am I supposed to do that? It’s not like I can just pull a masterpiece out of thin air.”

Lane gestures at my bag, the one where I keep my sketchbook.

“No, but you do good work when you’re feeling inspired. I say we start there. However, we’ll also attack the problem on a second front: while you work on something that will really impress Rush, we use Alistair Rat to keep him distracted.”

Yes. Now we’re talking.

“All right. I’m with you, professor.”

I step up to him, pulling off my top. His eyes move down to my chest, so I unhook my bra and let it fall to my feet.

“Inspire me.”

Chapter 14

GWEN



“Undress,” says Lane. “And tell me: have you ever looked into going on an artist’s retreat?”

That would be amazing. A few days of just drawing and writing — no job, no classes, no distractions. Sadly, there’s no way I could afford to take off that much time, and I doubt I ever will.

“No, professor. They’re too expensive.”

“Of course. The trick is getting someone else to pay. Artists have long depended on benefactors to escape the world for a while. However, there’s more than one way to enjoy isolation and introspection.”

Lane bids me to use the restroom and wash up, then leads me not to his usual composition space, but down into the building’s basement. I haven’t been here before — or even know there was one — so I watch my step, especially on the stairs.

At the bottom, I’m relieved to find a finished basement, with hardwood floors and pink marble wallpaper. Shelves, cabinets and pegs display a massive collection of sex toys, devices and supplies. The rather large, open space allows for

multiple pieces of dungeon furniture: benches, a stockade, a St. Andrew's Cross and more. Lane has to tug at my leash to keep me moving; instinct begs me to stop and stare. I'm reminded of his artwork at Galleria Carnale — I'd bet a week's salary that this is where he and the models conceived the pieces and rehearsed them.

We arrive at the back of the room, which houses an incredibly large box covered with black studded leather and sealed with a series of padlocks. It's about six feet long, maybe two feet wide and two feet tall — too big to be called a coffin, but not by much. What could he possibly have in there? All of the rope, whips, gags, plugs and so on were back on the shelves.

Isolation and introspection...

No way.

Fuck me.

He's going to put me in the box, and he's going to lock it. I can already feel the thumping in my chest.

"Today we're going to experiment with sensory deprivation," says Lane. "Not in a tank with a bath of saltwater, but in this sarcophagus. You're not here to relax, you're here to be alone with your thoughts. Are you claustrophobic?"

"No."

"Good."

He slips off the open padlocks and raises the box's lid. It looks heavy, even for Lane. Thankfully, thick padding lines the interior, with an extra bump at the end to serve as a pillow. It won't be as roomy, but it should be more comfortable than a hard surface.

“You see this, Gwen?” he says, pointing to a large tablet built into the underside of the lid. “I want you to experience silence and darkness. But, if you feel inspired, this has apps for drawing and writing. You'll find a stylus built into the side of the device. It also has a microphone which will remain on at all times if you need to be let out. You can adjust the brightness, but that is all. You cannot use it to go online, play music or otherwise distract yourself. I will be able to see and hear you through the device's camera, and if you draw or write, I'll see that too.”

My smile gets bigger with each word. I must be crazy to be so excited; I want nothing more than to get in that box and get started.

“Close your eyes, and wait here. I have one last thing for you.”

“Yes, sir.”

He disappears only for a moment. When he returns, I hear clinking metal in rhythm with his footsteps.

“Open your eyes.”

Lane holds what looks like a pair of panties made of metal. With the twist of a key, the crotch partially detaches

from the belt.

“What the hell is that?”

“There are two things I don’t want you to do while you’re in there: fall asleep, or pleasure yourself. This will ensure you don’t do either.”

He takes from his pants pocket a slim, metal cylinder and attaches it to a slot in the crotch piece.

My head swims when I realize what he intends; I could almost faint.

“I’m going to... wear that... with...”

“Put it on.”

This is absolutely insane, which means — of course — that my pussy already creams at the very idea. The toy is going to remain locked inside me, but I won’t be able to touch it, remove it or anything.

It’s going to drive me fucking crazy.

I slip the belt around my waist and lock it into place. Lane hands me a miniature padlock to fasten around interlocking pieces, ensuring they can’t be separated. For the crotch piece, I line the toy up to my sodden lips and gently slide it in until the entire contraption rests flush against my skin. After one more lock, the device is complete.

Lane shows me the key, then hangs it from a small hook outside the sarcophagus.

“How does that feel, pet?”

Twisting my hips, I take a few steps, back and forth. Just like the ass plug and the rope, I feel the toy with every motion — except now I can't do anything about it. There's no taking this off without Lane's permission. The metal belt hugs the small of my waist; I can't slide my way out of it, and the fit is so tight I can't even slip my pinky between the metal and my skin.

“Snug, sir.”

“Yes,” he says, taking out his phone. “A proper chastity belt would be custom designed to fit your body. If this session proves fruitful, I'll have one made. Until then, this one fits well enough to be worn for a few hours, instead of days, weeks or even longer.”

Days? Weeks? He can't be serious.

“Now, if I see you dozing off, I'll do this.”

Lane taps his phone, and a sharp sensation of heat flashes inside me. It doesn't hurt, but I definitely felt something.

“That was a warning. If it doesn't wake you, I'll do this.”

He presses the screen again, and the toy releases a shock inside my core. Yelping, I double over, clutching the belt.

“Not pleasant, was it?”

I thought it would fucking vibrate, if it did anything.

“No, professor,” I mutter. If he wants me to stay awake, that'll get the point across. “Hey, how are you going to see me? Won't it be pitch black in there?”

“There are a couple very, very dim LEDs on the inside. You’ll barely register it, but you’ll be illuminated enough for night vision to work. And if you use the tablet, then you’ll be well-lit.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Good. When you’re ready, get in.”

“You’ll be listening the whole time?”

“Yes. I won’t watch every second, but I will check on you frequently.”

Yeah, I bet he will. Not that I’ll know when — unless I get shocked.

After a deep breath, I step over the lid. The rod presses inside me as I move; my breath hitches until I set myself down and lie still on the cool padding.

“Have a good time,” Lane says as he closes the lid.

The darkness is as pure as any I’ve ever experienced. He said there would be dim LEDs, but I can’t see any. I hear muffled clicks as Lane snaps the locks into place. As an experiment, I try pushing the lid up, but it doesn’t budge even slightly.

I must have been insane to agree to this.

To start, I give myself time to get used to the situation. The darkness isn’t a big deal. I don’t really have room to move around, but it’s not like I have anywhere to go. What matters most is that the padding is comfortable.

Will I still be okay with all this after a few hours? I suppose I'll find out.

My initial instinct is to close my eyes, but I force them wide open. I don't want to be punished, especially not in the first damn minute. Plus, it's so dark, it doesn't really matter if my eyes are open or closed.

Taking care to go slowly, I test my range of movement. It's not much. I can spread my legs only a little until my ankles touch the side of the sarcophagus. I can't lift my legs more than a few inches before my knee hits the lid. There's just enough room that I think I could turn over and lie on my stomach, but that's out of the question. I'd be punished for sure.

Lifting my hands to the tablet screen isn't easy. It's not a great position for drawing, but I could give it a try. For now I focus on my breathing and try to meditate.

The hardest part, I discover immediately, is ignoring the belt I wear, and the toy secured in me. Even if I avoid fidgeting, the sensation of being held and filled never fades into the back of my mind. I won't be able to enjoy any kind of reward until Lane lets me take this thing off, and that just makes me crave even harder. There's no way to try and slip a finger inside and give myself a little relief — the belt covers everything.

I should draw. It'll take my mind off my situation. If I don't, I'll just stew in my own juices.

Feeling around the tablet, I find the stylus, as well as the power switch. The screen turns on, but not all at once.

Please wait, it says, the letters barely visible, dark gray against a black background. The words brighten gradually, giving my eyes time to adjust.

Lane thinks of everything, apparently.

When it's as bright as it needs to be, I select the app for drawing. Normally I would draw me or Lane or both of us, but my goal is to avoid anything that will feed my frustration. Instead, I think of a vintage, black-and-white postcard of the Manhattan skyline I found at a rummage sale when I was young. It hung on my wall for years before it wound up in a shoe box with my old decorations. I can still see it pretty clearly in my mind, though, so I try to recreate it.

If Lane's watching, does he get what I'm trying to do? How well can he read me?

Not for the first time since I met Lane, I hear a laugh and a whisper from the devil on my shoulder. Just because I'm locked in this box, that doesn't mean I can't entice Lane to give me what I want. If I were to draw, say, something to convince him to let me out early... that would be his decision, now wouldn't it?

I groan, exasperated with myself.

I'm doing a really shitty job of not thinking about Lane.

Skyline, Gwen. The Empire State Building, tall and majestic.

Kinda like Lane's cock.

Stop it.

The Chrysler Building, an icon of Art Deco architecture.

Lane would look dapper as fuck in a pinstripe suit and a fedora, dragging on a hand-rolled cigarette like a gangster from the Roaring 20s.

I sigh, then laugh at myself.

This is so fucked up. I should be focusing on my art. I can fantasize about Lane anywhere, anytime. Is it too early to concede this isn't working? It's impossible to tell time in a situation like this, but it can't have been that long. Lane's definitely going to be mad if I beg to be let out after... it's been forty-five minutes, at most.

I trust him to know what he's doing. If he thinks this will help inspire me, I'll stick with it, however long it takes. Sometimes the best move an artist can make is putting down the pen or the brush for a little while and giving the mind time to sort out what to do next. Or, one can just have fun and draw or write or sing what feels right.

I tap a button to clear the screen so I can start over, then begin sketching Lane in that pinstripe suit. I'll draw him again and again, until I get him out of my system. It could take a while.

For the first sketch, I start with the pinstripe suit, and I keep the Manhattan motif, placing him in front of a floor-to-ceiling skyscraper window, peering out on the city below.

Next, I change things up: swim trunks on the beach. Of course it's an intoxicating image, though I actually prefer him in the suit — it fits him better. Somehow I don't think Lane would be one to grab a board and hit the surf; I'm certainly not.

Then again, art is a great way to imagine what could be possible, like Lane in a New York Yankees uniform, running at full speed toward home plate. Or, Lane as a firefighter, holding an axe, face dark with sweat and soot. Then: Lane on stage at a rock concert, bare arms sleeved in tattoos, belting into the microphone, fingers dancing over the strings of a black, reflective electric guitar.

Is he enjoying this dive into fantasy land? Does he think they're funny?

Are they at least good?

I'm not going for extraordinary skill in my drawing — I'm using a stylus while lying on my back inside a box. It's not going to be as good as using pencil and paper. If he likes these, I can draw better versions in the future.

Halfway through my next drawing — Lane in a form-fitting spacesuit, standing on the moon — the power goes out on the tablet. Startled by the sudden darkness I yelp and instinctively press against the lid.

You're fine, you're fine.

Did the tablet's battery run out? It would have warned me, wouldn't it? No, it hasn't been that long, has it? A few

hours, perhaps. And if I know Lane, he would have charged the damn battery — assuming it isn't plugged in somewhere.

So what the hell is going on?

“Lane? Can you hear me?”

My mouth is dry — I haven't spoken out loud in hours. I've focused on my drawing so well, I ignored being hungry, thirsty and horny for a long time. Now it all floods back.

“I'm okay in here, but the tablet stopped working. Can you come fix it? I was drawing. I didn't want to stop.”

I don't know if he could have replied via the tablet before it went off; I doubt he could now. Hopefully he's on his way. And if he can't hear me at all, then when he tries to check on me he'll notice the issue and come down. I just have to wait.

Closing my eyes, I listen to every sound, hoping to hear footsteps, followed by the rattling of padlocks. All I get is the sound of my own breathing, my growling stomach and my rising pulse.

This is what I'm supposed to be doing, isn't it? Drawing is great, but I can do that any time. The point of this experiment was to be alone with my thoughts. Unfortunately, that doesn't lead anywhere good.

What if the tablet went out because the whole studio somehow lost power? What if there's something horrible going on outside and Lane was hurt? What if he's in the hospital, unconscious? How long would it take for literally anyone to figure out I was here?

No, don't be neurotic, Gwen. That's all ridiculous. It's probably only been a few minutes. How often was Lane checking? I bet pretty often at first, but once I got on a roll with my drawing maybe he didn't keep such a close eye.

Did I do something wrong? Should I not have amused myself with cute drawings of Lane? Did he not like them? Should I have taken this more seriously? Is he punishing me? I wasn't doing anything wrong, and it's not like him to change the rules in the middle of a lesson.

No, this is just a glitch. Nothing serious. I tap the tablet, hoping to wake it back up, but nothing happens. I feel all around, making sure there isn't a button I can press to try and restart it, but don't find one. If I could see, maybe I could find a way to detach the device from the lid, but there's no chance of that happening. Are the LEDs even still on? They were so dim before I couldn't tell they even existed; and I still see nothing. It's completely dark — closing or opening my eyes makes no difference.

I wait as long as I can before shouting, "Lane! Come let me out!" I pound my fist against the side of the sarcophagus, hoping the deep sound will carry better than my voice.
"Lane!"

This isn't right. Lane should have noticed something was wrong by now.

Or am I just mistaking minutes for seconds? Have I lost all perception of time? Am I overreacting? There's no way to be sure.

“Lane! Let me out of here!”

The temperature inside this box is rising. Sweat beads on my forehead, stinging my eyes. I wipe it off with my hand, wishing I had literally any kind of cloth.

Was there air conditioning on before, or have hours of my body heat finally turned this damn box into an oven? Am I squirming too much? Is that it? I can't help myself.

“Lane, where the fuck are you?”

I really am the biggest idiot in the world. It doesn't matter how much I trust Lane, this was just a stupid thing to do. A student can respect their teacher and still question the lesson if it sounds as fucking crazy as getting locked up for hours in what may as well be a coffin!

The last time I was this scared, I had four days of high school left to finish before I could claim my diploma and get the fuck out of Ohio. My bags were packed, my bus ticket was paid for. What cash I could scrounge up I hid in a sock. If Mom or Dad found out, though... All I could do was stay in my room with the door locked so they wouldn't come inside. I counted down the minutes, too afraid to sleep, terrified of what I could walk into coming home from school.

Honestly, as fucked up as it is to be stuck here, it's better than being back there. I'm in this situation now because of someone I trust, not people I feared.

But what if something's really wrong?

It's not just that he couldn't help me; I can't help him.

“Lane! Please!”

I bang against the wall until my knuckles ache, then I push as hard as I can on the lid.

“Please, Lane! I need you! Please, let me out!”

I hear a click.

Maybe.

Was it my imagination? Am I hallucinating?

I’m so damn thirsty. What if I’ve been down here for a day? It feels like a week.

No, that’s definitely a click!

“I’m in here! Please, let me out!”

“Cover your eyes, Gwen,” Lane says. His voice comes through muffled, but heavy — he’s shouting. Calm but loud.

I do as he says, squeezing my eyelids tight and holding a hand over them.

“Okay!”

The lid lifts off, letting in a draft of cool air. I break into a shiver immediately. Lane grips my wrists and pulls me to my feet.

“You’re fine,” he says, stroking my hair. “Everything’s fine.”

“I was so worried,” I gasp, losing my composure.

Trembling against his body, I let it all out. Tears drip down my cheeks. For a moment I can barely breathe.

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” Lane says.

“I don’t know,” I wail. “Like, everything. Relief, fear... gratitude... grief... rage. All of it.”

“Try opening your eyes.”

I do; it hurts a little, but I can start opening them more and more.

“Remember *Death of a Salesman*, Gwen?” he asks. “The audience went on a bit of a journey: fear and grief when they realized the falling body wasn’t part of the show and they thought someone had died. Then relief and gratitude when they discovered it was just a mannequin and everyone was fine, followed by rage that they’d been tricked, and in such a crude way.”

My tears stop. I slip out of his grasp.

“Is that what this is? You used me for your art?”

Lane’s face sinks.

“No, not at all. There was no audience, I didn’t record this. I wanted you to experience-”

“You told me this was about inspiration and... introspection. This wasn’t supposed to be some kind of game!”

“Inspiration comes from our experiences,” he says, crossing his arms before his chest. “When you want to evoke an emotional response from your audience, you will be able to go to this memory. You will always have this-”

“I already have fucked up memories, Lane!” I scream, getting up and heading for the stairs. My clothes better be where the hell I left them.

“Come back, Gwen. We have more to talk about. We’re going to fully process this session, then-”

“Process it yourself!”

“Stop! You’re still wearing-”

I don’t listen. Fuck him. That was seriously fucked, and going over every second of it with a microscope is not going to fucking happen.

Furious beyond comprehension, I find my clothes, dress and leave.

Chapter 15

PET



The cell block feels empty without her. Anne spoke to me, she kept my mind active. She planned our escape, she talked me through it. She convinced me to hold on.

She reminded me I was still a person.

Now I'm not so sure. Maybe I died that night too. I'm just the ghost left behind, haunting our secret prison until someone new arrives. Anne's been gone for weeks now, but to me it's been years. Second lasted hours while she was here; now they take days.

I've had nothing to do but be alone in my head, questioning my mistakes.

I never should have let him get close to me. Did he even care about my art? Did he really think I had talent? Or was that just an excuse to get me to listen, to make me compliant with his wishes?

Of course, I've walked down these trails a thousand times. Anne used to tell me I couldn't blame myself. I wasn't his first, and I'm not going to be his last. This is what he does: finds a student in a vulnerable place, takes advantage of her need for guidance and then claims her once she's fallen

into his web. He's good at it; he's had practice. If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else.

My ankle still twinges with pain if I step on it wrong, but it's mostly healed. Sometimes I wish the injury was permanent: I deserve the agony. Anne might be alive if I hadn't been so careless. We might be free, and Master would be the one alone in a cell.

I know the real reason, though. Having a bum ankle would absolve me of my responsibility to try to escape again. If I could barely walk, I'd have a good excuse to just accept fate. I wouldn't have to go back to the world I was stolen from. I never really belonged there, and it never wanted me either. It probably doesn't even know I'm gone. Master was the only one who ever showed any real interest in me, and that turned out to be a lie — a lure to lead me into his snare.

If I ever did get back, where would I go? What kind of life would I have? I'd have to tell them about Anne — about how I failed her, after everything she tried to do for me. Some people would pity me, but some would hate me. Most wouldn't care. I'd be a headline on the news for a while, and then the world would keep turning.

In some ways, it'll be better if I never go back. Maybe some heroic version of me could serve as a distraction while the new Toy escapes. I could live with that, even if I didn't make it. As long as Master died with me — preferably in serious pain.

But no, my ankle's getting better. I'm going to have to honor the promise I made Anne, and find a way out of here.

How, though?

Anne was the brains last time. She was everything, in fact: all I did was try to follow her plan. All of my ideas revolve around just hoping to catch Master off-guard. Thinking long-term has never been my strong suit.

He's too careful, though. Especially since Anne. He'll be wary for a long, long time. He was extra-vigilant when I first arrived, intent on escape and lashing out at every opportunity. The new Toy will be no different. Master likes them defiant but breakable — it would be too easy if we didn't fight back a little.

How close is he to finding me a cellmate? Master hasn't spent any real time here since he killed Anne, but he visits to make sure I haven't hurt or starved myself. From somewhere upstairs, he pours cereal, nuts and fresh vegetables into their respective troughs, and the dispensers open every day, without fail. I haven't missed a meal. Not that I ever want to eat — it's hard to have an appetite in this place — but I'll need my strength.

Has Master watched the footage from the security camera? Does he watch me sleep? I'm just lying here, waiting. When my ankle no longer barks at all, maybe I'll try jogging in place. Jumping jacks. Push-ups. Build some muscle and endurance so that next time I can climb a fence with ease. Would Master forbid it? Would he realize I was

training for my next escape attempt? It might get me in trouble.

No, I need Master to think I've learned my lesson. He'll see me as a broken, defenseless, obedient, scared little pet, desperate to serve its master. I won't try to hurt him directly — no matter how well I act, he'll never be lax in his preparation or attention.

I sensed it when he came to take what he wanted from us. Like a finger on the trigger, there was always a tension in him, a tension of constant anticipation. How did he find any of this pleasurable, if he couldn't relax and truly enjoy himself? Perhaps that's part of the thrill — knowing that he has to keep his wits about him. We're wild animals in captivity. He can feed us and clean us, but we'll never be fully tamed.

Above me, I hear clunking: Master's refilling the troughs. He's back.

I sit up, trying to stay calm.

He hasn't wanted anything from me lately, which I don't understand. Normally not a day would go by without his visit... that's why he always had two of us. His need was insatiable. Ever since he killed Anne, though, he's left me alone. Why? Has he been saving himself until he could replace her? Has he been sating his needs elsewhere?

Regardless, this reprieve could end at any moment. I swallow down the acid in my throat and wait.

“Good evening, Pet,” he says when he arrives. “How’s your ankle?”

We’ve spoken so little these past weeks, I’m still not used to being called Pet.

“Getting better, Master.”

“That’s great. Keep resting it. The sooner it’s fully healed, the better. You’re going to need to use it soon.”

Oh no.

I keep it all off my face: the rage, the hatred, the fear.

“Yes, I came down here to share the good news: you’re going to have a new friend soon. You will call her Toy. Do you want to see her?”

He takes out a phone and holds it up for me to see the screen.

I step up to the bars to get a better look. I’d give anything to reach through and take that phone, but he stands too far back. He always does. Instead, I watch as a woman in a tattered, bloody wedding dress stands out on the street. Her face looks bruised and dirty, but there’s a power in her glare at the men passing by.

She’s a street performer. Of course — she’s an artist like me and Anne.

He found another.

“She’s very talented. I have no doubt she will inspire us both to do great work.”

Is that why he hasn't claimed me these past weeks? Has he been focused on her?

"I have something special for you," he says, pocketing his phone. "I'll be right back."

Whoever that woman is, she looked like a demon. She'll fight him. Maybe she'll succeed where so many others have failed, and she won't fall for his tricks. She'll know better than to trust him.

Maybe she'll kill him.

If that happened, would I somehow make it out of here? Would the authorities show up and find me, or would I eventually starve? I could think of a worse fate: at least then I'd know he'd never hurt anyone again.

But if he does take this girl alive, and she does wind up here, she won't give in easily. I can tell.

Master returns carrying a wide, white saucer. The smell coming from it nearly makes me pass out, it's so delectable. I know it at once: mushroom risotto.

He remembered.

"I made it myself. I hope it's as good as yours."

My mouth waters. It's been so long since I ate a hot meal, much less my favorite dish. Except, I don't take gifts from this monster. I've never asked him for anything, and that's not going to change.

Master tosses a pair of handcuffs into my cell.

“Quick, while it’s still nice and hot.”

He means to feed me. I can’t be trusted with a spoon; certainly not a large piece of fragile ceramic.

Fuck it.

I’m not Toy anymore, I’m Pet. I witnessed my predecessor get shot and killed. It would only be natural for me to have changed, to become fearful and compliant.

I cuff myself, hands behind my back, and step up to the cell bars.

He grips the spoon like a dog tugging his favorite bone, lest I try and rip it from his hands with my lips. What could I do with a spoon while my hands are bound? Still, he never makes a mistake. The only way to beat him is to think of something he could never imagine.

“How is it?” Master asks as I take my first bite. “Be honest with me. I’m not much of a cook.”

It’s the most delicious thing I’ve tasted in years. I doubt that’s because he did a good job.

“I like it a lot, Master.”

“I’m glad. If you are a good pet, I’ll make it for you again.”

Does he feel bad about Anne? Or does he think I’ll respond to the carrot better than the stick? He enjoys employing the stick — that’s half the reason we’re here.

What if he took our escape attempt as a sign his methods need improvement, and he's experimenting?

"When I bring my new Toy home," Master says, "I expect her to be very, very unhappy. She's going to make my life difficult until she's learned to behave herself."

I wouldn't be surprised. I haven't forgotten my first few days and weeks here.

"I want you to help her. Teach her what she'll have to do if she wants to please me, and what will happen if she doesn't."

He's making an admission that he failed. He couldn't destroy Anne's will to survive. He must have concerns about mine. Or he realizes that if he can't break us completely, maybe we can do it to each other. I would have lost my strength if not for Anne's. If this new toy sees in me nothing but defeat and resignation...

She won't. For Anne, I won't let that happen.

"So, you'll help me, Pet?"

I nearly spit the risotto back in his face. This may be the last good meal I ever eat but I'd rather knock the bowl out of his hands than take another bite.

I have to play along. For Anne.

"Yes, Master."

I won't give up, and I won't let this new girl give up either. I hope she manages to escape Master's clutches, but if

not, I'll get her home, whatever it takes.

Chapter 16

GWEN



I spend the rest of the night on my own.

Joel's gone out to dinner with Martin, according to the text on my phone, so no one's around when I get home. It's just as well. I'm not in the mood to talk to them about what happened.

Apparently I was trapped in that box for more than five hours. Famished and livid, I need to eat, immediately. I duck into a diner and order a burger and fries, plus a bowl of cream of broccoli soup. I scroll my phone, catching up on Twitter, when Lane texts me a Dropbox link.

All of your drawings are in here, he says. I really liked them.

Scowling to myself, I tap the link and download the image gallery. I like them too, if I say so myself. There's a lightness and richness to them; it's evident I was having a good time — that I was in the zone. A flow state. It *is* nice to know I can achieve that under some very strange circumstances.

Would Lane say it was because of the conditions? I don't know. I've gotten on a tear plenty of times. Then again, those

five hours were probably the most prolific of my life in terms of quality *and* quantity.

It's too bad the session had to end with such a dirty trick — it really ruined the whole experience. There's no way I could go back in that sarcophagus and just draw without feeling pissed off.

Well... probably not. Maybe after I've had time to cool off I'll change my mind — assuming Lane apologizes sufficiently.

Dinner calms my nerves. I stream an episode of *The Office* as I eat, listening on headphones. By the time I clean my plate — I was easily hungry enough to eat it all — I feel a lot better. In truth, I understand what Lane was trying to do in that session. I'm still annoyed at him, though.

I completely forget about the belt I'm wearing until I get up to pay and leave. As I move I feel it... and the rod inside.

Oh hell.

I'm going to have to go back and get this thing taken off. He better not give me shit. He better just do it.

Tomorrow. I don't want to see Lane again tonight.

I take my time getting home, savoring being out in open spaces. After being locked in that box, the streets and sidewalks between city buildings feel like yawning canyons. I loved Manhattan the moment I arrived, even though it felt intimidatingly huge compared to my home. Now it feels practically spacious. Lane, admittedly, has given me a new

perspective. It's easy for an outsider to see New York and be struck by how many people are everywhere. There aren't many places one can go to truly feel alone. Apartment buildings mean roommates, neighbors and street traffic. Late at night, there's a chance to have a subway car all to oneself, but not for very long. For a few hours, I was truly alone — in a good way.

Too bad it ended how it did.

I stay out of the way when I get home, leaving Joel and Martin to enjoy themselves. Joel shows his appreciation the following morning by making us all breakfast, waking me with the smell of frying bacon.

When I get to the kitchen table, I plunk down into my seat without thinking. The metal belt taps very audibly against the wood seat, and I grimace as the hard contact jerks the inserted rod.

“What was that?” Joel asks, looking all around us.

“I didn't hear anything.”

“Seriously?”

I shrug.

“Huh. Weird.”

“So, you two have a nice night?” I ask.

Joel sighs and bites off a piece of bacon.

“Yes and no. For the most part, it was great. He took me to this amazing bistro, then we hit up a couple galleries. We

talked all night long. It was wonderful. But, at one point he brought up the question of what I'll do if it doesn't work out to paint full-time. Like, Professor Mundell is going to open so many doors, but what if it's not enough?"

Uh oh.

Mundell is the last fucking person I want to talk about.

"Even the greatest artists in history did commissions," I say.

"I know. Martin said that too. You're right. It wouldn't be the worst thing. I just wish I didn't have to, you know? Like, Professor Mundell doesn't have to worry about money, so he can just focus on art."

I almost blurt out that he cares about his reputation most of all, but swallow it back down.

"We can't all be that lucky," I say instead.

"Yeah, I know."

A grin blossoms on my face.

"You could learn to tattoo. You'd be the best tattoo artist in the city, hands down. Money wouldn't be an issue, ever."

Joel laughs.

"I'd probably see a lot of hot guys with their shirts off."

I slap my hand on the table.

"That's it. We're opening a tattoo parlor."

"I'm in!"

Joel laughs, digging into his breakfast.

“What about you? You were gone a while yesterday. What did you do?”

How would I even begin to explain the sarcophagus and all of that?

“We worked on our art,” I say, looking away from Joel. “He taught me some new techniques.”

“And that’s a euphemism for what, exactly?”

A weariness passes through me; I glance down at my thighs. Every lie to Joel sucks away at some store of energy and my conscience only has so much to spare.

He’s already keeping the relationship a secret. As long as I don’t talk about Alistair Rat, the rest should be okay, I think.

“If I show you something strange, do you promise not to freak out?”

Joel wipes off his mouth and sits up straight.

“No, but now you have to tell me.”

I stand up and pull down my shorts, showing him the belt beneath.

“What the fuck is that?” he mumbles, leaning in to stare.

“It’s not even the craziest part.”

I leave out the fact that there’s a rod inside me, but go into the rest: being locked in the box, Lane’s trick and all the drawings.

“So he just has this stuff in his apartment?”

“No, at his studio.”

“Oh, well of course,” Joel says, rolling his eyes. “I had no idea Lane was so... extra.”

“You didn’t see his exhibition at Galleria Carnale. Here, this is what I did yesterday.”

I show him the drawings from my phone, flipping through them one at a time.

“These are really cute. You did this all with a stylus?”

“Yup.”

“That’s impressive,” says Joel, handing me back my phone.

A surge of pride swirls through my chest. Coming from him, it means a lot. He’d tell me if they were shit.

“Thanks. It felt good to draw again. I’d been so focused on Enmity Jane, I kinda ignored illustration. I missed it. I just wish Lane hadn’t ruined the whole thing by fucking with my head like that... I mean, do you think I overreacted? I was really hungry. Maybe I shouldn’t have lost it on him.”

Joel nods, glancing down at my waist.

“No, that was messed up,” he says. “But, I think he had good intentions. He just went too far.”

That’s true, I guess. Lane thought the situation would help, especially if I’m going to make art like Alistair Rat. Joel’s not even factoring in that part of it.

“Do you like... that?” Joel asks, pointing down at my belt. “It’s not too weird?”

“Oh, it’s super weird.” Laughing, I rub the metal band through my shorts. “But I do like it. A lot, actually. I like... letting him have control.”

Joel looks at me for a moment, concentration in his eyes.

“I want to paint you with it on,” he says.

Oh.

“I’m not sure if that’s... allowed.”

Would it bother Lane? This belt is an ongoing interaction between us, in a way. By showing Joel, I’ve brought him into the dynamic, even if it’s just as an observer. What if that was going too far? I don’t think it is, because Lane didn’t forbid me to tell anyone — but having Joel paint me in it could cross a line. Does it, though? I’m not sure.

“I get it, Gwen. Don’t worry about it,” Joel says.

At the end of the day, it’s just a painting — and Lane has nothing to fear from Joel.

Maybe there’s a middle ground.

In fact, an idea comes to mind...

“Can I have the painting when you’re done?” I ask.

Joel nods, then leads the way.

—

I make Lane wait until the early evening before I text him that I'm heading over. He offers to have dinner ready, so I take him up on it.

The belt definitely grows to be a bother throughout the day. I can live with it, even if it is a pain to keep clean, but the tight grip and hard rod eventually get to me. I need out, and soon.

Except, the last thing I want to do is show up at Lane's studio acting desperate for his help. I'm not going to ask him to release the belt until he's apologized, no matter how badly I have to have it off.

When I arrive, Lane opens the door without a word, his expression neutral, as if he's waiting for me to speak. I stand still and wait for him, refusing to blink first.

"Come in, let's talk," he says at last.

Satisfied, I follow him in, immediately inhaling a thick aroma of rich spices. Whatever he's ordered, it smells delicious. As soon as the scent hits me, I'd almost rather eat first and deal with our conversation later.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he says as we reach the kitchen. Take-out containers rest on the counter: three colorful aluminum trays and a container of rice for each.

"You can begin," I counter.

If that pisses him off, he doesn't let it show. Likewise, I hide the surge of discomfort as I take my seat.

"How was dealing with the belt?"

Can he tell how much it's bugging me, or is that just a well-educated guess?

"It was fine."

"That's good. To be honest, I expected to hear from you sooner because of it."

I shrug.

"It's a little tight, but no big deal."

"Sure. Okay. Well, I don't want to play games. What I did yesterday went too far, and I'm sorry for that. I knew it would be a difficult experience, but thought something good would come out of it. I should have been clearer about what I was doing. It won't happen again."

Wow.

Now I actually feel a bit bad for expecting this to turn into a fight.

"Thank you," I say. "I appreciate that."

I'm still used to the boys I knew back home, who never apologized for anything, ever. They were all so immature.

Lane nods.

"Thank you for understanding."

"You're welcome. Like, I know that you were trying to... help me develop, as an artist," I add. "You meant well. That matters."

He gets up and starts bringing food to the table.

“I thought if I told you what to expect, it wouldn’t work. I spent a lot of last night wondering if there was a way I could have prepared you without giving away what I was going to do.”

“We can work on that together,” I say. “We’ll figure it out. I trust you, Lane.”

He smiles.

“I’m glad.”

I watch as he brings over plates, silverware and a carafe of water. Then he takes a key out of his pocket.

“Do you want to eat first, or take off the belt?”

Well, he did apologize. I guess I can stop pretending.

“Take it off, please,” I reply, getting up and unzipping my jeans.

Lane works quickly to release the locks; I groan as the belt pieces separate and finally let me go. Relieved beyond thought, I sigh as the rod comes out coated in my fluids. I can practically feel the warmth radiating off it. As happy as I am to be free of the device, I’ll also miss it.

However, I’m also hungry as hell, so I don’t dwell on it for very long.

The food turns out to be Indian: butter chicken, lamb korma and spinach paneer, with sides of rice and naan. I serve myself nice heaps of fluffy basmati rice, then drizzle on all the different sauces.

“I’d like to pick up where we left off now,” Lane says, serving himself after I finish. “I want to hear your thoughts on our experiment. You should be honest.”

If he wants the truth, that I can do.

“Well, I think it was kind of a failure, honestly. I didn’t really spend much time on introspection. I just drew you, and I wasn’t getting tired of it. Maybe if you’d given me more time I would have gotten to a place you wanted me to be, but I don’t know.”

“I see,” says Lane. “You were in there a long time. It sounds like the isolation didn’t really bother you.”

“Have you done this experiment with someone else before?”

“No.” He smirks. “You’re not the first person I’ve put in that sarcophagus, but this was the first time it was for... educational purposes.”

Yeah, I can’t imagine he’s had too many students who are open to these kinds of lessons.

“How long did they last in there?” I ask.

“Until yesterday, the record was thirty-four minutes.”

Holy shit.

“You could try to improve on your time, if you want,” he says.

I cut into a cube of butter chicken and eat it, thinking over the offer. Would I be crazy to even consider going back in

that box? I did enjoy it, up until the end. And as long as Lane promised no tricks...

Of course, it doesn't have to be about art.

"I'll think about it," I say after a beat. "One thing I want to know: how much of my time in there were you watching?"

Lane chuckles.

"Almost all of it. I had to watch at the very beginning in case you noped out right away, which I didn't think likely. When I knew you'd be good in there for a while, I kept the audio on and did a few sketches while checking on you here and there. But, when you started drawing me, I couldn't help watching the whole time. They were very flattering; it killed me to interrupt you. I wish I'd skipped the fake-out and pulled you out of the box to fuck you until we both passed out."

Squirming against my chair, lip bitten, I stare into his eyes.

"I wish you had."

Considering how bothered I was from the belt, I wouldn't have argued.

"That reminds me, I have something for you," I say, getting up to grab my bag.

"Oh?"

I pull out Joel's painting in its sheet protector and give it to Lane. His eyes widen as he takes it in: me, naked save the

belt, sitting on my bed, longingly staring out my window.

“Your roommate?”

“Yes.”

“This is excellent.”

“I’ll tell him you said so. You can keep it.”

Lane smiles.

“Thank you, and thank him for me. This may be the nicest gift I’ve ever received.”

My whole body warms.

“I can give you a nicer one,” I say, hands wandering down to my hips.

“Sit,” Lane says. He sets the painting down on the counter, propped up against a coffee maker so he can see it.

“Finish your dinner. You’ll need the energy.”

“For what, professor?” I say, though I already know what he’s thinking.

“We’re going to do what we should have done last night.”

Chapter 17

GWEN



When we finish eating, Lane instructs me to undress, then wait for him until he gets back. He doesn't take more than a few minutes, leaving me little time to imagine what he has in mind. What exactly does he mean to teach? Or is this going to be more recess than class?

The sound of rattling metal sends a shiver across my bare skin. Lane returns with his hands full of chains and padlocks.

“My plan had been to put you back in the sarcophagus with your body bound in these and a pair of vibrators stuck inside you.”

“To see how long I could stand it?” I ask.

“To reward you.”

I almost laugh.

It's demented he thinks that's a reward and not utter torment, and yet I can't say I would have objected.

“But if you want to see how much you could stand, this will be perfect. Cross your arms behind your back.”

He wraps the chains around my body, binding my wrists together and squeezing my arms against my back. I strain

against them after he seals the padlocks, but they offer no give. Usually I could flex a little when tied with rope, but the chains are fully taut, gently digging into my skin.

I want to walk around, feeling the chains hold me as I sway my hips and take long, leisurely strides. I could speed up, forcing Lane to catch me. My pussy aches at the thought.

Would Lane play such a game with me, or is that not instructive enough? Is he going to tie our every moment back to art? Does he have to tell himself this is about my education to justify fucking a student? I'd like for him to know this doesn't always have to involve a lesson. It can just be for fun.

Lane doesn't permit me to walk around in the chains. The second my bonds are secure, he pushes my shoulders forward, forcing me to bend over.

"Spread your legs," he says, tapping the inside of my thighs until I comply. "You're not going back in the box, I need you where I can see you."

He smacks my ass, earning a throaty moan from me. Despite the sting, pleasure emanates from my rear until my whole body tenses, hungry for more. Lane obliges, slapping each cheek until I'm bouncing on my heels. With his free hand he grips the chains against my back, holding me steady.

"What do you say to show your appreciation, pet?" he asks, giving my backside a hard swat.

"Thank you, sir," I say, letting out a deep breath.

I'd express my appreciation in other ways, if he'd let me.

“Again, pet.”

He spans my ass again, harder.

“Thank you, sir!”

He alternates sides, peppering every inch of my ass, and I keep thanking him, trying to steady my voice throughout the session. To finish, he pulls me up straight, pats my legs together, then spans me one last time.

“Do you know why I’m doing this, pet?”

Am I being punished? I don’t see how. This must be a warm-up to something, but what?

“No, sir.”

Lane rubs his hand up my leg, along my stomach, between my breasts and up to my chin.

“Today your body is my canvas, and I wanted to paint your ass a little pink.”

I twist on my heels, my damp thighs pressed together.

“Yes, sir.”

He locks one last length of chain to the ones behind my back, then pulls the chain up through my legs.

“Come on, move,” he says, pulling me along.

The chain catches against my swollen folds, urging me to obey him without hesitation. If I don’t match Lane’s pace, the metal digs into me. I got my wish to walk around in these chains, I suppose, but my pussy was already sore from having the rod inside me for so long.

Lane walks backward and gazes down between my legs, smiling as I hurry to avoid the chain's pinch. He leads us to the studio and connects my leash to a hook hanging from the ceiling. It's loose enough that I have a couple inches of give: enough to not need to stand on my toes, but too little for me to take more than a step or two in any direction. A hum emanates from the vents, cool air blowing around me.

"Cold?" Lane says.

"Yes, sir."

"Try and bear it. This won't work if you're sweating."

"Yes, sir."

I don't know how that's supposed to work, but whatever. He drags over a table and sets out an array of paint brushes and bottles, cluing me in to what Lane meant by my body being a canvas: I recognize the case of Mehron Paradise-line face paint. He squirts some black paint into a cup and then dips his first brush.

"Hold still," he says, then begins.

Sweeping the brush over my skin, Lane traces dark lines across my collarbone, ribcage and pelvis. The bristles tickle, but I resist the urge to shy away. I stop noticing it quickly, fixating instead on Lane's work.

"Sir?"

"Yes, pet?" he replies, pausing from painting.

"Did you get this idea from Joel? Did Mundell tell you?"

He shakes his head.

“No, what do you mean?”

I chuckle, swinging in place.

“He wanted to paint classical nudes with tattoos. This reminded me of that.”

Lane smirks.

“I like his idea. But no, I’ve done pieces like this before.”

Once he’s done outlining my bones, Lane switches to a royal blue and fills in the space between my ribs. When that’s done, he adds red rose blossoms and green, thorny vines that snake around my arms and legs. Painting around the chains makes his task more difficult, but he doesn’t release me.

He circles around me, painting my exposed skin everywhere except my ass, which still throbs.

By the time he finishes I’m shivering on the outside, burning on the inside. I glance down to admire his work, but can only glimpse a small portion of it.

“Are you going to make a portrait of me?” I ask, hoping I sound more inquisitive than suggestive. “Or... or photographs?” I’m not sure I want him to take pictures but... at least I’d look really good.

“No. This is just for us.”

“But I’d like to see the rest of it, sir.”

Lane nods.

“Fair enough. Wait here.”

He steps out, leaving me to wonder how he'll show me what he's done. Is he going to get a canvas, to paint my portrait, only to destroy it after? Does he have a Polaroid camera so he can take disposable, non-digital pictures?

He returns after just a minute, carrying my purse.

"Your phone's in here?" he asks.

"Yes, sir."

"You care if I take it out? Is there anything in here you don't want me to see?"

I smile. I think I know what he has in mind.

"No, sir. Go ahead."

He reaches in without looking, feeling around until he has the phone, then slips it into my hand — which is still bound behind my back.

"Unlock it," Lane says.

Smirking, I run my finger across the screen, entering my PIN by feel alone.

He takes the phone from me, turns on the camera, then begins snapping pictures, circling me to capture every angle. The camera shutter sound effect clicks elicit fresh shudders through my core.

"Take a video, sir," I say, writhing in place.

Lane chuckles.

"Are you giving me orders now, pet?"

My cheeks flush, burning beneath the layers of paint.

“No, sir, I-”

He pulls on the chain between my legs, lifting the metal links into my tender lips. With a tug at the other end, the new elevation becomes permanent, forcing me to rise onto my toes.

“Now, that’ll make for a nice video,” he says, backing up. “Don’t you think, pet?”

I can’t even string together a response. Conflicting sensations of pain and pleasure explode whenever I lower myself slightly. Part of me wants to let go and sink down, but a voice inside my head fears I’ll never stop falling, and the stimulation will intensify until I pass out or die. I know that that wouldn’t happen, but even if it did...

Lane cuts off the video, then shows me the replay. I look a mess. I’m already starting to sweat, causing the paint to run — but I still look incredible: a creature of nature, covered in blooming flowers, thorny stems, creeping vines and exotic birds. In front, I’m daylight — bright colors, reflections of sun on dewy leaves. In back, I’m night — spiderwebs glistening in the moonlight, predatory feline eyes leering from a high branch, lightning bugs glowing lonesome in a starry void.

He shuts off my phone and slips it back into my purse, then retrieves a ball gag from his pants pocket. It’s larger than the one I wore last time, so I open up as wide as I can. Grunting as he pulls the strap tight and seals the rubbery taste

on my tongue, I suck in my saliva before it can escape my lips.

“Beautiful,” he says, running his finger along the gentle curve of my breast. “It’s as if I’ve captured and tamed nature herself, as if that were possible. Imagine such hubris.”

Were I not gagged, and my mind capable of putting together the words, I would provide my own interpretation, that the duality of night and day are expressed poetically through the use of my body. Just as the world turns to create the day-night cycle, so too can I. Except, only Lane is here to witness it. For the moment, I feel like his entire world.

He disconnects the chain, allowing me to stand on my feet and take all my weight off my toes. While I watch, he strips down slowly, inviting me to savor the unveiling. His cock already rises, rigid and eager.

Before tossing aside his pants, he takes one last item from his pocket: a small bottle. Lane squirts a clear fluid into his hand.

“I don’t know what you’re going to do with the photos and videos,” he says, stepping behind me. “Keep them, delete them — whatever you prefer. Either way I’m glad you got to see them, because you’re not going to look the same after this.”

His hand pressed between the still-tingling cheeks of my ass, rubbing the cool oil all around. I hear more squirts from the bottle, followed by his fingers urging the liquid inside me.

After wearing a tail, I don't shy from the contact — but tension builds in my chest knowing what's coming next.

“Are you nervous?” Lane asks.

I mumble affirmatively.

How can a cock like that fit in my ass, even with an entire bottle of lube? He's way too big.

“I'll go slow, just like last time.”

Firm hands grip my hips. Thick fingers spread me open. My heart races, anticipation ratcheting up each second. When his hot tip makes contact with my tight channel, I squeeze instinctively, keeping him away.

“Relax, pet. Take your time, but relax.”

I inhale slowly, finding a seed of control in the act. I remind myself that the discomfort will be minor compared to the bliss.

Lane wouldn't give me more than I could take.

“Good,” he says, urging gently against my opening door. A little at first, then more. Still, such a massive presence can only seem small for a moment before rapidly expanding, and I squeal from the shock. He holds me in place, pausing as needed while I adjust to his impossible girth. Stretched to its limit, my untested muscle protests constantly, filling my mind with alarm and dread — but then the moment passes.

I take a deep breath, and calm myself further. Lane sinks in deeper, filling me with his hardness. My body sways,

inviting him to continue. Drops of sweat and paint roll down my forehead, forcing me to close my eyes and focus on the ecstasy of his length.

“Good job, Gwen. You’re doing so good.”

His right hand drifts down to my soaked pussy; his middle finger probes inward, distracting me from his cock just enough to enhance the pleasure. His finger brings back how much I liked having the rod locked inside me. Knowing it would be there for as long as Lane wished, that I was powerless to free myself...

Gasping with a smile, I recognize that he’s driven his cock in as far as he can. He gives me a moment, as if to celebrate, then begins a slow thrust. I moan into the gag, already lightheaded.

“That’s it. Feels nice, doesn’t it, pet?” He brushes my clit, until my knees nearly buckle.

Shaking from tremors of euphoria, I nod. Despite the pain of taking such an enormous member in my ass, the reward has been more than I ever imagined. His motion accelerates gradually, but even slight increases escalate my rapture. He thrusts with barely a fraction of his power, but already I’m close to the precipice of an explosive orgasm. I try to speak through the gag, but only shrieking sounds escape.

“Don’t come yet. I want that ass trained for regular use.”

He speeds up some more, and as much as I want to obey, I can’t. The added power demolishes my resistance, unleashing

my eruption. Immediate regret floods through me, but my need overpowers all. If I let it, it would claim one orgasm after another, without any heed for Lane's orders.

"Oh, Gwen. Look what you did," he taunts, withdrawing his finger. He swats my ass, reigniting the punishing spanking from earlier. This only pushes me further, topping off the first orgasm and bringing the second to an instant boil.

"I suppose it's my fault, isn't it? I gave you too much at once. That's fine. I'll take responsibility this time, and you can take this."

He bucks against me hard, driving his steely erection in deep. Screaming in absolute joy, I ride him back, earning his hot release.

"Fucking holy hell," Lane groans, grabbing my painted tits and pulling my slick body against his. He pumps me twice more, expelling his seed until it drips out of me. I give one last moan as he pulls out, leaving my body feeling woefully empty. Everything hurts, but I still want more.

Lane unbuckles my gag and tosses it aside. Gathering me in his arms, he holds me upright until I catch my breath. He wipes a cloth across my forehead, cleaning away sweat and paint until I can open my eyes again.

"Thank you, sir. That was amazing."

He kisses my cheek and brushes my hair out of my face.

"It was. I've never come so fucking hard."

I laugh. Other guys probably say that a lot, but after what we just did, I believe him.

Lane unties me from my chains and carries me into the shower. We laugh at all the paint smeared all over us, but I sigh in regret as it all washes down the drain.

When I wake up, we're together on the mattress in the former news control room, his arms wrapped around me. I'm sore in ways I didn't know it was possible to be sore, but otherwise I feel good. Well-rested, even.

"What time is it?" I ask. "I have work at ten."

"It's early. You're fine."

"Did you sleep?"

He sits up, lifting me with him.

"A little. I was up for a while."

I laugh, rising to my feet. The endeavor hurts, and I wobble for a second, but I manage to stay upright.

"After all that? You couldn't sleep?"

He grins.

"I couldn't stop thinking about us."

Aww.

"That's sweet, Lane."

He gets up, finally, and takes my hand.

"I'm reconsidering the issue of what will happen if our relationship comes out."

I freeze.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m wondering if we should disclose the truth ourselves, rather than risk someone finding out.”

Oh.

“Wouldn’t that, like, get you fired?”

He shrugs.

“Possibly. I could ask Mundell to grant me a sabbatical until you’ve finished school.”

“Would he do that?”

“He might. It’s not like I ask for a lot of favors. Though if he knew we were an item... maybe not.”

Yeah, no kidding.

“Okay, that’s an idea. But, why bother? You didn’t do that when you were with other students.”

Lane pulls me into his chest and holds me tighter. He doesn’t answer right away.

“It’s complicated,” he says, his voice torn. “I made mistakes with them, and maybe if I’d done things differently... What we have is important, and I don’t want our future taken out of our hands.”

He lets me go, and I turn around to find his expression dark, his gaze focused somewhere far distant.

Whoa. I’ve never seen him like this.

“Did it end badly, or something?” I ask.

“No, not badly. Suddenly.”

“You didn’t get caught, did you?”

“No, it’s not like that. In the past, Mundell didn’t care. But he was mad about Chloe disappearing, so I told him I’d stop.”

A chill races through me, then swings back around, an icy echo.

“What do you mean, she disappeared?”

“Not literally. One day we were good, the next she was gone. She dropped out and moved back home, I guess. We texted for a few days after she left. I guess she couldn’t afford to stay. I don’t know. I was kinda pissed, to be honest, so I didn’t ask her for the details.”

Wow.

“Her name was Chloe?”

“Chloe Andreason. I’ve tried looking her up to apologize for how I handled things, but she’s not on social media. Her old number was disconnected, she doesn’t respond to e-mails... I don’t know what happened to her. I even tried looking up her family, but apparently she came up through the foster system, so it was a dead end.”

“That’s terrible...” I mumble, unable to stop shaking.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure she just needed time to...”

To what, exactly? She must have left for a good reason.

He nods.

“Yeah, me too. I feel responsible. Like I should have tried harder to help her. That’s why all I care about is doing right by you, Gwen.”

“I know. I know you mean to help me, I really do.”

“Good.”

“Lane, I have to go,” I say, glancing around, trying to remember where I left my purse and clothes.

“Of course. We’ll talk later. I had an amazing night.”

“Me too,” I reply, half-forcing a smile. Then I’m in motion, finding my things, dressing and leaving.

I don’t know what came over me; Lane’s story was more sad than anything. I’d like to ask about it more, but clearly Lane still hurts. Maybe he cared for her more than he realizes.

Rush Mundell’s standing on the sidewalk as I exit the building. He gazes down the street at a passing taxi, not seeing me. I almost turn around and head back inside, but instead veer to my left, walking away with my purse against my chest.

Did he spot me? I don’t think so, but I’m not sure. He definitely would have if I’d turned to the right. That’s the direction I needed to go, but I don’t look back. I walk three blocks, thinking *Chloe Andreason, Chloe Andreason, Chloe Andreason*, before circling around and heading down into the subway.

Chapter 18

LANE



It's been a few months since I last ran a search on Chloe, so I Google her while getting dressed. I didn't expect to find anything new at this point. No one's posted about her. She obviously hasn't. At least no one's reported her missing.

With energy to burn and no Gwen around, I grab my wallet and keys to go out for a jog. Before I can leave, however, someone rings the buzzer for my studio.

Did she leave something here? She didn't text or call.

"Who's there?" I ask, thumbing the intercom switch.

"It's Rush."

Fuck.

He came all the way out here? Why?

"Come in."

I run a quick mental catalog of the studio: there shouldn't be anything problematic left out in the open. Nothing of Alistair, or of Gwen. Hopefully this won't take long.

Mundell smiles politely when I open the door to let him in, but there's frost in his narrowed eyes.

“I wasn’t expecting visitors, Rush. What brings you out this way?” I ask as he steps inside. He’s tucked a black umbrella under his arm, matching his turtleneck and beret.

“Well, I had a hunch you’d be here, and I had to see for myself.”

“See what?”

Rush laughs, marching into the studio.

“Well, the way you’ve been acting lately, I had my suspicions.”

I tell myself to stay cool, but it doesn’t matter. Nothing good is going to come of this conversation. I could make an excuse, pretend now’s not a good time, but it wouldn’t help.

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Why else would you be at your studio, Lane? You’ve started painting again, haven’t you?”

Oh holy fuck. Is he serious?

“You missed Tichenor’s exhibition at the Florentine last night. I figured you must have something important going on.”

Damn. I did mean to go to that.

“I’ll apologize to Tichenor later. I completely forgot.”

“Good,” Rush says. He inhales deeply through his nose, and nods to himself. “Well, so I came here excited to see the fruit of your rekindled inspiration, but then I saw Ms. Carpenter outside.”

His smile turns to a scowl, dark as an approaching hurricane. I hold his stare, not letting him see the fire igniting under my skin.

“I realized what an idiot I’d been. Here I had this grand hope that a generous muse had driven you back to your art. I wanted to find you hard at work, possessed by creative zeal like the artist I once knew. But no. You were fucking a student. Again.”

Maybe if at some point I had helped Gwen with *The Ohio Zoo* I could claim innocence, but that’s not going to work. He can probably smell the sex in here.

“Now I get why you keep this squalid den,” Rush continues. “You could afford a much nicer loft close to home, but here you have much more privacy.”

“That was the theory,” I snap. “And she’s not my student. She never took a class with me.”

“Oh, stop. That doesn’t matter.”

“Of course. What matters is you had eyes for her too.”

Rush’s nostrils flare. He points his finger, fist shaking.

“Don’t turn this back on me, Lane. It’s my school, I’ll do with it as I please. That does not give you license to do the same. I don’t need you driving away any more of my students.”

“Oh fuck off. You’re the one trying to drive her out.”

Rush recoils, jaw open in dismay.

“Excuse me?”

Chips on the table, I guess.

“Gwen told me you threatened to take her scholarship. Forced her to drop her street art. Was she lying?”

“No,” Rush admits, centering himself. “That’s true. But I did that to save her education, not end it. I want what’s best for my students, and compromising the reputation of the school will jeopardize their futures.”

“Please,” I mutter, crossing my arms in front of my chest. “Save that shit for the *Times*. Just admit it. You want her for yourself.”

Rush can’t resist a smirk. He’s not going to say it; he doesn’t have to, and I can’t make him.

“I want her to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by enrollment in this school. I want her to fulfill her potential as an artist. If she’s distracted from her education, then I’m failing her as a teacher. As are you.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“I’m going to make you choose,” he replies. “Or Ms. Carpenter can choose, but I worry she’d choose wrong, so I’m asking you to do the right thing. Break it off with her, or resign.”

“Don’t, Rush. As a friend, I’m asking you to let this one go. I wouldn’t ask if she wasn’t important to me.”

Rush sighs, leaning against the wall, letting his umbrella dangle back and forth.

“That’s not possible,” he says.

Yes it is, you motherfucking piece of shit.

“In fact, I’m tempted to expel Ms. Carpenter regardless. Between this and her idiotic, wannabe Alistair Rat stunts, I have ample grounds. I wouldn’t have selected her if I’d known he was such a big influence over her.”

There it is. The real truth. He’s punishing her for her taste. What a petty fuck. He wants to kick her out just for that, forget all the rest. When he eventually tries to coax her into his bed, he knows full well she’ll refuse. Then he can claim he has no choice but to rescind her scholarship. He’ll have given her every opportunity to save it, but she had to choose her art — and her dignity.

So, who does he want to save more? A student who aspires to make art Rush considers beneath him, or his long-term colleague and former protégé? He’s not looking to end my career, he’s looking to either get laid or remove an unwanted student.

He could be bluffing, hoping I won’t take a chance. He’d be wrong.

“If you kick her out, I’m gone too,” I say. “I don’t need this job that bad.”

Rush laughs.

“Okay, I admit I’m surprised. I wouldn’t have believed that the world’s foremost critic of Alistair Rat could fall for a Rat acolyte. In hindsight, I get it now: the despised critic sticking it to an innocent fan to assert dominance over Rat in a show of primal superiority.”

He pauses, waiting for me to share in his humor. Yeah, I get it. The anti-Rat persona I’ve built would get a kick out of hate-fucking a hot little Rat fan. Rush has no idea how far he is from the truth about me. Whoever blinks first here now, I’ll always have the satisfaction of knowing he couldn’t crack my code.

“I care for her in spite of her taste in artists,” I say.

“It must add quite a spark to your encounters.”

We’re not talking about that.

“If you kick us out, I will pay for Gwen to attend another school. I’ll make sure she’s taught by someone who understands her vision, and I’ll get her work in front of the masses. I’ll make her a success, and her story will be that she found her voice not *after* she left the Mundell Academy, but *because* she left the Mundell Academy. Your reputation will suffer, as will your school’s.”

Rush turns to the exit.

“You don’t get to threaten me,” he says. “Or the school. I’ve seen Ms. Carpenter’s work. I’m not afraid of her outshining my academy, even with your guidance. Now, a sex scandal between a teacher and student, that’s an actual

potential problem. I'll give you a day to consider the decision."

I don't need it. He's not pushing me around, period.

"Think about what you're doing," Rush says. "Are you really going to bring Ms. Carpenter to galleries and introduce her to your — our — friends? Will you be able to look your colleagues in the eyes when they recognize her from their classes? Or are you going to keep your tryst under wraps until you tire of her?"

It'll be awkward, sure. So fucking what? Every member of the faculty remembers what it was like to have an art hero to worship in their academy days. Most have been the target of a student's infatuation themselves. Some have acted on it. They may judge, but not harshly.

"There's no future in this for you. When she decides she needs cock from someone who respects her taste, you won't be—"

He doesn't get to finish. I spring across the hall, shoving him against the wall.

"Careful," I growl. "I've kept secrets for you, Rush. If you hurt Gwen, the truth comes out. We'll see how your reputation holds up then."

Somehow Rush's fist finds the side of my head. His swing comes way too fast and hard for a man who looks softer than fresh bread. It doesn't hurt enough to stun me, but it gives Rush a chance to sidestep me and reach the door.

“You’re emotional,” he says as he walks out. “I understand your frustration, so I’ll be charitable. You have one day to make up your mind.”

I follow him as far as the porch. My instinct says to keep fighting, but there’s no point. We have serious leverage on one another. There’s no way to break the stalemate of mutually assured destruction. One of us will have to cave.

If I don’t want it to be me, I’m going to have to make a move.

Chapter 19

GWEN



Despite waking up so early, by the time I get home, shower and change, I nearly don't make it to the cafe in time. Joel, the single greatest friend anyone could ask for, has a bagel waiting for me.

"I had a feeling you'd be hungry when you didn't come home last night," he says.

He has no clue. My stomach rumbles so hard, I could probably scarf down the bagel in less than a minute.

"You have fun? Did he give you a hard time about taking off the... you know?"

It's hard to wrap my mind around that only being last night.

"It was a really good night," I reply, though I can't meet his smile.

Lane turned my body into a masterpiece, then made me feel as amazing as I looked. I'm dying to show the photos to Joel, if just so they can be appreciated by a truly great artist, but Lane said that was just for us.

I wish I could live in that moment until the next time I see Lane, but instead I'm stuck on that name: Chloe. The girl who left him, who left Mundell Academy and seemingly left the whole world behind. After the lunch rush, I hide in the bathroom and search for her everywhere.

I find Chloe Andreason, 71, a retired orthopedist from Fresno. There's Chloe Andreason, 29, a doctoral student in Machine Learning at MIT. Then there's one from Ottawa, who drowned in a freak accident as a child, and a graphic designer from the UK well into her forties.

No one in their early twenties who had anything to do with art. So what happened to her? What kind of woman my age has no presence on the Internet? Was she some kind of digital recluse before she came to Mundell Academy?

I'm jumping to conclusions. Maybe Chloe wasn't her real name. That would make more sense than a student straight-up disappearing. Would Lane know if Chloe was just her artist name? I guess it depends on how long were they seeing each other. How serious were they as a couple? I have a lot of questions.

Hey, call me soon, Lane texts me. *We need to talk.*

Yeah, no kidding.

After work, I send back.

"Oh my god!" Joel says, a hand pressed to his chest. He's breathing heavy, a cautious smile blooming.

"What's going on?"

“I just got an e-mail from Professor Mundell! He got me an exhibition at the Gallery Madrigal!”

“Joel!” I shriek, pulling him into a hug. “That’s amazing, congratulations! You deserve it.”

As much as I may hate Mundell, at least he came through for Joel.

“Thank you. You’re right,” he laughs. “But oh no. I’m gonna have to do so much work! They want thirty finished pieces!”

Wow.

“Anything you need, I’ll be there,” I say. “Like, don’t worry about cleaning the apartment, or grocery shopping. I’ll take care of everything.”

He sighs, leaning in to whisper.

“I think I need to quit the cafe.”

He’s right. He’ll need the time. Money will be tight, but this is his future.

“We’ll figure it out. Don’t worry,” I say. “Do what you have to do.”

What’s a little extra credit card debt? If the gallery goes well, and he sells a lot of paintings, he’ll be able to pay it all off with ease.

“Okay, I’m leaving. See you tonight.” Joel winks. “Maybe.” He hugs me one more time, throws off his apron and jogs to the back office.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and duck behind the counter to drink it. This is going to be a long, busy day.

—

No one from the cafe can come in on short notice to cover the rest of Joel's shift. My phone buzzes repeatedly inside my purse, but we're too swamped for me to respond. I don't get out until after dark, and by then Lane's texted four times and left two voicemails.

What the fuck is going on?

I call him on my walk home, forgetting my sore feet and sweaty skin. My heart pounds, concern growing when he answers on the first ring.

"Mundell knows about us," he says. "He wants me to resign or you're gone."

I stop in place, listening as Lane gives me the details. More than one passerby bumps me until I have the presence of mind to step aside.

All of our plans to continue my art in secret, to bide my time until I finish school — it was for nothing. Either Lane resigns or I leave — no matter what, Mundell wins.

"When I see him I'm going to..." I start, but draw a blank. "I don't know. Mundell got Joel a show at the Madrigal. If I lash out at him..."

"Fuck. He did that to force your hand, Gwen. He's playing on your loyalty to your friend."

“Hey! Joel’s the best artist at the whole school. This was in the works before we became a thing.”

Lane’s clearly pissed, but he needs to watch what he says about Joel. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. If there’s anything I can agree with Mundell about, it’s Joel’s talent.

“Sorry,” Lane says. “I’m sure he’s excellent if he got into Madrigal. The point is, Rush’s putting the screws to us. I wanted to do the same to him, but he got there first. Almost as if he’d planned it, then played each card perfectly.”

Is he for real?

“Lane, we dealt him the cards! Maybe if you hadn’t turned your sights on a student, he wouldn’t be able to put you, or me, in this position. Mundell has every right to fire you.”

“What do you want, Gwen? You want me to quit? You can say so.”

He’s hiding the anger from his voice. If Mundell saw me on the street, that means Lane spent all day seething, searching for solutions and coming up empty. The last thing I want to do is cost him his job, but... what other option do we have?

“Do you know what was the happiest moment of my life?” I ask him, closing my eyes and traveling back in time.

“What?”

“When I saw that envelope from Mundell Academy, when I saw that it was a big one. I knew then I got in. Even if I couldn’t afford to go there, they thought I was good enough. They said I belonged. And when I opened it and it said I had a full scholarship... I cried, Lane. I nearly fell over, I was so dizzy. It was my ticket out of Ohio, and I’d earned it, all on my own.”

Nothing I say could help him really understand what it was like. He’s never needed to escape, never felt the dread of being cursed to rot in the same small town forever.

“I’m not giving up my scholarship,” I say. “And I’m not going back to Ohio.”

“You don’t have to go back there. My offer stands, Gwen. You can go to any other school and I will pay your way, completely. No strings attached. You wouldn’t have to put up with Mundell. You could bring back Enmity Jane immediately, and Joel would have nothing to worry about.”

I want to believe him, but what guarantee would I have that he’d honor his promise and pay my way through school? What if he ghosts me the second his job is secure? How do we even know Mundell would back off?

“If I accept your offer, and you stay, what’s to stop Mundell from blackmailing you again?” I ask.

“He’ll have what he wants. Enmity Jane won’t be associated with his school, and I won’t be in bed with one of his students.”

“Maybe,” I say. It makes sense, but then again, the threat of losing his job would always hang over Lane. What if people discovered he’s really Alistair Rat? Mundell would definitely fire him. Wouldn’t it be better to rip off that bandage now?

“Lane, I have to do what’s right for myself. I can’t throw away what I’ve worked for.”

He sighs.

“If I quit, Rush wins.”

A sharp wind blows between the buildings, creeping under my sweater and sending a chill through my chest.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“He’s hated my art since I got started,” Lane says. “He’s a total hypocrite, fucking over anyone who doesn’t adhere to his taste. I don’t want him to win. It isn’t right.”

“No, it isn’t. And I’m sorry about that, but I can’t go home. I need this.”

My phone beeps at me; the battery is close to dead. That’s fine. There’s not much left to discuss.

“Gwen, I understand,” he says. “I’ll... I’ll figure this out. I’ll find leverage on Rush. I’ll make him stand down. I promise.”

He hangs up. I stare at my phone, considering whether or not to call him back, when it dies.

Whatever. I'm done thinking about this. My head aches, and I'm starving; I haven't eaten since that bagel. If he fucks this up, I'll...

I don't know.

When I get home, Joel's left a note saying he's out celebrating with Martin. A fresh canvas rests on a stand next to the note: a portrait of me as the Bloody Bride — it's haunting, and gorgeous.

Mundell is going to hate it.

I boil a pot of spaghetti and microwave a bag of frozen broccoli florets. While they cook I grab some papers and pencils and start to draw. It's been too long since I worked on *The Ohio Zoo*, but I've got another idea, thanks to Joel.

I spent years thinking about the performance that would become "Bloody Bride." I can't perform it again, for the time being — but as Joel's shown me, I can still use the idea in another way. This character had a reason for standing in Union Square after a violent ordeal.

Did she survive it, or cause it? I want to tell her story — how she fought to stay sane in a world that kicked her and cursed her no matter how she begged for acceptance. Even as they tore her down and built her into something unrecognizable, she never forgot who she was. She remembered.

Eating and working takes my mind off Lane and Mundell.

Lane is deluding himself, thinking there's some clever way out of this. There isn't. He has my whole future in his hands, so he better do the right thing.

Chapter 20

LANE



Considering Rush invaded my studio yesterday without warning, it's only fair for me to show up at his penthouse. He's probably expecting me anyway.

I haven't been here in years. Rush doesn't often have guests in his home, preferring to host gatherings at galleries and at school.

Men like us need a sanctuary, he once told me. A place where we can explore our art in solitude. For me, it's here.

It makes sense for him. He hardly gets a moment alone at the school, where he spends most of his time. Still, when he lets me into the penthouse, it hardly seems lived-in. The air smells too clean — almost sterile. No trace of his cologne, or cooking aromas or even paint. He has all the supplies, with an easel set up in front of the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over midtown. It's probably just his luxurious building's top quality air filtration system, but I can't picture Rush spending much time here.

Then there's the art: no prized Pollock or Basquiat, no Monet or Matisse, like one would expect. No, the art on his walls is his own: impressionistic renditions of historic photos,

expressionist portraits of modern celebrities and surrealist takes on corporate logos and insignias.

One minute he's struggling to mimic Degas, the next he's trying to reinvent Warhol by way of Dalí. It's embarrassing. Maybe that's why he rarely invites anyone over.

How can he not display work from his best students, the truest proof of his success as an arts educator? There's no shortage of options after such a long career. Sure, many can be found at the school, but does Rush not have any personal favorites he wanted for himself? Why show his own sub-par work, if not as a sign of extraordinary egotism? I suppose this the only place he has to hang it, and he's too shameless to put it all away.

"Come in," he says, meeting me at the door.

He's set out two wine glasses and a bottle of Cabernet on the kitchen counter. He doesn't wait for me to confirm if I want any before pulling the cork and pouring for us both.

"Before we start, I want you to know that all this," he says, indicating the wine, "is not for celebration. If I wanted to be petty and insulting, I'd have taken out one glass, not two. I don't want this to be the end of our friendship. This can be nothing more than a professional matter. A decision reached between employer and employee concerning an unfortunate incidence of misconduct. I can compartmentalize this, Lane. Can you?"

Is he out of his fucking mind? I'm willing myself not to grab that bottle and throw it through his penthouse window.

“Rush, there’s no getting around how personal this is. You know that.”

He nods and hands me my glass.

“It felt right to make the offer. I don’t want there to be bad blood between us, regardless of how it all resolves.”

No fucking chance.

“Yeah,” I say. “Well, I have an offer for you.”

Rush gestures to the black sectional in his living room, but I’d rather stand, so I don’t follow him. Saving face, he sits, leaning back into the thin but resilient cushion.

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

I sip the wine, steeling myself. He’s not really listening, he’s just letting me say my piece. He has no incentive to back down.

“I considered a lot of different options before coming here tonight. I thought about writing down all your dirty secrets and sending them to the *Times*. I’d find the people you hurt and get them to speak out against you, united in exposing the rot in your soul. I would drag you all the way down with me.”

“Of course. A natural reaction.” He smiles smugly and drinks half his glass.

I imagine punching that look off his face. It would be so fucking satisfying.

“So why haven’t you done just that?” Rush asks.

“For Gwen.”

“Ahh.”

If I really wanted to destroy Rush, there is one card I could play. He'd never see it coming, but the cost would be too high. I could tell the world that I'm Alistair Rat and Rush Mundell, a lifelong friend and admirer of the arts, had no idea. If reputation is what he truly values, this would hit. It would haunt him like nothing else in his career.

If I did it, people would keep an eye on me. Going out in public and staging a piece would be a hundred times harder. My art would suffer, or I'd get arrested. Probably both. I'm not ready to retire Alistair Rat, not yet. More importantly, I wouldn't be able to teach Gwen what I know.

“That's noble of you,” Rush says. “But misguided. She's not worth losing your career, Lane. Maybe someday she'll manage to publish her comics, but she doesn't need your help for that. Whatever affection you feel for her, you know it's only momentary. Leaving my academy would be permanent.”

No wonder he's such a bad artist. For a student of the human condition, Rush really has no fucking clue about people. We wouldn't be having this conversation if I didn't care about Gwen.

“You're wrong. I'm not letting her go. I'm leaving your school. But, you can make sure this stays civil by leaving with me.”

Rush gets up from the couch and downs the rest of his Cabernet. He returns to the kitchen counter and pours another glass.

“Say that again, Lane. I misheard you.”

“It’s time for you to pass the torch. You have nothing left to prove. Your tenure has done the Mundell name proud. You can keep that name out of the mud by naming a successor and stepping aside. Tichenor or Vina would carry on your legacy as you’d want.”

“I’m sure they would.”

“Professor emeritus status would keep you in the scene without all the work attached.”

Rush nods, leaning back against the counter. Shaking his head, he sets down his glass.

“I like the work,” he says. “That’s why I do it. If I wanted someone else to run my school, I’d have hired someone decades ago.”

Yeah, of course. He gets to choose who receives a scholarship and who doesn’t. He can weed out applicants who don’t follow his vision.

“Let me ask you,” he says. “How do you know your relationship with Gwen will be any different from the others? You’ve let a few go. What makes Gwen different?”

I can’t answer him.

Yes, there’s an obvious answer: artistically, she’s unique. She wants to learn from Alistair Rat. How could I turn her down? However, that’s not the real reason I need her. I’d happily teach her even if our relationship was strictly platonic. She inspires me, she challenges me. She knows me

better than anyone, even though we haven't known each other for very long. I told her my true identity because my instinct told me to trust her. Wherever this is leading, I'll follow it through.

Rush wouldn't understand that.

"She hated me long before we ever met. She avoided taking my classes on purpose," I explain. "Look how far we've come since. That's special. After Chloe left, I told myself if I had another chance I wouldn't have let her go. I'm not going to make the same mistake with Gwen."

Sighing, Rush steps close. He's lost his mirth, the thrill of victory. He did want me to stay, for me to choose him and his school over her, and he thought I would. This will be one of the rare times he doesn't get what he wants, and he's not enjoying it.

"Has it occurred to you she could be playing you, Lane?" he asks. "Entrapping you through your base desires so she can use you?"

I hold back a laugh.

"For what?"

Rush shrugs.

"I don't know. This, perhaps. Maybe she wanted to get you fired, since you're so sour on her artistic idol."

"That's psychotic." I say.

"We get our share of troubled individuals here."

“You’re reaching.”

“If you say so. Devotees of Alistair Rat have utter contempt for you, Lane. How can the two of you possibly get along?”

Careful.

He could make the leap, with the right train of thought. As Doyle wrote, *When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.* What better answer to this mystery?

“A little disagreement keeps things interesting,” I chuckle. “We both want to convince each other we’re right. Until one of us succeeds, we have a reason to stick together.”

Rush rolls his eyes and his jaw hangs open.

“You’re both ridiculous,” he says.

“No argument there. So, do we have a deal? Step down and your secrets stay secret.”

I almost expect him to budge. He has more to lose than me or Gwen, he has to recognize that. I like teaching at his school, but I can live without it. I care far more about Gwen and Alistair Rat, and he can’t take either of those away from me.

“No,” he says at last. “No deal, Lane. You were supposed to be my successor, not Tichenor or Vina, but I’ll find someone else, eventually. Until then, I’m staying. If you attempt to defame me, I’ll make sure the media portrays you

as a disgruntled former employee with an axe to grind, then sue you. No one will believe you.”

“I guess we’ll see-”

“And do your girlfriend a favor and tell her to watch out. If she pulls any of this stupid Internet street art bullshit, she’s out. If she lets out one word of your relationship, I’ll expel her immediately. I should kick her out now, just as punishment for ruining your career.”

Walk out. Walk out now.

I’ve about hit my limit.

“I made this call, Rush. It was my decision, so leave her the fuck out of it.”

“She put herself before you. She’s a first-year, mediocre student. You’re a world-class talent and an excellent teacher. That bitch should be begging you not to throw away-”

The urge to punch him rises like acid in my throat; this time I don’t stop myself. It’s just a quick jab, a hot snap at his nose that’s over before Rush even realizes it happened, but it shuts him up pretty good. He clutches his face, then takes his hand away, checking his palm for blood that isn’t there.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Rush snarls. “Get the fuck out, before I have you arrested. Don’t come back to the school. I’ll mail your things. And don’t let me see you at the galleries. You’re done in New York.”

Turning to leave, I mutter, “This isn’t over.”

He slams the door behind me.

I don't look back.

Chapter 21

GWEN



My phone wakes me, buzzing against my desk like a power drill.

He fired me. You can stay.

Holy shit! Lane did it! But does he mean that he was literally fired, or is that his way of saying Mundell accepted his resignation?

What happened?

Come to the studio. There's a lot to cover. We're going to have to be really careful.

Oh, well that sounds fantastic.

He'll use any excuse he can find to expel you. He's going to make both our lives difficult.

What the fuck did he do last night? Clearly it wasn't amicable.

I'm about to call him for some direct answers when I get an e-mail notification. It's from Mundell and titled "Regarding your future."

There's only one line.

Meet at my office in one hour.

Fuck me.

I almost text Lane to tell him, but hold off.

What if he really fucked up last night? I'd like to hear Mundell's version of what happened. Maybe there's a way I could smooth things over. I'm probably being delusional, but as Mundell says, this is my future. The last thing I need is to spend the next year walking on eggshells, constantly waiting for Mundell to screw me over. He could expel me a week before graduation if he wanted to. If I can secure some kind of assurance that he won't, it's worth my time.

When he answers the door, he's got a bandage across his nose.

Seriously, Lane?

He could have mentioned that they literally fought.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Mundell says. "Please, come in."

"What the hell happened?" I ask, taking a seat in the recliner facing his desk.

"Oh, where to begin?" He brings over a serving tray with a teapot and two mugs. He pours one for himself and glances at me.

"Yes, please." I didn't get a ton of sleep. A little caffeine couldn't hurt. The tea steams as it flows from the pot. I wait for it to cool, inhaling its faint lavender aroma.

“Did Lane give you his version?” he asks, pouring my cup.

“No. I was going to go see him when I got your e-mail.”

Lane would have warned me not to tell Mundell anything.

“Right,” Mundell says, nodding. “Before we start, I want you to understand that I do approach your situation with sympathy. I know we’ve had our differences artistically, and that’s caused friction. I don’t expect that to change overnight, but I do want it to change. You’re my student, Ms. Carpenter. I chose you over thousands of other applicants because I believe in you. Your success or lack thereof will reflect back on me, so it’s in my interests to see you thrive.”

“Okay.”

I try not to let my surprise show. Is this some kind of good cop routine? Am I supposed to trust him after everything he’s done? How is that not pure insanity?

“By that same token,” Mundell continues, “your fate is tied to the reputation of this academy. If we lose prestige due to a scandal, it will affect the trajectory of your career.”

“Yours too.”

He smiles, but without warmth.

“Yes, but I’ll be fine. I’m a wealthy man. I’d like to make sure you have every opportunity to achieve greatness, and that means resolving this conflict to our mutual satisfaction.”

“Right.”

I doubt that's really possible, unless Mundell is prepared to give Lane his job back and to promise, in writing, that my scholarship is secure and that he won't interfere with my pursuit of whatever art I choose.

"It shames me that you've been put into this situation at all, Ms. Carpenter."

Been put?

He holds out a hand before I can object.

"Yes, I know. You're an adult and you can make your own decisions, but ultimately it's Lane's fault for pursuing you in an inappropriate manner. He should know better. Now, I believe that his feelings for you are genuine, and vice versa. Unfortunately, that doesn't change the fact that he's a teacher and you're a student. You acted responsibly in avoiding his classes, considering your artistic differences, but he opted to pursue you anyway."

If I'm following Mundell fully, it sounds as though he still doesn't know that Lane is Alistair Rat. That's good. Whatever else happens, that secret needs to stay safe.

"Respectfully, I'm not really his student. As long as I don't take his classes, there's no conflict of interest," I argue.

"That's not the point. It's behavior unbecoming of his position. I can't allow that to go unpunished, even if there was no specific conflict. Unfortunately, thanks to Lane, there is one. His actions last night have forced my hand just as much as his conduct with you."

“What’s that mean?” I ask, staring at his bandaged nose.

Mundell sighs, sipping his tea.

“Our discussion last night became heated. When informed I was terminating his contract, he became irate, ultimately escalating into a physical altercation. It would have continued had I not threatened to call the police.”

Translation: Lane wanted to kick your ass but you’re a spineless fucking coward.

“Did you?”

A quick hum rises from my purse; someone’s texting. Possibly Joel, but probably Lane wondering where I am. It’ll have to wait.

“Thankfully, no,” says Mundell. “The threat restored some sense in Lane, and he left immediately. Don’t get me wrong, Ms. Carpenter: he deserved to be charged, but I’m trying to avoid drawing negative attention to the academy.”

“Of course.”

It’s one thing for me to pick up a fine on the subway; no one will care, or even notice. But if a teacher caught an assault charge and the media found out... I wouldn’t put it past Lane to leak it himself, if just to hurt Mundell.

“Lane recognized he wasn’t going to change my mind with physical intimidation, so he made a few threats of his own. Defamation, mostly — trotting out baseless allegations against me in an attempt to assassinate my character and scandalize the entire academy.”

“What kind of allegations?”

Considering there’s enough truth out there to sink Mundell, I’d be shocked if he was willing to let them see the light of day, even if he denied them.

Mundell shakes his head.

“For starters, claiming that my artwork is all plagiarized, stolen from my best students and claimed as my own.”

Huh. That would be quite an accusation. I can’t tell if Lane actually said that or if Mundell made it up.

“Lane also promised to produce records proving I’ve used the school’s finance to launder money, which is absolutely ridiculous. The worst of his claims, however, would be that I assaulted female students and coerced them into silence. It’s as abhorrent as it is false.”

Is it, though? I’ve been on the receiving end of his coercion before. Maybe he’s forgotten.

“Admittedly, I almost threw a punch of my own when he said that. I’ve never been so insulted.” He makes a fist, but somehow his hand reminds me more of a wad of mashed potatoes than a potential weapon. He stares at his closed fingers with remorse. “Sadly, I’m not known for my martial prowess.”

No, clearly not.

Now I kinda wish I’d spoken to Lane first. If he’d told me exactly what happened here, I could maybe figure out if Mundell is lying or if any of this is true. Lane did say he was

going to find a solution, but outright defamation? He could get himself into even more trouble than he's in now.

"I know you're probably in a bit of shock that Lane would do something like this. Imagine my surprise. I've known him for years, and he's never acted so rashly. He's hardly a temperamental man. Isn't that right?"

"Sure."

In fact, I don't think I've seen him get mad except for when dealing with Mundell.

"Unfortunately, that's not the real Lane Porter," he says, rising from his seat.

"What?"

He turns to a painting on his wall by Hieronymus Bosch; I don't know the name of the piece but the style is unmistakable. Malevolent and chaotic, his work scared me when I was young. At the same time, I was drawn to it. The idea of containing my fears within the bounds of a piece of paper gave me comfort, and set me down my chosen path.

"I've known Lane for so many years now, and I've observed his behaviors. The man he's shown you isn't necessarily who he is, deep down. Has he told you about his past?"

A centipede squirms through my stomach, slithery and cold. Has Lane been hiding something, a bigger secret than his artistic alter ego?

As if his ears were burning, my phone buzzes from an incoming call. Lane must be getting really impatient. It's unusual for me not to respond right away. Does he know I'm here, or has he guessed? I should write back, but I don't trust myself not to bombard him with questions.

"A bit. How he's not close with his family, how you were friends."

"What about his past paramours?"

I shake my head.

"Not much. Just his last one, who dumped him."

"Is that what he said? That's... generous."

"She didn't leave him?" I ask.

I shouldn't trust Mundell, obviously. Yet, Lane's story about Chloe didn't sit right with me. If Mundell can fill in some information, maybe the truth will appear somewhere in between.

"I suppose it's not a complete lie. She was the one who ended their relationship when she left the academy, but it's *why* she left that matters. When Chloe applied to my school, she was in a unique position: unlike most, she had no need for financial support. She had money from her father's life insurance payout, after he sadly passed in a car accident."

"That's horrible."

Mundell nods.

“Her mother had passed when Chloe was very young, so now she was alone. Dreamed of being an artist. She could afford to learn from the best. The problem was, she didn’t really have the talent. She had some basic skills, I should say. We see far worse all the time. But normally she would not have been considered. We felt bad for her; I was prepared to connect her with a private tutor, figuring she might make the grade next year with a little training. Lane didn’t think that was good enough, and argued at length to accept her now. ‘If she’s going to learn, she should learn from us,’ he said. Eventually I agreed.”

“But it didn’t work out,” I say, trying to put myself in her shoes. It would have been hard being here on her own, no family back at home. She didn’t have to worry about losing a scholarship, but if she wasn’t really qualified to be here, she’d find out quickly. Then what? How much pressure was she under to stick it out and prove she belonged? Did people laugh at her, pity her, resent her? Did they know about her parents, or her finances?

“Was she in Lane’s classes?” I ask.

“Oh yes. He made sure of that. I agreed to accept her application on the condition that he get her up to speed. He gave her all the personal instruction he could, which obviously led to them growing close. He charmed her with his outgoing personality and good looks, but her art wasn’t improving. I think she knew it, too. I considered dismissing her from the academy, but how could I? She had nowhere to go. Lane said he’d gently broach the subject of her finding

another vocation. The next day she dropped out. Apparently she left the city too. I assumed Lane handled the situation... indelicately. He got what he wanted from her, I guess, because he didn't chase her."

I think I've heard enough.

"You're wrong, Professor. Lane cared about Chloe. He's still upset about how things ended with her."

"I'm sure he gave you that impression," Mundell says. "I've known him a lot longer than you, Gwen, but even I'm often at a loss with him. We only get to see the version of Lane Porter he wants us to see."

"I know him," I say, forcing my eyes not to tear.

I can't tell him about Alistair Rat, but if I did, maybe he's understand. I know Lane. I know him better than anyone. He said so himself.

"He didn't tell you about Anne, did he?"

The centipede unfurls its length, worming its way through my intestine.

"Who?"

The sympathy evaporates from Mundell's tired eyes, replaced by a hard edge.

"Ask him, Ms. Carpenter. See if he can bring himself to tell you what he did to her. I should have fired him then and there. It would have been better for him and the school. If you

want to remain a student here, stay away from him. I won't warn you again. You're dismissed."

Arguing isn't going to get me anywhere, so I grab my purse and go. I hate to believe a single thing he said, but I have another name. How bad must it be if Lane wouldn't even mention her?

The centipede wriggles its legs all at once, setting my insides on fire. I nearly vomit when I reach the street. My world feels upended. Could everything I've experienced with Lane be a lie?

My aching gut tells me I shouldn't listen to Mundell... but what if he's telling the truth? All he's really done to me is threaten my scholarship, which was a real dick move, but not a crime. Everything else I've believed about him has come from Lane. Is it possible Lane took that one ember of malice and fanned it into a flame of hatred?

How do I know who's telling the truth? If it's Mundell, and Lane used Chloe only to throw her away... And now there's Anne. Who was she? What happened to her?

How will Lane react when I ask him? And what will I do if what he tells me is too terrible to bear? Would I leave him, knowing this was the lowest point in his career? How could I stay? If he really is some kind of monster...

Lane told me his biggest secret. What if he decides I can't be trusted to keep it?

Chapter 22

GWEN



I need time to think, so I walk back to my apartment instead of taking the subway. I text Lane that I'll come to the studio later, but I don't mean it. We're going to talk in public.

It kills me to be planning as though Lane might try to hurt me, but I have to be careful until I know more. Who was Anne? Is it possible to find her, or Chloe? That would be the way to find out who is really telling me the truth. Except, I have no idea how. I'm no private investigator. Could I go to the police? Would they accept a missing person report from someone who has never even met that person, and doesn't know if they're actually missing? Even if they did investigate, it would take time, and I need answers right now.

My mind races still after the walk; I'm ready to lie down and try to put the pieces together, but Lane's standing outside my apartment building. He sees me before my brain registers that it's him, he's here.

"Where were you?" he says, startling me out of my train of thought.

I'm caught so off-guard I reply with, "You punched him?"

Fuck. I should have texted him back.

Lane's scowl makes me look away.

"You saw Rush? In person?"

"He told me to meet him. I didn't have a choice."

"Right. Okay. And he told you I punched him?"

He told me a lot of fucking things.

"He had his nose bandaged! Like it was broken."

Lane glances at my front door and steps toward it, but I stay put.

"I didn't hit him that hard," he says. "He did that for sympathy."

I suppose that's possible. Mundell didn't act like he was in any obvious pain. If Lane's right, though, that's so manipulative! What a psycho!

So which is more likely? That Mundell is an absolute creep, or that Lane is lying?

"Gwen, whatever he told you-"

"Who's Anne?"

"What?"

"He told me about Chloe. He said to ask you about Anne."

The fury in his eyes breaks, and his imposing presence deflates like a balloon.

"Let's go inside," he says.

Joel should be home now, hopefully in the middle of painting. My place isn't an option.

“No. Somewhere else.”

“Fine. Whatever you want.”

I lead us to an old dinette down the block. Full of city workers and ancient retirees, there's a steady din of utensils against ceramic and conversations in a half-dozen languages. Lane orders us coffees at the register and we slip into a booth against the back wall. Neither of us speak until a wrinkled, wiry waitress delivers our coffees.

“Who is she?” I ask. My hand is in my purse, clutching my phone. “Who's Anne?”

Lane bats his eyes, looking away.

“Another ex of mine.”

“Before or after Chloe?”

“Before.”

“What happened?”

Steam rises from the coffee. He bows his head, staring into the mug as if he could jump in. His face wrenches, rising and collapsing. I'm not sure I've ever seen him so visibly perturbed.

“She died,” he says at last. The words cut through the noise, dulling it in their wake, leaving us alone to talk.

“How?” I ask.

Lane takes a deep breath, gathering his composure, but his voice still wavers when he answers, "Suicide."

"That's awful."

He nods.

"Yeah."

This must have occurred years ago, but he's hurting as if this is still a fresh wound.

"Why?"

"She was extremely talented," he begins. "Mundell took her under his wing, like your roommate, but she struggled to handle the pressure. She appreciated Mundell but was intimidated by him, so she came to me for support. I gave her an outlet and comforted her. I'd like to think I did my best, but it wasn't enough. Even Mundell did everything he could. It's true. He begged her to see a therapist, on his dime. He offered her all the time she needed, to pay her expenses as long as it took."

Why would Mundell advise me to ask about this woman if neither of them did anything wrong, and tried their best to help her?

"Did she blame either of you for what she did?"

"Both of us," Lane says. "She left a note about not being able to handle disappointing her mentors."

"That's not the same thing."

“Gwen, I told her not to give up. I told her she was a brilliant artist, that she could never disappoint me or Mundell — that we’d be there for her, always. I thought we’d gotten through to her, that she was doing better. I couldn’t believe it when I read her note. It didn’t feel real.”

I get out my phone and Google Mundell Academy, Anne and suicide. Results appear immediately, mostly news articles.

Prestigious art school reeling from student’s death

Authorities rule student death a suicide, dismiss suspicions of foul play

Divers unable to locate body of Anne Nichols after third day of search.

“Fuck me,” I mumble. “They never found her?”

“Just her purse, on the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Shivering, I set down my phone.

It’s a tragic story, but was Lane really at fault? Even Mundell, apparently, had tried to help her. Why would he want me to bring this up? Did he think I’d be mad at Lane for not telling me about Anne sooner? Or maybe I’d be wary of a man whose last two girlfriends wound up dead or lost to the world? Was he implying that maybe it’s not a coincidence?

Unless...

“Did you tell them who you really are?”

Without hesitation, Lane replies, “No. They weren’t interested in... him. You’re the first person to like him and still want to have anything to do with me.”

I half-smile. That’s not a shock.

“I tried to get Mundell to retire,” Lane says. “Last night. I offered to resign and not make trouble if he agreed to go too. He did not accept. And I did punch him, but not hard enough to break his nose. I promise you, Gwen, he was exaggerating.”

I nod.

Maybe it’s true. Mundell wore that bandage as if he was proud of it.

“So what now?” I ask.

Lane gets out his wallet and leaves a few bills on the table.

“Now I find a way to ruin him,” he says, standing up to go. “You can either stay out of it and hope Rush doesn’t decide to expel you, or you can help me.”

I follow him out, my blood pumping hot.

“Can’t you leave it alone?” I ask, practically jogging to keep up with Lane as he weaves around pedestrians. “If you ruin him, you’ll hurt Mundell Academy, which will destroy me and Joel and everyone else associated with the place.”

Did I misjudge Mundell? Yes, he’s used his money and influence to shut down my art, but if that’s the worst thing

he's done... It's hard to be the adult here, but Lane's not going to do me any favors by provoking Mundell.

"I told you, I can't let him win," Lane says, picking up his pace.

"Why not? You're more successful as an artist than he'll ever be!"

"He doesn't know that."

"You're famous! No one outside of the art world has ever heard of him!"

"I don't care about that."

I'm running out of breath, but I keep chasing.

"You're letting him live rent-free in your head!" I say. "Wouldn't it piss him off knowing you don't care about him anymore?"

"He wouldn't believe it. He knows I care."

"Okay, but you could stop for my sake!"

"Gwen, he threatened to destroy your life if you didn't do what he wants, and you're not the first. How many people will he hurt if no one exposes him?"

"You're not doing this for them!"

He stops and turns to me.

"Yes I am! You didn't hear the way he talked about you. You didn't hear the contempt he has for artists like us. I *am* doing this for both of us, and for everyone else who will come to this school with a vision for something different."

“Lane, it’s his academy! I don’t like what he’s done but it is his school. Why don’t you start your own? You have the money. Wouldn’t that be even better? Beating Mundell at his own game?”

He laughs, a dark, mocking grunt.

“You think it’s that easy to just start your own school?”

Embarrassment and rage reddens my cheeks.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did. It’s a nice idea, Gwen, but it’s a fantasy. It’s not gonna happen. But I will drag Mundell’s name through the mud and maybe when it’s dirty enough, we can be the one to clean off his school and make it beautiful again.”

I shake my head.

“I won’t be a part of that. I could lose everything.”

Lane nods.

“I understand, Gwen. Good luck.”

He walks away, and this time I don’t follow.

—

Five days go by in a tear-streaked blur. I take on extra shifts at Cafe Vitolo until they hire someone to fill in for Joel. The distraction doesn’t hurt, and neither does the extra cash. When not working, I join Martin in doing everything we can to support Joel: cook meals, clean the apartment, run to the store for art supplies and anything else. They know it’s

unusual for me to always be home instead of out with Lane, and offer to help me if I need it, which I appreciate.

When I have no chores to do and Joel's asleep or with Martin, I work on my *Bloody Bride* graphic novel. Scenes come to me while I work, so when I have time for drawing and writing I have plenty of inspiration.

More often than I'd like, my thoughts drift from Gwen Carpenter's novels to Enmity Jane's performances. I put them down in a notebook hoping that'll make them go away for the time being, but it's no use. Jane doesn't want to wait, she wants to be seen and heard.

I can't afford to lose my scholarship, I tell her.

*Lane will pay for you to go somewhere else, she argues.
Then you won't have to worry about Professor Mundell.*

I haven't heard from Lane, and while I assume he'd keep his word and pay my tuition if I asked, I meant what I said about not wanting to be in his debt. That's true now more than ever.

When I finally bring up the situation with Joel, he's heard about Anne Nichols — there's a plaque dedicated to her memory at the school. As soon as he mentions it, I remember seeing it too. It features a photo of her and one of her pieces, a beautiful but frightening depiction of the Parisian barricades during the French Revolution. She was pretty, and her talent really was extraordinary.

Unlike Chloe, there's plenty of information about Anne online. Her obituary has the names of her surviving relatives, which is all I need to find out everything else about her. Apparently she was adopted as an infant and never met her biological family. Her parents, who had a biological daughter of their own, were in their fifties when they adopted Anne. Her father, Philippe, passed when she was a teenager. Her mother, Colette, teaches French at Temple University, while her much older sister, Lea, works at a marketing firm here in the city.

One name is absent from the obituary, however: Lane's. There's no mention of a boyfriend. Did the family know about Lane? I presume he attended the funeral — most of the Mundell faculty was reportedly there — but did they have any idea who he was?

Digging deep into their profiles, I search for any indication of a history of depression or bipolar disorder for Anne, something that might be a clue that she would take her own life. Instead, I find a Facebook post of Lea's on the anniversary of Anne's death.

Four years ago today I received the worst news of my life. My little sister was gone. I didn't understand it then and still don't today. They say she couldn't handle the pressure, but in all the years I knew Anne, there was never a challenge she couldn't overcome. I don't know what she went through in those final days; maybe being away from home changed her. I just wish I knew why she didn't reach out to me or Mom. We would have been there for her. Take care of the people in your

life, everyone. You can't tell how someone's doing on the inside unless you ask.

I shut my laptop after that, unable to read any more. Of course Lea wants answers. I do too. Why didn't Anne take time off? Why didn't she seek professional help? Two people in the world might know, and I'll see them soon.

—

“How do I look?” Joel asks, stepping out of the bathroom.

I nearly faint.

The clothes delivered to our apartment yesterday fit Joel perfectly: a light gray sports jacket with blue-striped patterning, a white button-down shirt and fitted jeans. No tie. Business casual with a nod to youth and artistic independence.

“Give me your phone now so I can take a picture,” I say. “It's not fair I get to see this before Martin.”

Joel laughs and makes seductive faces for the camera.

“They're going to let me keep all this, right?” he says mid-pose.

“Don't ask me. I'm not in charge.”

“I could get used to looking this good.”

“Gallery's not even open yet and fame has already changed you,” I joke, shaking my head.

“Oh, don't worry. I won't forget the little people like you... Gina?”

I snort, crossing my arms and feigning disgust.

“I’m sorry, I meant Gail.”

It feels good to laugh after the past few days.

“Come on,” he says. “We’ll be late.”

My old sea-green dress might have worked back at the Askew, but the Gallery Madrigal called for more sophistication. Wanting to look nice for the occasion, I splurged and bought a new dress, a knee-length, slinky, black number that Joel picked out for me online. I thought it was too flashy, that people would think I was trying to steal the show, but he insisted.

“If Professor Porter has the nerve to show up, don’t you want him to see what he’s missing out on?”

Admittedly, he made a good point.

We hail a cab instead of walking or taking the subway to the Madrigal. The show won’t start for more than an hour, but Professor Mundell told Joel to show up early for a final look at the presentation. I stay outside as he checks everything.

“Soak it in,” Martin and I told him at least a dozen times over the last few days. This opening is going to mark a moment in his life and career, and there will be a distinct before and after. From this point forward, he’ll be a star. Maybe not a household name, but everyone who knows art will know Joel Franklin.

Eventually he pokes his head out the door and says, “Oh my god, Gwen, get in here!”

I follow him in, only a little jealous. The Gallery Madrigal hosts a beautiful space: wide, tall and deep. Every inch is bathed in light, the white walls immaculate and hardwood floor glossy. Champagne bottles chill in ice buckets next to a table full of glasses in the room's center.

And then there are Joel's paintings. I've seen most of them, but a few he painted before coming to Mundell Academy. The nudes I posed for occupy the center of the gallery's north wall, which is what everyone will see first when they enter the gallery.

Yeah, that's... scary. I knew people would see them eventually but...

"Gwen, if you're not comfortable with this..." Joel says.

He's being nice. Having to take those down and rearrange the entire gallery now would be a disaster. I couldn't do that to him.

"It's fine," I say. "Seriously. They're beautiful. They deserve to be seen."

He smiles and squeezes my hand.

"You're beautiful, Gwen. And amazing. I couldn't have done this without you."

I pull him into a hug.

"You're the amazing one. You're the most talented person I've ever met, and the best friend anyone could ask for."

He wipes his cheek as he lets me go.

“You too, Gwen. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

We tour the gallery until Martin arrives, followed shortly by Professor Mundell. He greets me with a cautious but respectful tone. We both share a mutual admiration for Joel, and I don’t think either of us wants to spoil the mood. We can talk about Lane another time.

Mundell introduces Joel to his fancy guests as they arrive, so I make myself sparse and watch them make their way through the gallery. I kinda wish I could be with them, to see rich arts patrons fawning over Joel, but at least I don’t have to act friendly around Mundell. Joel steals glances my way, smiling so wide I can’t help smiling back. It’s great seeing him so happy.

Scanning the room, I stop at a wrinkly, hunched over man who’s staring at me. Caught red-handed, he flinches, but doesn’t break his gaze right away. He turns to my nude paintings, then back to me, then to the paintings, his jaw dropping progressively wider.

He’s going to tell everyone, isn’t he? He better buy some fucking paintings.

“Hey, Gwen.”

I turn around, knowing who it is.

“Lane.”

“You look amazing,” he says, taking in the new dress.

He looks good too, as usual. Tight black sweater that hugs his solid chest, sharp khakis — stylish, but casual. He holds a glass of champagne, though no one's serving the drinks yet. Lane must have helped himself.

“Are you supposed to be here?” I reply.

Mundell could spot him at any moment, and I'm certain nothing good will come of it.

Lane scowls.

“Rush doesn't own the gallery. And I was invited.”

“Really?”

So far, no one's paying us any attention. I've been out of the loop for the past few days, so I don't know if word has gotten around about Lane's firing. For the moment, the guests are still perusing Joel's art and socializing with one another.

“I need you to be on my side, Gwen.”

“And I need you not to fuck tonight up for Joel,” I hiss.
“If you go, I'll call you tomorrow, okay?”

He shakes his head, turning up his lips in dismissal.

“You don't have to worry about that. I know how much this means to you.”

“Bullshit, Lane. You're here to embarrass Mundell and you know it!”

Struggling to keep my voice down and smile, I reach out for his arm to drag him away.

“Please, Lane. Come with me. We'll go outside and talk.”

“Sorry, no.”

“How is this going to help?” I ask, whispering in his ear. “How does it get you closer to what you want? All you’re doing is making a complete ass of yourself. You’re just being petty!”

Lane takes my upper arms in his hands; I fight off the impulse to shake him off.

“This is all out war,” he says. “And Rush lives for events like this. Do you think he really cares about your friend?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Trust me, he doesn’t. He only cares about himself and his prestige. He’s not here to celebrate Joel’s talent, he’s celebrating himself for finding and elevating Joel’s talent.”

“Maybe so,” I say. “But you’re just going to piss him off. It’s not actually going to hurt his reputation or anything. It’s just going to make *you* look bad. You know how you can win but the price of winning is too high so it’s not worth it? That’s what this is.”

“You’re wrong. Rush already fired me, so what else do I have to lose?”

“Me!”

The word comes out louder than I intend, and as soon as it does I can feel eyes turning toward us.

“Gwen-”

“Please, Lane. Not tonight. Do whatever you need to do, but not tonight.”

He stops and thinks. The wheels are turning in his head, and I’m almost sure he’s going to relent when Mundell approaches.

“Excuse me,” he says, stepping up to us. “Lane, would you come with me, please?”

I look around; more guests have filled up the gallery, and while most are still focused on Joel and his art, several have noticed the developing confrontation. It’s not going to take long for us to become the center of attention.

“Hello, Rush,” Lane says, his voice louder than it needs to be. “How’s the nose feeling? It looks completely better.

I hadn’t thought about it, but he’s right: Professor Mundell’s nose looks perfectly fine.

“Let’s go talk in private, okay?”

“Actually, I just got here,” Lane says, waving the champagne glass around the gallery. “How about you show me this breathtaking collection and give me your insights? They haven’t all sold yet, have they?”

Mundell grits his teeth, face turning red.

“Not right now, Lane. Go home, before you do something regrettable.”

I step back and look away, done with both of them. Murmurs that once hung in the air like an enveloping fog

now intensify, focused on the building tension.

Lane raises his glass.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on discovering the next generational talent. The beauty he creates will transcend time and persist long after we’re both forgotten.”

Mundell pauses, as if sensing a trap. “Thank you,” he says. “I agree. Mr. Franklin will capture imaginations for decades, and we’re lucky to have him in our family.”

“I’m really proud of you, Rush. For once you’ve used your position to elevate a worthy artist, instead of the one willing to sleep with you.”

For fuck’s sake.

A stir rises from those in earshot, their gasps and whispers congealing into a proper commotion. I’ve heard enough of it. I start to walk away, but stop when Joel slips through the crowd.

This is not happening. He worked too hard.

I swing around and march up to Lane.

“We’re leaving, now,” I snap, wrapping my hand around his wrist.

“Don’t make me call security,” Mundell says.

Joel asks, “Gwen, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Professor Porter really loves your work, but now he has to leave.”

Joel smiles uncertainly.

“Oh, thank you. Thanks for coming.”

“Yes, thank you for coming,” Mundell repeats. “Have a lovely evening.”

Lane stands firm until I tug at his arm; finally he budes. I don't let go of him until we're through the lobby and standing on the Madison Avenue sidewalk.

“Fuck you,” I say to him, tossing his arm away from me. Hot tears sting my eyes. “I can't believe you did that. Was it worth it?”

He doesn't answer. He stares off into the passing traffic.

Does he have some kind of elaborate plan, a meticulously plotted scheme to break Mundell a piece at a time? Am I an unwitting part in it, preventing him from telling me the role I am to play? I wish I could believe that, but he'd tell me now, wouldn't he? The damage is done, isn't it? Isn't there something he could tell me to justify why he had to tarnish the greatest night of my friend's life?

“Was it worth it, Lane?”

“No,” he says at last. “I guess not.”

I turn and head back inside. I make it to the bathroom before I cry.

Chapter 23

LANE



I'd give anything to chase after her, but all I can do is watch her disappear through the gallery doors. If I followed her, she'd run further to get away. There's no fixing this, not tonight — maybe not ever.

I fucking blew it.

With nowhere else to be and no one to talk to, I decide to head home. There's a temptation to go back to the gallery I know I should ignore, so I walk fast.

In my head, there was so much more I was going to say to Rush. I had accusations to level, secrets to expose. I didn't come just to make a scene or land a pithy line, impressing exactly nobody.

Gwen threw me off. She broke my conviction. I don't blame her, but it's true. I should have bailed out as soon as I knew I couldn't carry on as planned. It's not like I'd never have another chance. Obsessed with winning a battle, I lost sight of the war.

I was impatient, plain and simple. I can't help it — every day that Gwen has to worry about a rug pulled out from under her is too many. Every day that Rush hides his corruption is

too fucking many. I can't choose between loving Gwen and hating him. It should be an easy choice, but it isn't.

Rush was dealt a great hand and he played it well. Telling Gwen about Anne was masterful. Planting suspicions in her mind, knowing there are no satisfying answers for Anne's disappearance. Of course Gwen would see herself in Anne and Chloe, students torn between their art and their teachers. She'd worry she would end up like them, that the man she chose for her master and mentor hid something dark. After all, I hide who I truly am as an artist from his public face — and how can one be trusted if they lie about something as fundamental as their art? Why wouldn't she suspect there was more I haven't told her?

I should have brought up Anne sooner, for sure. Then Rush couldn't have used her as a cudgel against me. But that would have meant talking about her; it would have meant pain.

No, I did not prepare for this moment. I've been acting on instinct, and my instinct's been lousy. If it was good, I would have focused on Gwen, not Rush. I would have had patience, for her sake. Despite everything going on in her life right now, what was on her mind tonight above all? Joel. She wanted a perfect night for her friend, free of conflict and embarrassment. I should have just let them have it.

After half an hour of walking, my heart no longer bangs against my chest. I stop racing around the other pedestrians and fall into their rhythm. My mind clears enough for me to

figure out what I should have done tonight with the knowledge I have.

Rush is at a gallery surrounded by dozens of adoring peers. Art reporters were there, eager to debut Joel Franklin to the world and hear all about him from his teachers. A boozy after-party will follow the exhibition.

Rush will be busy all night.

This may be my best opportunity to get what I need.

One of my weaknesses as an artist has been a resistance to making elaborate plans. I like to see where my inspiration takes me. “Death of a Salesman” was the biggest exception, when I forced myself to really develop every aspect so that it could be executed flawlessly. That’s the approach I should take now.

If I want the world to know that Rush uses his position to fuck students, don’t call him out in public with a bad joke. Find proof. Get people to go on the record. Go to the media.

To do it right, I’ll need some help, so I call Rory.

“Where have you been?” he asks. “Haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“I get it. New girlfriend. Don’t worry about it. What’s up?”

“I need your help with a thing.”

“Tonight?” Rory asks.

“Yes.”

He sighs.

“I can’t, Lane. Sorry. I’m restoring a Shelby. Client paid for expedited service, the whole deal. I can’t be out late.”

“It’s time sensitive,” I say. “Window closes in a few hours.”

“Fuck. What’s the idea?”

Here we go.

“Break into Rush’s office, copy everything on his computer, photograph any documents of-”

“Lane, let me stop you. This isn’t an art project?”

“No, but it’s important.”

Rory doesn’t answer right away, as if thinking it over. He isn’t. His answer is going to be no. It’s not that he’s against a little breaking and entering. We’ve done plenty. Stealing sensitive private information might give him pause, but he knows I’m not going to use it for identity theft or something unsavory. He’ll turn me down for one basic, but vital, reason — one he made clear to me when we started working together.

“I can’t,” he says at last. “If it was for actual art, and it could wait a day, I’d be there.”

“Sure. I understand.”

Not the outcome I hoped for, but not the end of the world.

“Is everything okay?” Rory asks. “Shouldn’t you be at a gallery for a thing?”

I guess all the news hasn’t traveled up the grapevine yet.

“Rush fired me. Blamed it on my relationship with Gwen.”

“Fuck. Wow.”

“Yeah. And she’s... I did a dumb thing tonight. She’s pissed at me, rightfully. I need to fix it.”

Hearing myself out loud, I can’t even imagine the amount of red flags this is throwing up in Rory’s head. I could talk myself out of this plan without too much effort, there’s no way he can justify participating.

“Lane, if there’s anything else I can do, I’m here man. Some kind of work of art to win her back, you know?”

That’s an interesting idea. An authentic Alistair Rat piece dedicated to her, perhaps? A public declaration of my affection — no, my contrition. An act of penance. But what if it could be traced back to me, exposing my identity?

Maybe that’s the kind of sacrifice I need to show her I mean it.

“I’ll call that Plan B,” I say. “This is about more than Gwen, though. Rush has hurt too many artists. I should have done this years ago.”

“Fair enough. Let me know if I can help in the future.”

“Will do.”

I hang up and hail a cab to a self-storage facility where we keep some of our “art supplies.” Crowbars, lock picks, spraypaint, bolt cutters, fishing line, sledge hammers, burner phones, miniature cameras, thumb drives, road flares, a variety of work clothes and uniforms — even a full firefighter suit and gear.

The only weapon we have is mace. No knives or guns, which would be an easy way skip a citation or misdemeanor and go straight to felony.

Most of our stash has never been used. We usually take the time to figure out how to get into where we’re going by walking in the front door, but every once in a while we need to go outside the lines a little. Cut through a chain-link fence, freeze off a padlock, hot-wire an electric gate — nothing fancy.

Of course, Rory’s the one who knows how to do most of that. I’ve picked up a little watching him work and taught myself basic lock-picking, but I’m not gonna reprogram a key fob or clone a smartphone.

I’ll have to make do.

Donning a denim button-down work shirt, overalls, boots, a Yankees cap and a tool belt, I catch the subway back uptown. I get off at Grand Central and walk the rest of the way to Mundell Academy.

Peering through the entrance, I see an empty reception desk; everyone’s gone home for the day. There’s a keypad at the door, so I punch in the shared employee code. Faculty,

staff, custodians — we all use the same one. Thankfully, it hasn't been changed.

Motion-activated lights flip on as I tread through the halls. I shiver at the near-silence, broken only by the muffled heating system. I've been inside the building late at night countless times; I'm used to the odd tranquility of being alone here, but I never imagined I'd be here as a trespasser.

I keep my head down and fight the urge to look up at the security cameras as I make my way to the maintenance closet. If I'm careful, no one will have reason to examine the tapes. If they do, they'll figure out it's me, even with the baseball cap covering most of my face. Not too many men with my body type can be found at the art school, especially after hours.

The closet door is locked, and I was never given a key, so I get out my picks and work the tumblers until it all clicks. Thankfully, hanging on a peg just inside is a ring of keys to the building. That's what I needed, but for appearances I find a mop bucket, fill it with soapy water from the closet's hose, then push the whole thing to the elevator.

I head straight to the top floor. Mundell's private office and studio.

The lights turn on, and my ears burn. I've been in here more times than I can count, but never alone. This was Rush's sanctum. He let people in all the time, but on his terms. Part of me regrets breaking this trust, even if he is a bastard.

Unlike his home, Rush's office could serve as a proper tribute to the accomplishments of his academy. Paintings and sculptures fill half the vast studio, which occupies the entire floor of the building. Years of brilliance hearkening back to Post-impressionism, modern takes on Neo-expressionism, inscrutably symbolic surrealism — even a few exceptional abstract works. Some come from artists who inspired Rush, but most of it was made by his own students. Even his desk was ornately carved and stained; it could have belonged to a medieval king.

On the other side of the building, his surprisingly modern studio: horizontal and vertical monitors sit on a standing desk positioned next to his easel and stool. He says this allows him to evaluate applications through text-to-speech software while painting. I tap a screen, bringing up a password prompt.

I try Vermeer.

Wrong.

Cassatt.

Wrong again.

There are way, way too many options to get lucky, but thankfully the prompt offers a hint: Ce——-62.

If I'm right that Rush picked among his favorite artists for the password, he's probably referring to Paul Cézanne. The 62 is likely for his birth year.

The combination fits, and the desktop appears. I pull a thumb drive from my pocket and start copying files. Then I

open his e-mail and browsers. Would Rush be brazen enough to save potentially incriminating messages? I hope so.

There's so much to look through — thousands of correspondences. Searching could be more fruitful than browsing, so I start with the cases I know about.

I find nothing in his e-mail related to Gwen that would matter — just normal communication about her application, classes and portfolio. There are similar e-mail chains to Chloe and Anne, but nothing in them unusual.

Rush does prefer to talk on the phone or in person, doesn't he?

I find the option to download his e-mails en masse and get that started, then keep looking around the room. There's a stack of mail in a wire mesh bin. I flip through it, but there's nothing special: utility bills, museum postcards from friends abroad, donation appeals from various charities. A few have stamps on them from the postal service, redirect notices that they've been transferred to the school after being initially addressed to his summer home in the Catskills.

Mundell has mentioned having a place up there, but I've never been invited. If I don't find anything here, that will be my next stop. I rip a page off a notepad, scribble down the address and jam it in my pocket.

Next, I head over to a dark, baroque armoire, but find it locked. Unlike the office itself, I doubt the custodian would have a key to whatever is inside, so I take a few minutes and

pick it open. The wide and deep interior holds a display rack full of framed paintings.

Oh wow.

Judging by the technique, they're Mundell's work, but it wouldn't take an expert to figure that out: artistically, they stink. More importantly, though, is that every painting is of a woman and I recognize most of them: Mundell's students. They're all depicted nude, staring straight at the viewer and experiencing clear orgasmic pleasure. Some are restrained, some are stimulating themselves.

A few seem frightened — terrified, even.

I flip all the way to the end and find one of Gwen. It's a riff on my own work, "Awakening." Remnants of the white gown hang in tatters from her arms and hips. Admittedly, if I had painted this I would like it quite a lot — but I didn't. This isn't an homage, it's a violation. Rush must have visited Galleria Carnale and seen it there, but how could he tell it was Gwen? Maybe he knows me too well.

I get out my phone and photograph his secret collection. I don't think this constitutes a crime, but it is unseemly — it will hurt his reputation. Could I blackmail Rush with these? Using the photos in any capacity would mean admitting I broke into his office, but if we handled this outside of court, it won't matter.

As I take the last picture, I notice an odd reflection from the flash — a black marble in the interior, back corner of the armoire. Is that...

I push it, causing a hidden panel to slide free: a secret compartment behind the display rack. It's only a few inches deep — just big enough for a black, leather-bound portfolio album. Opening it up, loose sheets nearly fall out.

Examining them, my hands start to shake. The room spins.

They're drawings, mostly pencil or ink, but some painted. Like the framed pieces, they show naked women — but these are definitely not Rush's work. These were made by students: artists with talent but immature technique. I don't recognize all of the women, but the last one in the album is a drawing of Chloe Andreason.

What the actual fuck, Rush?

Did she draw that? If not, who did?

Gwen...

I get out my phone to call her. She could be with him at the gallery, or at the after-party, depending on-

By the time I hear the footsteps behind me, it's too late. Cold metal presses into my neck and unleashes a fiery river. My legs buckle and the lights go out.

Chapter 24

GWEN



Regaining my composure takes almost half an hour, and by the time I do, my hair and makeup are beyond fixing.

Joel, the angel he is, breaks away from the crowd long enough to text me, *Are you okay?*

I'll be fine, I send back. I'm gonna go home. Enjoy the night, okay? Please don't let anything spoil it.

If you need anything, call me. Seriously. I'll send Martin if I have to.

I laugh.

Perfect. Thank you. And congrats again.

I call for a Lyft back home. Traffic has subsided, so it's a short ride. A longer one would have been nice; I could spend all night looking out at the streets, lost in the city's energy. It would be nice to feel like I did when I first arrived from Ohio: grateful to have started a new chapter, everything and everyone I once knew left behind.

A totally fresh start might be a little extreme, but maybe I need half of one. I love Manhattan, but what if I had a new art school and a new mentor? There are plenty of teachers who

could help me develop Enmity Jane — it doesn't have to be Alistair Rat.

With Joel and Martin out for the night, I have the apartment to myself. I try to binge some episodes of *Emily in Paris*, but I can't concentrate. Browsing the websites of other New York art schools restores my confidence that I'll find my way, but it also brings back fraught memories. It wasn't so long ago I surreptitiously viewed these same sites from an ancient computer in my old high school library. I stuffed printed applications between my textbooks, praying my parents wouldn't find them when I got home.

I'm not going back there. I'll couch surf my way through art school and pay my tuition from cafe tips if I have to.

Every few minutes I check my phone, ready for Lane to call or text and make his apology. I wouldn't be shocked if he came to my apartment, in fact, but I don't hear from him at all. Has he decided to wait a day or two so I wouldn't be as raw? Maybe he thinks I won't forgive him, that we're finished.

Would he be right? I don't know. What we have has meant so much; I've never had a connection like I do with Lane. Could I again? My heart screams that I won't, that I couldn't, that what we have is unique and impossible to replace. I've been wrong before, though.

What I do know is that even if I find another teacher or another school, they won't be better than Alistair Rat or Mundell Academy.

I fall asleep on the couch long before Joel and Martin get home, and wake up under a cozy blanket, roused by the scent and crackle of frying bacon.

“Hey,” they say in unison as I shamble into the kitchen, eyes still bleary. I don’t even want to fathom how I look. They’re both shockingly energetic, flying around as they scramble eggs, squeeze fresh orange juice and butter slices of toast — seemingly all at once. There’s even a to-go carrier with three coffees and a brown bag full of bagels.

“Hey,” I reply, slumping into my seat. “How was the rest of your night?”

“Oh, it was fine,” Joel says, smiling. “It went well.”

“He’s downplaying it,” Martin cuts in. “All of his pieces sold half-way through the exhibition. Three gallery owners approached him, asking if they could be next. A talent manager offered to represent him. Promised to book all kinds of lucrative commissions.”

“Holy shit, that’s amazing!”

“I was going to wait to tell you all that,” Joel says, bringing me a coffee. “I didn’t want you to, you know, be sorry about... stuff.”

“That’s sweet, seriously, but I’m so happy for you! That’s so amazing! All your hard work paid off.”

“It did,” says Martin. He scoops the bacon out of the frying pan and onto a serving plate. “And now he has to get right back to it. Strike while the iron’s hot.”

“Always being practical,” Joel sighs.

Martin brings over the plate and kisses Joel before going back for the toast.

“But I’m not wrong,” he replies.

“I guess. Today, though: we’re taking the day off. First, we’re going shopping at Bloomingdales, followed by a matinee of *Merrily We Roll Along*. Then dinner at Smith & Wollensky, followed by clubbing at... we’ll see.”

I shake my head in disbelief. How are they not too exhausted?

“That sounds absolutely fucking amazing. You’re going to have a great time.”

Joel reaches out and takes my hand.

“You’re one-hundred percent invited, Gwen. We have a reservation for three, tickets for three. I’m buying all of us something nice at Bloomingdales. I wouldn’t be here without help from both of you.”

Oh. Oh wow.

“Joel, I’m honored. It won’t be weird though, with me as a third wheel?”

He laughs.

“Fuck no! I don’t care about that. And I had Martin to myself last night.”

“You did? Weren’t you at the gallery?” I ask.

“Sure, but it didn’t go that late.”

“What about the after-party?”

Martin folds a slice of toast around a strip of bacon and digs in, smiling to himself.

“We showed up at the beginning to make an appearance. Then we bailed,” Joel says.

“The party was lame. Professor Mundell wasn’t even there,” Martin adds.

Huh.

So they weren’t out partying all night. No wonder they’re in such good shape now.

I could use a little time to get my mind off Lane. A free Broadway show and steakhouse dinner sound pretty good... assuming it works. The last thing I want to do is ruin a great day by moping. Even if I try to stay upbeat, they’ll know I’m faking it. Joel would sympathize, but I don’t want to bring down the mood.

I need to get some closure.

“Listen,” I say to them. They stop eating and focus on me. “I’m a bit in my head right now, for obvious reasons. I’m going to pass on shopping and try to shake it off. If I get right, I’ll meet up with you for the show and dinner, okay?”

“Of course,” Joel says. “There’s no pressure, okay? I know things weren’t... well, you know. And I really appreciate what you did, trying to alleviate the situation. I know you did everything you could.”

“Thanks.”

I wish I believed it as much as he does.

“We know whatever was going on between Porter and Mundell, it didn’t have anything to do with any of us,” Martin adds.

“Exactly.” Joel says.

We finish breakfast and I volunteer to clean up so they can head out. I don’t want to miss the show or dinner, but I have no idea how I’m going to get into a truly good mood by then. Maybe if Lane called and begged for forgiveness... Would that be enough? Am I a sucker for wanting him to make things right? He knew what he was doing last night — he knew how upset I’d be and he did it anyway. And what did he accomplish? Nothing.

He ought to spend at least a few days contemplating how badly he fucked up. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours. I know myself well enough to admit that I’ll forgive Lane in time, especially if he makes a convincing apology — but I can’t let it happen immediately. He’s going to have to wait a bit.

Yet, when my phone rings, I practically drop the frying pan as I run to answer.

It’s not Lane calling, though. The caller ID says *Mundell Academy*.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Carpenter. This is Rush Mundell. I was hoping to speak with you about last night, and hopefully make an agreement about your future at my school.”

My hand tightens around the phone.

“I thought the terms were already clear.”

“Yes, well... I admit I’ve erred. Mr. Franklin spoke very highly of you in your absence, and you comported yourself well in that unfortunate encounter. I feel indebted to you for your part in deescalating the situation. Would you be willing to meet up to discuss this further? How about at Union Square, by the Washington statue?”

“You mean now?”

“If it’s convenient, yes.”

Huh. This sounds promising, I guess. If Joel talked me up to Mundell, and Mundell is high on Joel’s success, it makes sense he’d want to keep Joel happy, and appeasing me would go a long way.

A walk wouldn’t be so bad. And maybe I could do a little shopping of my own afterward.

“Yeah, okay. I can be there in an hour.”

“Lovely. I’ll see you then.”

—

I take my time showering and dressing up; I want to look presentable, in part for Mundell but also in case I wind up

seeing the show. I find a cute white button-down top with an ankle-length patterned skirt, then head out.

Heavy foot traffic makes it hard to pick a single person out of the crowd at Union Square Park. A pretty good saxophone player wails away, drawing a circle of tourists to listen. Vendors with folding tables sell purses, flowers and pre-rolled joints while cops stand around chatting and ignoring jaywalkers. It's sunny and windy, carrying the scent of roasting chestnuts.

"Over here, Ms. Carpenter!" Mundell calls, waving at me from the other side of George Washington's statue, and we both move toward one another.

"Thank you for coming out," he says when we arrive. "How was the rest of your night?"

"Fine. How was the rest of the exhibition, and the party?"

Mundell laughs.

"Oh, I'm sure Mr. Franklin already told you, we sold all of his pieces. I'm proud of him beyond words."

I smile, nodding.

"Me too."

"As for the party, I didn't go. I'm a little too old to revel until the break of dawn. But that's okay. Once Lane left, the gallery didn't dwell on the disturbance. Everyone was enthralled by Mr. Franklin's work."

"Good."

“And no matter how many times people complimented him on his skill and vision, he always gave credit to you and his partner. When some of our more devoted patrons learned that you were the model for several of Mr. Franklin’s best pieces, they actually got into a minor bidding war to purchase them. And when they learned that you weren’t just a model, but an artist in your own right, they became very interested.”

Blushing, I turn away, not wanting Mundell to see. Maybe he wants to make amends, but like Lane, I don’t want to offer up a clean slate so easily.

“Well, I’m nowhere near as talented as Joel.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Ms. Carpenter. Your illustrations are very good. That’s why you’re a student of mine.”

I want to take that as the praise he intended, but Mundell has some gall saying so now.

“You mean, as long as my art reflects well on your school,” I counter.

“Fair point.” He gazes up at the sky, squinting from the sun. “I know what I said before, but in light of recent developments, I’d like to offer you a... special dispensation.”

A troupe of drummers passes by, playing and chanting loudly. They drown out the saxophone and stop in front of Mundell. He fishes a twenty out of his wallet and drops it in the basket hanging from the lead drummer’s waist. The man gives us both a wide smile before moving on.

“What does that mean?” I ask when we can hear ourselves think again.

“You devise your art and present it to me. If I approve it, you can do it in public and it won’t affect your enrollment at my school.”

Oh, I see. He still controls my work in the end. I hope he can forgive my skepticism.

“How do I know you’ll ever approve of them?”

“You have my word. For every piece you conceive, I’ll offer feedback as much or as little as necessary until you’ve developed your idea into art that is meaningful, feasible and still truly personal.”

Ahh. His word, and his mentorship. And how much, exactly, are those worth?

“How many people have you taught to make art like mine?”

He chuckles.

“The principles of art are similar across mediums. The goals are often the same too: creating beauty, imparting meaning, challenging preconceptions. Whatever your goals are, whether you want to be the next Georgia O’Keeffe or the next Alistair Rat, I’m confident I can help you. And if not me, who else will you learn from?”

I hold back a laugh. He really has no fucking idea, does he?

“The other main condition would be cutting off all contact with Lane, of course. While he may no longer be your teacher, a relationship with him would reflect badly on the school.”

If we’d had this conversation last night, I might have agreed to it on the spot. Now, I’m not ready to swear off Lane permanently. He may still redeem himself, and I’d rather not have to hide.

“Lane made me certain promises about my education,” I say. “He’s offered to support me, should something happen to my scholarship.”

Mundell narrows his brow.

“Under what conditions?” he asks.

“None. He’s pledged to help me because it’s the right thing to do. We’ll need to stay in contact, to a degree.”

“I see. Don’t worry.” He sets his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll match his offer. I’ll pay your expenses instead.”

He can’t be serious. It’s okay for him to do it, but not Lane? What the hell will he get out of it? At least with Lane, we’re connected by our art. Our physical and romantic relationship was... not strictly independent, though it could have been.

“Won’t that invite suspicions-” I invoke his intonation — “that would reflect badly on the school?”

Mundell takes a few steps away and motions for me to follow.

“I think I have an answer to that. Come, let me show you something.”

Wary, I match his pace, staying out of arm’s reach. We walk a few blocks down Broadway until Mundell spots a wall scribbled with graffiti tags.

“You see that, Ms. Carpenter?”

“Sure.”

“Some people see this as vandalism, some see it as art. Which would you say it is?”

One tag reads *Joat!* in blocky, cartoonish yellow lettering with purple shadowing. Others are swooshy, swirling marks barely legible, more insignia than signature. I think about my answer for a minute.

“I’d say it’s both.”

Mundell smirks and replies, “Explain.”

“Well, unless they were commissioned by the property owner, which I doubt, then legally it’s vandalism — graffiti. But unless the person who painted these had a gun to their head forcing them to do it, they were engaging in an act of self-expression, rather than self-preservation. That’s what art is at its core, isn’t it?”

He nods.

“To some, that is absolutely correct. I like to hold the bar for art a bit higher. I’ve seen incredible street art, from Shoreditch to Stavenger. That’s one thing. What we see here,

to me, is the artistic equivalent of shouting one's name. Hardly meaningful. At least if they were actually shouting, we would all understand — but only a select group can comprehend these tags. Who is Joat? We don't know. What will the average person get from this? That there's someone or something out there called Joat."

"Okay," I mumble.

"Now, you take a piece of real art — for instance, the work of Mr. Franklin. Last night he wowed the Gallery Madrigal, but one need not be a connoisseur of fine art to see its beauty. Anyone with a beating heart would be moved by them."

"Sure. But is there something wrong with art that has a small audience?"

"No, of course not," Mundell says. "My point is that there's nothing inherently special about using bricks and concrete walls as a canvas. When you came out here in that horrific wedding dress, you got some attention. The videos got you more. But, the world quickly moved on. There's always a new oddity in New York, another video sensation on the Internet. How many people thought about it a second time since? Compare that to when you finish *The Ohio Zoo* and it's published. People will read it and remember it. They'll talk about it with friends, maybe even discuss it in classes someday."

I hide a smirk, imagining all the ways Lane would call bullshit. Mundell's not wrong that Internet fame can be

fleeting, but it can also be powerful — and influential, and inspirational. What makes a piece of art that is seen by millions across centuries artistically better than one seen by a single person? Is a larger scope inherently better than a smaller one?

“With all due respect,” I say, “people talk about Alistair Rat in classes.”

“Not at my school, Ms. Carpenter. Not at my school.”

“I think it’s time for me to go, Professor,” I say, already turning around.

“You could work for me.”

I pause.

“What?”

“That’s how I could pay your expenses and not have it look suspicious,” Mundell says, walking toward me.

“I have a job already.”

“This would be better. Have you ever been to the Catskills?”

I laugh. Oh yes, my family drove out from Ohio to stay in our summer chalet.

“No. Why?”

He passes me and keeps going, setting a pace that forces me to keep up.

“I have a vacation home there that requires regular upkeep,” he says. “I would pay you to visit it on weekends

and do the work. The pay would be enough that you could quit your other job, and you'd be able to enjoy the amenities of a beautiful home in the mountains. You could even bring friends there, provided you cleaned up after yourselves."

Damn. That's the last kind of offer I expected, though of course a man like Mundell has a vacation home. Why wouldn't he?

"I don't have a car, how would I get there?" I ask.

"There are buses, which I would reimburse you for. I could also lend you my car, on occasion."

"I see. That's very kind, but I don't know. I don't have any experience managing a big piece of property. I'd screw so much of it up."

"Nonsense. The work is strenuous, but not complicated. Mowing, cleaning, taking in any mail delivered by mistake. I have a breakdown of the whole thing. Come on, I'll show you. My car is just up ahead."

What, is he serious?

He stops at a black, full-size Lexus and gets into the driver's seat. After a second rooting around in the glove compartment, he produces a spiral-bound booklet and holds it up to show me.

"Get in and we'll go through it," he says through the glass, barely audible.

This is crazy — I have a life here, I can't be commuting upstate every damn weekend, no matter how much it pays.

I open the passenger-side door and lean in.

“Professor, I appreciate the offer, I really do, but-”

He slides something out from behind the booklet with his free hand, a black device like a remote control. Before I can back away it’s jammed against my chest, jolting me until I convulse and collapse.

I feel my legs being pulled into the car and hear the door slamming shut, followed by a slight prick. A needle, pressing through my skirt and into my thigh.

Everything blurs, then fades to black.

Chapter 25

GWEN



Light scalds my eyes when I try to open them like someone's prying my skull open from the inside. What the hell happened? I was in Union Square, I was talking to... Professor Mundell?

I'm lying on a gray, carpeted floor. White walls all around me, sketches hanging in cheap plastic frames — like an amateur gallery. I blink a few times to clear my vision, but the world refuses to reach high resolution. I try to stand up, but the room tumbles underneath my feet.

This is very, very wrong.

I'm not in a hospital. When I test out my arms and legs, my stomach and scalp, nothing comes back broken or bleeding. There's a sore spot on my chest and-

There's a collar around my neck. Not an accessory — an actual dog collar. I freeze, feeling a box on the back.

What the actual fuck?

Adrenaline pours through me, and when I stand up, I totter only a second before my balance returns. My sight squeezes into hard focus, allowing me to see the paintings

clearly: they're of me. Naked, bound in chains, imprisoned in a jail cell. Well, the face is definitely me, but the body doesn't seem quite right. Longer legs, thinner arms, tighter abdomen — almost distended. Malnourished? It's as if I've been superimposed onto another model.

Who made these? The style reminds me of Lane's, but it's not the same — and he'd paint my body accurately. I've seen him do it. Whoever it was, they had no right. Anger rising, muscles tensing, I reach for one of the frames. I'm going to smash every fucking one of these.

A piercing jolt explodes out from my neck. Instinctively, I step back, then whip around, searching the ceiling for cameras. Someone's watching me.

There's a door at the end of the room labeled *Pet*. Is it a way out of here? It has to be. I have to get the fuck out, right now.

I race over, almost expecting it to be locked, but it opens. The gallery continues on the other side, though now the sketches have been replaced with proper paintings in professional, high-quality wooden frames. They depict a different girl instead of me; I don't recognize her.

Keep going, there has to be a way out.

The next door isn't labeled; on the other side I find two doors, marked *Archives* and *Stairs*. I immediately try for the stairs, but this door's locked.

“Where do you think you're going?”

The voice comes out of nowhere and everywhere. It's scrambled, an electronic mashing of male and female tones.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

"You're in my personal gallery and I am your Master."

A lock on the entrance to the stairs buzzes.

"Head downstairs," the voice commands. "And don't try going up. You'll see what happens."

"Fuck you."

I run into the Archives instead, finding more paintings of more women. They're all beautiful and young. I wait for the shock to bowl me over, but it doesn't come, so I keep going. The room bends at a ninety-degree angle, and eventually I come to another door: *Toy*.

I go in, only to find I'm back where I started: surrounded by sketches of me. The rooms go around in a circle.

"Downstairs, Toy."

The word sends a chill through me.

"Don't call me that, motherfucker."

Electricity snaps, burning me from within.

"Do as you're told, Toy."

Screaming, my body heaving, I grab one of the pictures of me and tear it off the wall. Another shock, this one even more powerful, knocks the breath out of me.

“You’ll be dead before the battery on that collar runs dry. And these pieces of you are just placeholders. I care about them less than you think. But I *will* punish you for disobeying me. It’s important you learn that. Now, go downstairs. It’s time for you to meet Pet.”

Oh fuck. There’s someone else here?

I was in Union Square and... and I was talking to Mundell. We were looking at graffiti, then there was something about a job...

I need more time to remember, to figure out what’s going on. Acting confused, I turn around and head back through the Archives. I make my way slowly, examining the art for any clues they may hold. I study their style, looking for deviations in technique and medium, but as far as I can tell they’re all painted by the same person. The main differences are the women themselves. Each has several paintings devoted to them, and at the end of the Archives I count six different women.

I stop at the last one. I focus on her face.

I know her. She’s familiar, though I can’t place her.

“Who’s this?” I ask.

“Someone who found out what happens when she disobeys her master.”

“Is she dead?”

I howl, hit by another high-voltage dose.

She died, Lane said, a conversation that feels like it happened in another world.

“Did you kill her?” I ask, not caring about getting punished.

“That’s enough,” the voice growls.

But it wasn’t enough.

We were talking about Anne.

My eyes go wide. I fall to my knees. The voice could shock me right now and I wouldn’t feel it. The pictures of Anne Nichols are fresh enough in my memory that I know, without a doubt, that this final woman in the Archives... is her.

How did she end up here? Unless...

Have you ever been to the Catskills?

My car is just up ahead...

I was leaning into Mundell’s car and then...

Then I was here.

And that voice belongs to-

“Mundell!” I shriek.

He laughs, his voice no longer distorted.

“From now on you call me master. Don’t make that mistake again.”

“Fuck you!”

Lane thinks he's responsible for Anne's death, but she didn't commit suicide — Mundell abducted her!

Furious, I reach for one of the paintings, but an immense shock doubles me over.

“Do not touch those, Toy. They are irreplaceable. You are not.”

I gasp, squeezing my eyes shut. Ears ringing, I let out a pained wail.

What kind of fucking psycho is he? How is one of his paintings irreplaceable? Can't he just make another?

“Why are you doing this?” I cry, trying to process the pain.

“Because you will be a perfect toy. You're beautiful, talented, submissive — with a streak of defiance for me to tame. A delightful specimen. Lane wouldn't have been so enamored with you otherwise. He has excellent taste.”

“You're out of your fucking mind!”

I'm still on the ground when the jolt stabs through me.

“No!” Mundell growls. “I'm an artist, Toy. Few people in this world can appreciate it. You will. Lane would too, if he wasn't such a hypocrite. I'll show you. It's rare to find a subject, a muse, who can also appreciate the work they inspire. That's why I need you.”

He's utterly, completely insane. I'm not going to appreciate a goddamn thing. I'm going to strangle him the

first chance I get. If I can separate him from the controls of the collar...

“You need a small jail cell and an army of psychiatrists, you piece of shit.”

I wait for the spike of agony I know is coming. I don't care, I'm not going to be his fucking toy.

“I know these first few days will be particularly difficult,” Mundell says. “But you're making this far worse than it has to be. Unless you enjoy pure pain. Is that it? I assumed you would have some masochistic tendencies, but I've never had a toy who enjoyed the shock collar.”

“I'm going to enjoy gouging your eyes out.”

He laughs, but the sound ends abruptly, like rolling thunder that suddenly snaps off a bolt of lightning.

“Enough. Get up and go down the stairs, *now*, Toy.”

Fuck.

He's not going to stop. Plus, getting a sense of this place could help me find a way out — if there is one.

Entering the stairwell, I look up just a moment. It rises several stories. Is this building that high up, or am I not on the ground floor? The galleries had no windows — it could be underground.

I walk down a level to find an open door waiting for me. Inside is a small, unfinished basement room: cement floors, bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Domed security cameras

observe the room from multiple locations. There's a door opposite the one I came in, set between two jail cells facing each other.

One cell is occupied, the woman from the *Pet* gallery paintings. Naked, she sits on a narrow bench, knees folded against her chest, staring down at the ground.

"Oh no," I say, my voice soft and small. This is a dungeon. "Are you... are you Chloe?"

Mundell delivers a small shock.

"You will refer to her as Pet."

I look up into a security camera.

"You're a sick piece of shit, shut the fuck up!"

If it really is her, she's been here for years. No wonder she disappeared. Did she even send those texts to Lane about leaving the school, or was that Mundell all along?

Fuck me, he has my purse. Has he been contacting people as me?

No. I don't think so. Not without my PIN to unlock the phone, which he's not going to get, no matter what he does to me.

I steel myself for his answer to my outburst, but instead Chloe squeals in pain. Her body spasms as if possessed. I didn't notice at first, but she wears a collar too.

"No!" I scream. "Stop!"

Chloe goes still.

“You have a good heart, Toy,” says Mundell. “You don’t want to see Pet punished for your transgressions. She has the same selfless nature. So, if disciplining you directly doesn’t work, I’ll hurt her. Maybe after a while she won’t feel as selfless anymore. Would you like to find out?”

“No,” I growl.

“You will address me as master. Is that understood?”

My lip curls. I’d like to tell him to fuck off, but Chloe’s expectant whimper tortures me worse than any shock.

“Yes, master,” I say, nauseated by the words.

“Good. Now, it’s clear your obstinance will rear its head again, so I’m going to accelerate your orientation. Normally I’d let a new toy keep her clothes for a day or two, but you’re going to remove them now. Fold them and place them in a pile by the door.”

I sneer into the camera, but Chloe doesn’t deserve to suffer. As much as I hate to strip for a monster like Mundell, in truth he’s already seen me naked in Joel’s paintings. I do as instructed, then stand in place, covering myself with my hands. The thought of Mundell feasting on the sight nearly makes me gag, but I keep my composure.

“In time, you will learn how to comport yourself. Pet will help you. She will be your mentor, your friend — and your critic. You will not be deprived of artistic expression. I understand full well you need it as vitally as air and water.”

Oh, that's fucking great. For a second there I thought I'd never finish *The Ohio Zoo*.

The door between the two jail cells unlocks and opens.

"Walk," Mundell says.

Fine. Fuck it. Still clutching my breasts with my arms, I comply. I try to give Chloe an encouraging glance, but she's not looking at me. How badly has Mundell broken her mind? Does she even still speak, or did he instruct her not to?

The next room appears to be his torture chamber. It's fully stocked: whips and canes, restraints, gags, clamps. Plugs with cruel bumps and ridges. Clear vials of liquids that are probably not lube. Electronic devices I can't even identify. The room's centerpiece is a high-backed chair padded in black, studded leather, with thick, metal shackles on the armrests and at neck- and ankle-level.

An easel and stool face the chair; paints, brushes and a canvas rest on a nearby end table.

"Take a seat," Mundell says.

I'm tempted to grab a cane so that I can beat him with it, but it wouldn't get me anywhere. If I don't do as he says, he'll hurt Chloe. If I still refuse to obey, he'll shock me so hard I pass out, then he can do with me what he wants. I don't like the idea of making myself more vulnerable than I already am, but what choice do I have?

I lower myself into the chair. There's a cutout in the seat that can be removed if necessary, which conjures terrifying

imaginings. When I position my arms and legs in place, the chair makes a sharp hiss, then the shackles seal over my wrist and ankles, each one snapping into place with a loud thunk. I test out their hold, but of course they're inescapable. I can fidget, but I won't stand up until Mundell lets me.

He doesn't make any new demands at first, but soon I hear footsteps approaching. The chair faces the door, so I watch him exit the stairs and stride through the jail.

"Hello, Toy," he says, picking out a paintbrush. "How much pain you'd like to endure for this portrait is entirely up to you." He gestures at the chamber's contents. "The options are endless."

Fucking scumbag. I want to cry, but instead I take a deep breath. He's not going to see me break. Never.

"Lane's going to figure out what you've done and where you've taken me," I say. "Everyone's going to know what you really are."

Mundell smiles and takes out his phone. I cringe, waiting to hear Chloe scream, but she doesn't. The collar around my neck pops open, and Mundell sets it aside.

"Speaking without permission is not allowed," he says, walking back to my jail entrance where I'd piled my clothes. He sorts through them and picks out my white panties. "I wanted that beautiful face of yours in my first portrait, but that's all right. This is just the first of many."

He comes back, holding my panties out so I can see. Mundell slips them over my forehead like a veil. I shudder, closing my eyes and groaning.

“Oh, and by the way,” he whispers in my ear. “Lane’s not going to be of much help to you. When something bad happens to a woman, you know who the police always suspect first.”

I try not to cry. Yes, I do know.

The boyfriend.

Chapter 26

LANE



Three swift kicks to the head make me roll over on the floor. It's like I'm back in college, waking up to a hangover worse than a lobotomy. Making it to my studio but not the bed, back aching from the cold, hard floor. Three more blows, loud as cannons.

“Professor Porter, are you there?”

The shout comes from outside, followed by another knock on the door.

“Hey, open up! Right now, before I call the police!”

What the fuck?

I get up, but regret it immediately. Acid bubbles rush to my throat, making me retch. Whatever I did to myself, I'm never doing it again.

“Hold on,” I say, though it sounds like screaming.

My stomach gnaws as if I haven't eaten in days. A headache leaves a dull throb between my ears. A sweaty denim shirt clings to my skin. How long have I been wearing this? And why?

Through the peephole I see two men: Joel and a man I think I saw at the Gallery Madrigal.

That's where I was... then I went...

Gwen.

Was it worth it, Lane?

Oh fuck.

Joel and his partner glare at me when I open the door. Their bodies are tense, defensive.

“Where is Gwen?” Joel asks.

“I... I don't know.”

We were at the gallery, then I left. I went somewhere else... alone.

Joel balls his fists, pressing forward. He holds out his hand like he's never taken a swing at someone in his life, but he's ready now.

“Bullshit! She's gone, she's not answering the phone! You have to know something!”

“Joel, I think someone drugged me. All I remember is leaving the gallery without her. What do you mean she's gone? What happened?”

“We went out yesterday. She was supposed to join us, but she didn't because she was so pissed at you. She wasn't home when we got back, we thought maybe she was working things out with you,” Joel explains. “We didn't want to freak out in

case it was nothing, but she hasn't called back and she didn't come home."

Yeah, I could see how that would be concerning.

"Why are you dressed like that?" the other man asks.

I look down at the outfit. Work clothing. It's part of the shit Rory and I use. Did I do an Alistair Rat piece?

Paintings... there were paintings.

"I'm taking a look around," Joel says, slipping past me.

I let him go, trying to break the block of ice frozen around my memory. I'm close — I can feel it.

"You're lucky he's focused on Gwen," says the other. Martin. Gwen told me his name is Martin. "After what you did at the gallery, he wanted to hit you. You deserved it."

"Yeah, I know. I wanted to make things right."

Follow the process.

I fucked things up with Gwen because I tried to take down Rush. When confronting him at the gallery didn't work, I wanted to...

Find something real.

"What the fuck?" Joel shouts.

Oh no.

I run to the sound of his voice, with Martin following. Joel's in the kitchen area, pointing at the table.

"That's her fucking purse, Lane! Where is she?"

That shouldn't be possible, but it is. It's right there.

Joel takes out his phone and taps the screen. After a second, the purse buzzes — her phone, it must be.

How the fuck did her things get here? I don't even know how I did.

Maybe they're the same?

I wanted dirt on Rush, so where would I go to get it?

The school, most likely. I'm not supposed to be there, though, which explains why I'm wearing one of my Rat outfits. And if I went to the school, I would have gone to... Rush's office.

I would have broken in.

I did.

I broke in and found stuff... Went on his computer...

The armoire. It was full of paintings.

Pictures. I took pictures of them.

Where's my phone?

Rush.

"Look, I think you're right," I tell Joel. "Something happened to Gwen, but I swear it wasn't me. I have evidence Rush Mundell has been... I don't know. Something shady."

"What does that mean?"

"He had these drawings of... Look, I'll show you. Can you call my phone?"

I give Joel my number, and he makes the call. My phone is upstairs in the makeshift bedroom. When I find it, I don't have to swipe in a PIN to unlock it. Someone changed the settings. I open up the photos and then I nearly explode. My hand clenches so hard I could snap the phone in half.

“They're gone,” I say. “All the photos I took.”

The latest images are all more than a month old. Everything I found has been erased. The trash is empty too. He deleted all of it — and he sent texts to Gwen's phone.

How dare you humiliate me like that.

Call me back.

Call me NOW

I swear you're going to pay when I find you

This is really fucking bad. What has Rush done to her?

But it couldn't have been him, could it? Wasn't he was busy? That's why I went to his office; he was supposed to be out all night.

“Okay, seriously Lane, what the fuck is going on?” Joel asks, hands at his hips. He's out of patience, and I don't blame him.

“How late were you at the gallery with Rush?” I ask.

“Not late, why?”

“So you can't say where he went after?”

“No,” Joel says. “Why?”

Goddamn fucking shit. I'm such a stupid moron.

"I thought he'd be there late, so I broke into his office," I explain. "Maybe I set off a silent alarm or something, because I was attacked."

Who else would have done that, except Rush? The police would have arrested me. They definitely wouldn't have drugged me, or messed with my phone, or planted Gwen's purse in my studio. Somebody wanted me to appear to be the last person to see Gwen — and for there to be evidence that I was out to hurt her.

Then there's my past. Anne and Chloe. One dying by suicide is tragic. Another disappearing? Could be a coincidence. A third going missing — that's a pattern, with me and Rush at the center.

"It must have been Rush," I say. "He took Gwen and left her things here to implicate me."

I don't want them to panic, so I don't share my next thought: that he could have done anything to her by now. That she might already be dead, if that was Rush's intent.

If he wants me to go to jail for murder, he might just get his wish — but it won't be just Gwen's.

"You guys have to believe me. I care about Gwen. I love her. I do. She's in trouble, and she needs our help."

Joel and Martin exchange a look.

"The police should sort this out," says Martin.

I shake my head.

“We should call them, but they’ll want to bring me in for questioning. They’ll be wasting time. Even if they do decide to investigate Rush, they’ll have to wait on a warrant. While they fuck around, I’m going after her myself.”

“How?” Joel says. “Where do you think he is?”

That’s a good question.

Assuming he’s keeping her alive — which I am going to assume for the sake of staying calm — he wouldn’t be dumb enough to take her to the school or his penthouse. He’d want somewhere more private and secluded.

The mail — the mail in his office. Some of it went to another address... in the Catskills.

I reach into my pocket and find a scrap of paper. I unfold it and show Joel and Martin.

“This is Mundell’s vacation home. I’m going there, now.”

“Wait!” Joel says, stepping between me and the exit.

“How do we know you’re telling the truth? You could try to flee the country, for all we know.”

That’s fair. They don’t know me like Gwen does.

“I’ll tell you something, but you’re not going to believe it,” I say, tearing off a piece of the paper. Finding a pen, I write down the password to my PC and hand it to Joel.

“Gwen isn’t just my girlfriend, she’s my student — because

I'm Alistair Rat. This will get you into my computer. You'll find the evidence to prove I'm not lying."

I push to move past them, but Joel grabs my wrist.

"Stop! If you're serious, then that's great and all, but that doesn't prove you love her. How do we know for sure?"

"Because I'd rather get arrested for the shit I've done than risk losing Gwen. I'd rather never make a piece of art again if it means she can. If she never wants to see me again after this, I'll understand completely. I've spent my life hiding behind a character, but her first instinct was to be herself for the world to see — she's braver than me, braver than anyone I've ever known. She challenges authority and stays true to herself. She's selfless, putting her friends' needs above hers. She came from nothing but still found a way to chase her dreams. I love her because she's an inspiration not just to me, but to everyone who meets her."

Joel and Martin nod to themselves, holding each other's hands.

"If I know her, right now she's resisting — she's fighting, even if she's scared. She's counting on us to find her, and if the situation was reversed, she'd be out there looking for us."

Martin leans into Joel and whispers something.

"Yeah, same," Joel replies. To me, he says, "What can we-"

Three booming knocks sound off from the front door.

“This is the NYPD, open up!” someone shouts from outside.

Fuck.

“Rush must have called in a tip,” I say. “Can you two distract them?”

“How?” Joel asks.

“Tell them you came here looking for Gwen. The door was open so you came in, but no one was here. Do not tell them about Rush, not yet.”

“What? Why not?”

The knocking comes again, even louder this time.

“Because if Rush is devious enough to do all this, he’s careful enough to make sure there won’t be anything to find if the cops come looking. Gwen’s best chance is if Rush thinks he’s free and clear. Look, it’ll take two hours to drive up there. Give me three, then tell them everything.” I grab Gwen’s purse and fish out her phone. “Keep this. I’ll call you with updates. I have to go.”

Joel gasps, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“She’s going to be fine,” I tell them as I run. “I promise.”

“You better be right!” Joel calls after me.

Yeah, I know.

I race upstairs and reach the hatch to the ceiling. Clutching Gwen’s purse’s strap in my teeth, I climb the ladder and push the door open, then scale my way through

onto the building's roof. Peering over the edge, I spot two cruisers parked on the street. Walkie-talkie chatter squawks up from below.

When Rush called them, he had to have been vague — like he heard a struggle or saw something strange. If he told them something only the guilty party would know, it would be obvious I was being framed.

I have my opening. Careful to be quiet, I cross to the other side of the roof, then check the cross street below — it's clear. Hurrying, I climb down the fire escape, all the way to the ground. Pulling out my phone, I dial Rory and start walking fast.

“Hey,” he says, picking up on the first ring. “What happened the other night? I thought you'd call sooner.”

“I'll tell you later. I need your help, right now. Gwen is in danger and the police will be looking for me. Come pick me up. I'll text you an address near the studio.”

“Understood. I'm on my way.”

“Thanks.”

I hope his van is gassed and ready. We don't have any time to waste.

Chapter 27

GWEN



I should be grateful that Professor Rush Mundell is the slowest fucking painter in history. It took Michelangelo years to finish the Sistine Chapel. Mundell would need a century. It's no wonder he needs to abduct his models — no one would be willing to stand for days on end while he worked. But every second he agonizes over his canvas is one less that he'll spend touching me.

Fucking piece of shit.

I should hold out hope that I'll be okay, but as the minutes tick by, it gets easier to believe I'm never escaping this place. Chloe's been here for years now. Anne was too — possibly still is. I haven't seen her, but maybe she's nearby. Mundell must be very careful, or he would have gotten caught by now. He knows what he's doing.

After what must be many, many hours, Mundell finally pulls my panties off my face and slips them back into his pocket.

“What do you think, Toy?” he asks, showing me the completed painting.

How do I even answer that? There are a million threats I've issued in my mind. I've pictured him torn apart by wolves, crushed by a pneumatic press, burned with a flamethrower. I've turned on conveyor belts to feed him into a buzzsaw, I've pulled a knife across his throat and watched a river of blood pour out.

Then there's his hand — a tiny, delicate hand holding a needlessly expensive paintbrush. There's so much I would do to that hand. Broken knuckles. Ripped off nails. Acid-burned skin. For every minute he's kept me in this chair while he painted, he'd spend an hour crying over what I did to his hand.

I don't know what to say that won't risk a punishment for me or Chloe, so I opt for the truth.

“I think a first-year student could have done twice as good in half the time. Master.”

Mundell laughs, setting the canvas back down.

“You're right.”

Huh. For a man with his ego, that's not what I expected.

“Go on. What else?”

Okay, if that's what he wants.

“It's garbage. There's no depth. It's not artistic, it's pornographic. Like you're jerking off with a brush instead of a cock.”

His smile grows wider.

“Excellent. Very good, Toy. When it comes to art, I want you to be honest. Never tell me something is good because you think it’ll appease me. Otherwise, how will I improve?”

Now it’s my turn to laugh.

“Improve? You’re a dirty old man. If you haven’t improved by now, you won’t.”

Sighing, Mundell nods. He walks over and sets a hand on my shoulder. The contact makes me shiver, and wonder if I should bite him, if I get the chance.

“Toy, I want you to think of the Empire State Building.”

What?

“Now, tell me what you see.”

Is this some kind of trick? What the fuck is this, some kind of art exercise?

“I see... the Empire State Building. Master.”

“Is the sky blue or cloudy?”

“Blue.”

“Are you seeing it from ground level, or from the air?”

“From the air.”

He nods, letting me go.

“Do you know what I see, Toy?”

“No.”

“Nothing. My mind’s eye is empty.”

Just like his soul, I guess.

“It’s a rare condition, and I’m at the furthest end of its spectrum. My family has been synonymous with great artists and art appreciators, going back generations. And then there’s me, who can’t conjure even a color or shape in his own mind.”

Interesting. I’d be fascinated if I didn’t want to punch him in the throat so badly.

“So it takes me a very long time to paint literally anything. And even then, the finished piece is never as polished as a true master, like Mr. Franklin.”

“Bullshit,” I mutter.

Mundell glowers.

“What was that, Toy?”

Fuck him. He wants the truth, I’ll give it to him.

“Beethoven was fucking deaf and he still composed brilliant symphonies. Your mind’s eye doesn’t make you a bad artist. It’s your lack of talent and humanity. Master.”

He stares at me a moment, then throws his painting against the wall. Seething, he fixes the shock collar around my neck and triggers a jolt that causes my whole body to seize. I scream, writhing and crying, but I breathe deep and smile.

He knows I’m right.

I'm still recovering as he unlocks me from the chair, cuffs my hands behind my back and drags me to the jail.

"Because you're such a slow fucking learner, Pet here is going to tell you what happens to bad pets and toys," he says, shoving me into the empty cell and sealing the door. He tugs on the bars, making sure they're shut. Without another word, he storms off, slamming the prison door shut behind him.

Chloe waits until I can move without wincing. She stares at me with a mixture of fear and pity.

"We're getting out of here," I say. "I promise. People will be looking for me. Mundell's plan won't work."

"No," she groans, shaking her head. "It will. I want to believe you. I thought I would be strong for the new Toy, but... Master always gets away with it. We disappear and no one suspects a thing."

"This time will be different. It will."

Even if she doesn't believe it, I have to.

"I saw other girls in his art gallery. Are they here too?"

She shakes her head. A tear drips onto her cheek and falls off.

"They're gone."

"Dead?"

She nods, sniffing as the tears come faster.

I back away and slump down on the bench. Bowing my head down to my knees, I force my eyes to stay dry, Mundell

must be watching, and I won't give him the satisfaction. I may break in this place, but it's not going to be today.

“Why?” I ask. “Why'd he do it? Did they try to escape?”

Now Chloe wails. She turns around so I won't see, but clearly I'm opening a raw wound. I hate to cause her more pain, but I have to know. What causes him to kill? Disobedience? Boredom? Voices in his head?

“Yes,” Chloe says, fighting to steady her voice, “We tried to escape. It didn't work and... he killed her.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“That's why... you're here. To replace her.”

Mundell's going to regret that. He's going to face justice. He's going to suffer.

Anne's family will know the truth.

The other girls may have failed to escape, but we'll find a way. It may take time, and I hate to imagine what Mundell will do to us until then, but what is the alternative? Giving up? Letting him win? I don't fucking think so.

“There's something I need to tell you,” I say. “I don't think Mundell chose me at random.”

“Don't say his name!”

Fuck.

She's trying to help me, but I am not calling him master willingly.

“I was- I *am* seeing Lane.”

Chloe perks up at his name.

“Whatever you were told, he didn’t know you were taken. Mundell tricked him, and everyone, into thinking you left on your own. Lane tried looking for you. He was sorry for the way things ended. He needs to know you’re alive so he can tell you that himself, so we’re going to survive, and we’re going to get out of here.”

For a minute, both of us let my words hang in the air. I hear them in my head, and they sound both hopeful and delusional — full of ambition and doubt. Finally, Chloe gets on her feet and walks up to the cell’s bars.

“Master is being lenient with you because you’re new,” she says. “He’s letting you get it out of your system, but if you keep speaking like that, he will punish us. He hears and sees everything. He will not tolerate disrespect or defiance. I am Pet and you are Toy, and we are expected to behave.”

Yeah, well. He’s going to be disappointed.

—

Chloe explains to me what goes on here. Mundell leaves us alone most of the time, which I suppose makes sense. He has to be at the school during the week. While he’s away, automatic dispensers keep us fed. While he may not be actively watching us at a given moment, the cameras record at all times and he does review the footage.

Most importantly, there is no leaving this underground dungeon without Mundell. The doors have code locks — they

won't open unless we know the combination. So even if we could get the drop on him — knock him out, or even kill him — we would be left in here until we likely starved to death.

“What about going outside for fresh air?”

Chloe shakes her head.

“You don't want him taking you outside. It won't be for anything good.”

Apparently his captives only leave the dungeon for some kind of unique punishment. Her examples include being forced to march through snow naked, or getting locked in a coffin to suffer under the sweltering sun.

“We screamed and screamed, but no one heard,” Chloe says. “We're miles away from anyone who could help. We're alone out here.”

He does allow his captives to speak to one another when he's away, but his rules always apply. If we behave, he will bring us gifts, as long as it's something that won't pose a threat to him. No electronics, obviously. Reading materials are allowed, as long as they come in softcover. No heavy, hard-bound art collections.

“He has those, though,” Chloe says. “He'll show them to us, if we ask nicely. He enjoys teaching art.”

Apparently Mundell will ask us to paint or draw, but under very strict circumstances. He will make sure we're restrained so we can't use a pencil or paintbrush to attack him.

“Does he ever talk about the other women he’s killed?” I ask. “Has he told you who they were, or when he took them?”

“He doesn’t like talking about that. Don’t ask.”

The one upside to having Mundell present, apparently, is that he brings his slaves better food than what usually comes out of the dispensers. By the time he brings us cut up pieces of chicken parmigiana on paper plates, my stomach quakes with hunger. I’d love to throw mine back in his face, but Chloe assures me if I refuse a meal, I won’t eat until the next one.

At Mundell’s request, Chloe informs me of the procedure for meal service: we wait at the back of the cell until he slips the food through the bars. When he’s far enough away, he’ll toss us the keys to unlock any cuffs we may be wearing. Once we eat, we’ll pass the empty dishes through the bars, then cuff ourselves, if necessary.

“He will make sure we tighten and lock the cuffs. Don’t be stupid. He checks every time. No exceptions.”

Apparently, Mundell is a better cook than he is an artist, because the chicken actually tastes good. Eating with my hands is messy and undignified, but admittedly I feel better afterward.

“Very good,” he says, once he’s set aside the plates. “Now, since this is Toy’s first day, and Pet has not seen her art before, I would like Toy to paint for us both.”

Fine.

Let's get this over with.

Once I've cuffed myself, Mundell opens up my jail cell. I consider trying to rush him, but then how would we get out of here? He won't tell us the code to unlock the stairs. I have no choice but to let him chain my body until I can barely move. My ankles are locked to a grate in the floor, assuring I won't take a single step in any direction.

He sets up the easel and paint supplies for me, then releases one of my hands so I can paint.

"If you feel tempted to push over the easel or spill that paint, remember what will happen to Pet," Mundell says, pointing at his neck. "Toy, if you need Pet to pose a certain way, feel free to ask her."

"Yes, master," I say, scowling at him.

I take my time. In truth, I prefer to draw with pens and pencils; it's not like my parents ever bought me painting supplies. Of course, I don't give a flying fuck if Mundell likes my work, so I don't worry about it. After what feels like a long time to me, he begins to glance at his watch. He taps his foot, then starts pacing. Is he dropping subtle hints for me to hurry up, or is he just impatient?

"Put the brush down, Toy. I'd like to see what you've done."

"I'm not finished, Mmster."

Mundell reaches into his pocket. I cringe, realizing I'd pushed too far. The resulting shock fries my synapses,

causing me to drop the brush.

“I wasn’t asking you, Toy. Do as I say, when I say it, and that won’t happen again.”

“Yes, master.” I force myself to adopt a contrite tone. If I give him attitude, the next shock might not be for me.

I inhale slowly as the pain subsides, glancing down at the fallen brush. The way he has me bound, I can’t bend over to pick it up.

“Don’t worry,” Mundell drawls. “I’ll get it.”

He comes close. It’s enough for me to throw a punch, maybe catch him with a jerk of my elbow or knee.

I know I shouldn’t be thinking this way; the more I entertain these ideas, the more tempted I’ll be to act on them.

Mundell stops behind me; I can’t see him, but I can feel warm breath against the small of my back. He chuckles as his hands grip my hips.

“Isn’t our new Toy beautiful?” he says.

Our new toy, he says. As if Chloe is his partner and not his prisoner.

“Yes, master,” she says, looking away.

“I knew you’d be ours the first time I saw you, Toy. And you can thank both Lane and Mr. Franklin for showing me how you’d look without your clothes, since I couldn’t picture it myself. That was very helpful in confirming my decision.”

Chloe trembles, her expression wretched. She knows what's about to happen. I do too, though I'm not letting myself admit it.

“Toy, I've waited long enough,” he says, cuffing my free hand behind my back. “Your painting is subpar, by the way. Clumsy brushstrokes, improper perspective and inconsistent coloration. Now be a good Toy. Don't make this difficult.”

He unzips his trousers and lets them fall to the floor; the fabric brushes my heels.

Fuck this. I will never make this easy on him. Not a chance.

I kick my foot back as far as the chains will allow; I only go a few inches, but with Mundell leaving no space between us, it's all the room I need to pound my heel into his bare shin.

“Ow, shit!”

He backs up before I can stomp on his foot, so I keep kicking. It's all I can do at this point.

“You dumb bitch, that was not fucking smart.”

I close my eyes as his hands wrap around my throat.

Do it, asshole.

I'll make you regret it if you don't.

His fingers link together, but they don't tighten.

A snap sounds through the room, followed by a whine.

“What the fuck?” Mundell says, letting me go.

I open my eyes, wondering a moment if I'd died. The room is completely dark; a pitch black deeper than I've ever experienced.

Then a small glow sparks to life, barely enough to see by.

"The power is down," Mundell says, as much to himself as us. "The backup generator kicked in... Oh god, fuck!"

Without being able to see much of anything, even if I could turn around, I listen closely. Clothes slide over skin, followed by the zipper. The chains around my ankles jerk taut, then let go.

"I told you they'd come for me," I say.

I could be completely wrong. For all I know, a raging thunderstorm knocked out a transmission line and this is nothing — but I don't think so. Mundell's scared.

Cold, sharp metal presses against my throat.

"You better hope not, bitch. If Lane's here, he's going to watch you die."

Chapter 28

GWEN



Shuffling forward with one's ankles chained together is difficult enough without having a knife against one's neck. I barely breathe as Mundell walks me up the stairs, passing his gallery and reaching the ground level. We emerge from the building to see a dark figure standing in front of us.

He wears gloves, jeans and a jacket — all black — and covers his face with a white theatrical comedy mask, its wide, joyous smile gaping in the darkness.

“That you, Lane?” Mundell says.

“Yeah.”

His voice comes from everywhere, booming in the frigid night. Despite my exposure to the chill breeze, my body warms knowing he's here.

Is he, though? The figure in front of us seems... not like Lane. Maybe it's just the disguise, but something feels off.

“Gwen, I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner,” Lane says. “I'm sorry for everything I did. I should have listened to you. This is my fault.”

“It's okay,” I say, already in tears.

Lane screwed up, but he didn't know Mundell was such a psychopath. Neither did I. He hid his true nature from the world, but now everyone will know.

"How'd you find us?" he asks.

"Mail in your office," Lane replies.

"Smart. And the police?"

"They're on the way."

I hold back a sigh of relief. No matter what happens to me, Mundell's going to get what he deserves.

"How come they didn't arrest you?" Mundell asks.

"Gwen's roommates got to me first."

Of course they did. I love them so much.

"So this is it, then," Mundell says. "Give me one reason I shouldn't kill her right in front of you."

"Because what I'll do to you will be much, much worse than life in prison."

"Maybe I'll kill you both. I'm not weak."

"You could get protective custody if you tell us where the other girls are," Lane says, unfazed by the threat. "Maybe they'll even put you in a psych ward."

"Chloe's here," I blurt. "She's alive. He's been keeping them this whole time!"

"Shut the fuck up," Mundell hisses. "Lane, this is your last chance. Get down on the ground or I'll cut her throat

right now.”

“Don’t listen to him!” I shout. “You can’t let him escape!”

“I can’t let him hurt you either. Don’t worry, it’ll be okay. You win, Rush.”

So much happens at the same time, I don’t fully comprehend it at first.

The figure in front of us bolts to our left, sprinting away. I hear sudden, rapid footsteps, but they’re getting closer. Then the blade against my skin goes away, and an invisible force throws Mundell to the ground.

A massive man stands before me; dressed the same as the other figure, he wears the tragedy mask, its open mouth wailing in silent anguish.

“Hey Gwen,” Lane says, throwing off the mask and slipping Mundell’s knife into his belt. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too,” I reply, wishing I could leap into his arms.

“Gwen, this is Rory.”

“Hey,” the other man says, pulling off the comedy mask. “Sorry to be meeting you like this.”

I laugh.

“Don’t be. Thank you.”

Mundell tries to get up, but Lane kicks him hard in the face.

Specks of blue and red light sneak through the thick, distant treeline.

Lane reaches into Mundell's pockets until he finds a ring of keys and tosses them to Rory, who runs back into the building.

Mundell howls, leaping at Lane and knocking them both over. They reach for the knife, wrestling and grasping. I struggle against my chains, needing to help, but I can't get free; the best I can do is stand up.

"Gwen, stay back!" Lane shouts.

He frees a hand and punches Mundell in the gut. The older man groans, but doesn't budge.

"You're finished, Rush! Everyone's going to know you're psychotic!"

Mundell wedges a foot against Lane's thigh and pushes off, forcing the men to separate. They recover quickly, rising to their feet. Lane brandishes the hard-won knife.

"You ever use one of those in a fight?" Mundell asks.
"Because I have."

"Come here and find out."

"I should have crushed your career years ago. You had so much potential, artistically and academically. Somehow, you squandered it."

Lane laughs.

"That's not true. I'm one of the most famous artists in the world."

Mundell sneers.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Not as Lane Porter, of course. You might know me better as Alistair Rat.”

At first Mundell scoffs, but the grin slowly bleeds off his face. Then he roars, charging at Lane.

“Watch out!” I shout, running into the way, but Mundell dodges right past me.

Mundell backhands the knife away as he tackles Lane.

I run at him, but he pushes me over, onto my back. The chains dig into my body when I hit the ground; the pain knocks the wind out of me. All I can do is watch as Mundell pumps his fist into Lane’s stomach.

“I can’t believe I almost made you my heir!” Mundell swings again, this time square at Lane’s solar plexus. “You’re a fucking disgrace. You’re a hack.”

Coughing and wheezing, Lane tries to defend himself, but Mundell bristles with rage.

“I can’t believe... I called you my friend,” Lane rasps, straining to shield himself from one punch after another.

I cry out, trying to get up to help him, but paralyzing pain saps my strength. I’m still struggling when a pair of bare legs walk past me.

Mundell’s too focused on Lane to notice Chloe approaching — holding out her shock collar. Letting out a piercing scream that scares off the crows hiding in the trees,

she pulls the collar around Mundell's neck like a garrote. The device seals with a beep, then Mundell convulses.

Lane pushes him off and gets up. Chloe rains punches down on Mundell, catching her breath to keep screaming. Rory approaches, shock controls in hand, and tosses Lane the keys. He races to my side and begins unlocking my chains.

Chloe runs out of steam after a few more hits and backs away. Rory takes off his jacket and holds it out for her.

"What should we do with him?" Rory says, finally easing off the electricity.

With my hands and arms free, I can finish unlocking my legs and ankles, so Lane grabs Mundell and puts him in a headlock.

"Police will be here soon," Lane says. "I should kill you myself. Life in prison is too good for you. But I leave it to Gwen. What do you think?"

They all turn to me. I don't need more than a second to decide.

What Mundell almost did to me...

And what he's done to so many others...

There is no punishment cruel enough for him, and I wouldn't shed a tear if Lane ended this now.

But I want Mundell to see what happens to his reputation when everyone he's ever known disavows him as a monster. I want him to know that every good thing he's ever had in his

life came from his name and his money — nothing more. If we're lucky, he'll feel one one-millionth the pain he's caused before he dies, which is far more than Lane can inflict here.

“Don't kill him. Just make sure he never paints again.”

Lane chuckles.

“With pleasure.”

I look away as he takes my meaning and reaches for Mundell's hands and wrists.

Chilling, tormented bellows follow sharp, wet snaps. Each one makes my smile grow wider.

By the time a small army of police cruisers pour onto the property, Mundell blubbers to himself, gasping in the cold, dewy lawn while Rory keeps watch. Lane holds me in his arms, but I tell him I'm okay. I point him over to Chloe, who stares into the night sky, tears running down her cheeks. He kisses me.

“I love you,” he says. “I'm so sorry I-”

“I love you too. Please. Help her.”

He kisses me again, then goes. He holds her until the police arrive.

—

It took Lane and Rory a couple hours to reach the Catskills, during which time Lane studied a satellite view of the property and the supplies available in Rory's van. As they got close, they called Joel and Martin, giving them the plan:

scale the fence, cut the power, set up networked Bluetooth speakers and misdirect Mundell. With his eyes on Rory, Lane would sneak up and disarm him. When the time was right, Joel would call the police, just in case.

There were a lot of unknowns, like whether they'd trip any motion sensors or if Mundell had any guns. Ultimately, they worked with what they had. Lane says he didn't intentionally plan the rescue mission like an Alistair Rat piece, that he naturally applied his instinct for distracting audiences and controlling their attention.

Joel contacted Lane and Rory's lawyers on their behalf, so when we were all taken in by the police, our legal counsel was already there waiting, fully briefed on the situation. Then he and Martin took a Lyft all the way from Manhattan to bring me clothes from the apartment. When they arrived, we cried in each other's arms in the middle of the precinct lobby.

"You saved my life," I tell them as their bodies press against mine. "I wouldn't be here without you, and I'll never forget that."

Crisis professionals come in to help Chloe, who showed the police where they could find the remains of Anne Nichols. Hers wasn't the only unmarked grave exhumed that night.

They don't let us see Chloe, but they tell us she gave a long and lucid accounting of her time since she disappeared. Despite the horrors inflicted on her, she maintained her

sanity. Especially lately, she clung to a promise she made to Anne that she would help Mundell's next victim.

After twelve hours of questioning, official statements and drinking the best and simultaneously worst coffee ever made, the police drive Lane and I back to my apartment. He's supposed to contact them if he needs to leave the city because they haven't decided whether or not to charge him with a crime. Our lawyers say this should take a few weeks.

While we're heading back to the city, the police and FBI raid Mundell's home and office. Apparently he destroyed the sketches Lane found and there's not much else that could be used against him as evidence, but the law enforcement movements alert the media to the developing story. They piece it together. By the next day, Rush Mundell is a famous mass murderer, instead of a famous art scholar or philanthropist. The trial may take years, but he's going to spend the rest of his life in jail.

It's also nice to know he'll never draw my face again, or Chloe's or Anne's. He'll never see us. Not in person. Not in the darkness of his mind's eye.

—

Lane and I spend the following week laying low at my apartment with Joel and Martin. News vans line our block for days before giving up. We bring in food deliveries and relax — painting, drawing, cooking, binge-watching *Bob's Burgers* and *The Office*. We let the lawyers handle the press.

When we do leave, Rory picks up all four of us and drives us to a cemetery in the suburbs west of Philadelphia. A funeral for Anne Nichols had been held years ago, long before she actually died, so a new one is held as her remains are put to rest properly. Seeing Lea and Colette in person makes me cry; they tell those gathered how they are glad to know the truth, but I can't help wishing they didn't have to know about Anne's suffering. Maybe they'll get some satisfaction knowing Mundell will face a life sentence for her murder. I know I will.

Chloe attends the ceremony as her first public appearance. In the time between her liberation and the funeral, she spoke to Anne's family at length, answering their questions. They promised Chloe they didn't blame her for Anne's death — only Mundell. They even offer Chloe a place to stay, should she have nowhere else to go. They also pledge to pay for her to finish art school, if she wishes.

At Martin's insistence, Joel hires a manager, who arranges interviews for Joel to tell his truth: that he had no idea Mundell was such a monster. Considering the offers for his work keep coming in, the public seems to believe him. If anything, the interviews bring Joel additional sympathy, and hosts of new fans.

Hundreds of past students give their takes on Mundell — no one knew, or even suspected. He'd had his share of willing partners, some of whom had even visited his home in the Catskills. They had no idea what was occurring under their feet.

Mundell Academy shuts down, of course. Days after Anne's funeral, the school's entire faculty and staff announce their resignation. Mundell's legal team takes on an additional job: selling the school's real estate and auctioning off its extensive art collection.

"You could buy it," I tell Lane. "That would really piss him off."

He laughs, stroking my hair as we lay together in my bed.

"Nah, they need to turn that building into offices for a bunch of accountants. Something as far away from art as possible. Besides, I have a better idea."

"Oh?"

"I've gotten calls from the academy's former donors," Lane says. "They still want to support the arts and have asked me to take charge in setting up a new school."

I cozy up against his chest, enjoying the rhythm of his breathing.

"Are you going to do it?" I ask.

He chuckles.

"I told them I'd do it, but it'll be on my terms. No more militant adherence to accepted doctrines. My school would have to have room for experimentation, without prejudice toward mediums or styles. And they'd have to do so knowing the truth about me."

I turn around to face him, my jaw hanging open.

“About Alistair Rat? You told them?”

“I did.”

Holy shit!

“And they agreed?”

“They feel pretty bad about donating millions to a murderer, so yeah. You’re looking at the executive director of New York’s next premiere art academy. The only question is what to call it.”

No more hiding our identities as artists — I guess as long as we get permits. But still — I can be Enmity Jane if I want.

“Why not the Alistair Rat Academy?” I suggest.

“Mundell would be fuming.”

“That’s true, but it’s too self-serving. You think Anne’s family would want it named after her?”

Oh. That’s a good question. I like the idea. Anne didn’t get to finish art school, but she was already brilliant. Students would be lucky to live up to her legacy.

“We should find out. I think it’s a great idea.”

“I’ll get in touch with them then,” he says.

I take his hand in mine and lie back down, gazing up at the ceiling.

“How are you going to make the announcement?” I ask.

“About Rat?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know,” Lane says. “I’ve thought about it, over the years. Maybe release a statement to the media. Start off short and professional. The in-depth interviews will come later.”

Smiling, I imagine the world getting to know Lane Porter the way I do.

A handsome art teacher at one of the city’s most prestigious schools had a habit of bending the rules, romancing several of his students, but he had a bigger secret still: he was the infamous street artist Alistair Rat. Little did he know a darkness stalked his school’s halls, a horror hidden to all until he helped expose it. In the process, he saved the lives of his paramour and a victim the world left behind.

“You know what I was thinking, Gwen?” he says.

“What’s that?”

“We should do a piece together. Alistair Rat and Enmity Jane.”

If I had thought a year ago that my greatest artistic influence would want to collaborate with me, I’d have laughed it off as a silly fantasy. If I dreamed he’d also be beautiful, brave, heroic and in love with me, I’d have checked myself into a psych ward. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand how I got so lucky.

“I’d love that,” I say.

Lane leans over and kisses me. His hands run down my hips and pull me into his protective embrace.

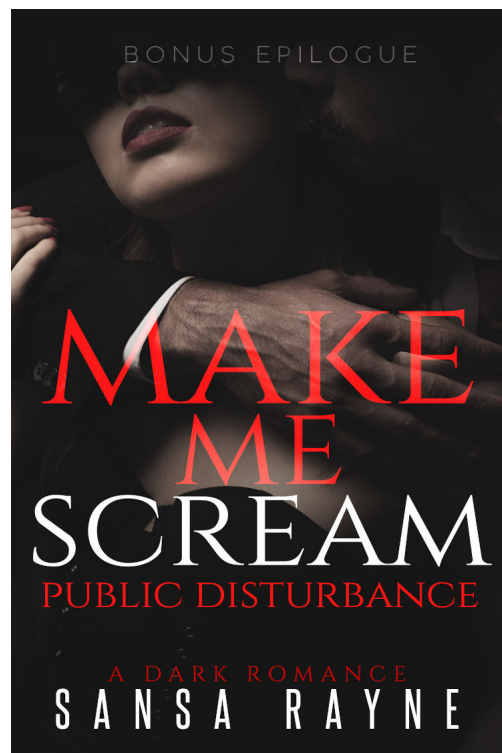
“I love you, Gwen,” he says. “Whatever the world throws at us, I promise we’ll always be together.”

“I love you too, and I promise I’ll stand with you through it all.”

It’ll be a long time before our lives become something normal, between Mundell’s criminal trials, our impending notoriety and founding a new art academy. Maybe normal will never happen. Maybe our lives will always be complicated and chaotic.

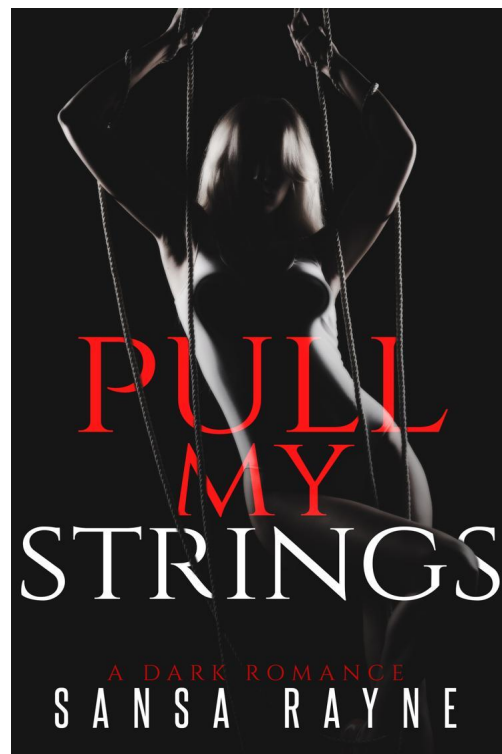
I’m not worried.

We’ll have our voices and we’ll have each other, and no one can ever take that away.



Thank you for reading “Make Me Scream” — I hope you enjoyed it! If you would like to receive a free bonus epilogue, “Make Me Scream: Public Disturbance,” sign up for my mailing list! You’ll also get the free novellas “Welcome to the Asylum” and “Welcome to the Agency,” as well as announcements about my future books! Your sign-up information will be kept confidential, and you can unsubscribe at any time. To sign up, [CLICK HERE](#).

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About the Author

Sansa Rayne, who also goes by the names Sasha Rich and Stella Rising, is a writer from upstate New York who has been a professional novelist full-time for more than five years now, thanks to the support of her fans. Sansa of course loves reading and writing, but has always dreamed of being independent: no boss to answer to, no nine-to-five grind. Thanks to readers like you, Sansa lives her dream life.

For fun, Sansa enjoys movies, anything from Marvel flicks to art-house prestige pictures; good food, especially if it's spicy; anything with Gordon Ramsay; and chilly walks in the snow. Sansa also loves visiting New York City to see friends, shop and try great neighborhood restaurants.

For updates on all new Sansa Rayne books, [sign up for her mailing list!](#)

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Last but not least, if you're reading this, thank you so much! You're making my dream possible.

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