

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a grey textured jacket over a black shirt, stands in the center. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. The background is a city street at night, with a large building illuminated in blue light. The sky is dark with some stars visible.

THE  
**ELITE**

**RECKLESS  
ROULETTE**

THE ELITE MULTI-AUTHOR SERIES

**ALICE WINTERS**

# **RECKLESS ROULETTE**

THE ELITE

BOOK 1

ALICE WINTERS

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# CHAPTER 1

## KADE

This isn't the first time I've had a gun pressed against my head.

It probably won't be the last.

Irritation rolls through me when the man clanks his gun against my skull again as he holds a hand around my throat to keep me from going too far.

A sigh escapes me as I grit my teeth to keep myself from doing something... unreasonable. Three of my guards are currently lying dead at my feet, telling me that whoever decided to rain on my damn parade is skilled.

Doesn't make me any less irritated. There are two men, a sniper who is the more skilled of the two and the gunman behind me who seems to think he needs to be uncomfortably close for his gun to work.

"I'm sorry, am I bothering you?" the man asks.

"Oh? How did you guess?" I ask as I lower my hand.

"Get your hands up," he growls.

"I just want a cigarette, and it's not like you're going to shoot me. If I was supposed to be dead at the end of this, you wouldn't even be here. Your sniper doesn't need you—you're fodder. You're here to tell me something that's going to annoy me," I say as I take out a cigarette and light it. "I mean, really, why else would they send someone who has a quiver to his fingers?"

"Fuck you," he says as I aim the cigarette for my lips again before thinking better of it and cramming the lit end into his eye.

He howls out and releases me, not shooting me, of course, because he never took the safety off. It wasn't because he made a mistake, it was because he knew that if he shot me,

even accidentally, he'd be better served crawling in a ditch somewhere and offing himself.

He lets out a growl as he shoves me forward and just as I turn around, he punches me in the face because that's something he *can* do. I drop my cigarette as I grit my teeth in irritation.

"Sell it," he orders.

"Oh?"

"You need to sell out to Norn if you don't want to be dead at the end of this. He's kindly decided that starting tomorrow, you have seven days to get your affairs in order and transfer ownership to him, and if in that time you don't, he's going to raze everything you've built up to the ground."

"I can't wait," I say dryly as I pull out a different cigarette since his eye rudely destroyed my last one. He's quite squinty, and it's kind of hard to give him my full attention when he's leaking tears the way he is.

I step up to him and jab a finger against his chest. "You tell your boss that he's going to regret fucking with me because it's the very last thing he's going to do."

Fuck, just hearing that man's name makes me irritated.

The gunman is just staring at me as I walk past him and continue toward the casino. Mostly employees park out here, but the mess will have to be cleaned up before anyone else stumbles on it or it'll raise some attention... not that this city isn't used to guns and bodies.

Fuck, would I love to knock down that damn sniper who killed my guards, but gun wielding is not my specialty. My father raised me with the mindset that we were always going to be taken care of by those beneath us and that shooting those who defied us was not what we did.

He was a fucking idiot.

As I walk through the casino, the noise pounds around me. It's something that's been an integral part of my life since I



was a child when my father built the place, so it's nothing more than background noise anymore.

I push through the doors into the back room where a group of my men are loitering. When they see me enter, they look surprised, having thought I'd gone home for the night.

"There are two fuckheads who targeted me when I was in the back parking lot. A sniper and a gunman. They killed my guards. Someone go kill them and clean up the mess, please," I say as I sink down in a chair and lean back while my financial advisor, Harker, raises an eyebrow. A couple of my security guys head out the door, presumably to do my bidding.

Harker is a man I've gotten to know through the business side of things, but he's also probably as close to a friend as I'm going to get. It doesn't mean we actually do much together, it just means I tolerate him more than the rest. And while his title is as my financial advisor, he does a lot more than that.

He's about five years older than my thirty-seven, with brown hair speckled with gray. His dark eyes are currently watching me in concern behind blue-framed glasses. Honestly, he's probably one of the only ones who'd care if something happened to me.

"You hurt?"

I shrug dismissively. "It's Norn Peterson."

Harker whistles as he leans back in his chair. "Well... we knew this day would come; he's been watching you for a long while. It was nice knowing you with a head on your shoulders. Next time I see you, I'm thinking you might not look so pretty."

I glower at him because of course this is what he has to say. "You're a fucking irritation, you know that?"

Harker laughs, clearly amused by his own idiocy. Everyone else in the room is dead silent because they all know better than to laugh or ridicule me, but none of them have known me as long as he has. Harker, knowing that I'm not enjoying a lick of this, sighs. "Well, they left you alive. What do they want?"

“For me to sell to him.”

“You’d be absolutely stupid not to.”

I raise an eyebrow, surprised that he’d believe I’m such a pushover. “You honestly think I’m just going to say, ‘Here ya go, I hope you enjoy taking everything I slaved over for the last twenty years of my life?’”

“Yeah, I think you should. He’ll give you enough money for it. You take it and go do something else with your life. You’re not going to win this game.”

“There only needs to be one man dead for me to win this game,” I say.

Harker seems to think I’m hilarious now as he contemplates this. “Yeah. You seem to forget that Norn got his rise to power as a hitman. He literally controls a chunk of the network.”

“So then I need someone better. Simple as that,” I say.

“So fucking simple,” he says dryly.

“I know you have a guy.”

“I don’t have a guy, I *know* a guy,” Harker corrects. “And let me just save you the time... he’s not going to work for you.”

“Call him. He won’t refuse when he hears my offer.”

Harker slowly shakes his head before taking his phone out. “Alright... do *not* come bitching to me about your time being wasted when this is over with.” He taps some buttons and holds the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Kade Morris wants to hire you... yeah, I told him that... yeah, I know you’re busy but you’re the only one I can think of... just... fucking hell, he’s not going to go for it... fine. Yeah, bye.”

I stare at him, already not impressed.

“He said he wants to meet you first. He only works for guys he likes, Kade. And you’re not a likeable guy,” he says.

“I’m goddamn Mr. Rogers,” I growl.

That makes Harker laugh as he shakes his head. “Oh, you’re going to die so hard.”

“Fuck off.”

“With that attitude, I’ll be the only one at your funeral.”

I glower at him as he laughs like he thinks he’s hilarious. Everyone else in the room is watching with wide eyes and remaining silent.

“Come to my office tomorrow. I’ll take you to see him,” he says.

“There is absolutely no reason that I need to go.”

“He’s not going to work for you if he doesn’t like you.”

“This is a pain in my ass.”

Harker shrugs. “Be there by ten in the morning. Don’t be late. He doesn’t like it when you’re late, either.”

“Is there anything this person does like?” I ask.

“He’s still ten times more pleasant than you. If I had to be stuck on an island with you or him, I’d pick him or drown myself.”

“You wouldn’t have to do it yourself, I’d do it for you,” I assure him.

“Perfect.”

# CHAPTER 2

SEVEN DAYS LEFT

## KADE

When I reach Harker's office building, I take the elevator up to the sixth floor before stepping out. With Harker handling my finances, I've been here often enough that the secretary merely glances up and gives me a nod before going back to his work.

I head down the hallway to the far corner where Harker's office is. There's a waiting area outside it where a young man and a woman are sitting. They don't seem to know each other if the distance between them is any indication. Pushing Harker's office door open, I realize he's not inside and promptly call him, but he doesn't answer.

Irritated, I walk over to the chairs and sit down between the man and woman.

"Someone called him out a bit ago," the man says as he stares at one of those ridiculous handheld game things in his hand.

"He acted like it wouldn't take long," the woman says, "but I've been here twenty minutes."

"Ha, I've been here forty. You guys want to play *Mario Party* while we wait?" he asks as he eagerly looks between us.

I ignore the man-child and lean back in my chair where I proceed to write death threats to Harker.

Me: Where the fuck are you?

Me: Don't be late, eh? I swear that I will wring your balls if you make me late.

Me: Oh, that's right, you don't have any balls. Your wife's got your balls.

Ah... at least threatening others gives me an ounce of joy in my life that's so lacking it.

Suddenly, the guy slips into the chair next to me.

“I really think it’s going to be a while; we could play *Mario Kart* while we wait.”

I stare at him and wonder at what point it looked like I wanted to partake in anything he’s offering.

He’s currently giving me a grin that makes me pause to take him in. It’s like he’s loving this and I don’t even know why. Even though he’s similar to me in height and weight, his hoodie is too big for him and there’s a bunch of superhero stuff all over it, making him look out of place in Harker’s office where everyone else is dressed professionally.

“Oh, don’t you know what *Mario Kart* is?” he asks.

“No, no... I just don’t give a *shit* what it is,” I say, hoping he gets the hint that I’m not a small talk kind of guy. I’m a no-talk kind of guy unless I want something, and then I expect to get it with minimal pushing.

His blue-green eyes lock on to mine. “Ah... okay, okay. Some people just don’t like the little Italian dude. I get it, I get it. I have other games, though. Ooh, old school? How about *Tetris*? We could *Tetris* it up in here. *Tetris* party, y’all.”

Why is he still *talking*? “Does any part of my face look like I want to engage with you?” I ask, not used to *anyone* willingly coming up and talking to me, but perhaps that’s because most people know who I am. I suppose nerds who climb out of their mother’s basements aren’t as privy to the underworld.

He cocks his head and stares at me for a long moment. “Well... you kind of looked like you were going to snap your phone in half in unadulterated anger if I continued to let you text, so I thought you could put some of that fury into *Tetris*. Like... fuck that little block with the hook on it, ya know?”

I glower at him. And the thing is, I have a good glower. One that generally makes anyone I toss it at do whatever the fuck I want them to. Generally, I don’t even have to lift a finger or speak a word to get them to understand, but this one is far too dense with that irritating smile of his, like he thinks it’s charming or something. “If you say... one more thing

about *Tetris*, I'm going to take your little toy and toss it in the trash."

He flips the game thing this way and that before grimacing, like he's realized maybe that doesn't sound overly pleasant. "Sooooo not a *Tetris* fan, I take it..." He gives me a look like he pities me. "How much did those blocks wrong you, my man?"

"Go sit absolutely *anywhere* else," I plead.

"Anywhere?" he asks.

"Yes... *anywhere else*."

"Like... on your lap's fine then?"

I'm going to murder him. I have never murdered a man with my own hands, though I have had many killed for me. But I think today's the day. Today is the day that I will color my hands in red and do the world a favor.

"So not *anywhere*, I take it."

"Do you know who I am?" I ask.

"Ooh, let me guess! A children's entertainer? You look like you love seeing the smiling wittle faces looking up at you."

"Has your life ever been threatened before?"

He cocks his head and seems to think about it as his blue-green eyes watch me closely. "This one time this guy bumped into me on the subway and was like, 'I'm gonna fuck you up... bitch.' But then we went and got drinks after, and he told me about how his wife cheated on him and he was going through a hard time—"

The glossing over of my eyes must have clearly shown that I give zero shits about this. I turn back to my phone and send another text to Harker.

Me: Can I kill the kid waiting outside your office?

Me: That's it. I'm going to kill him.

Me: And then you for not answering.



“You’re a tough sell, you know that, right?” he asks, so I get up myself and move to the farthest chair. The woman is watching us curiously but seems to enjoy the fact I’m the one being tortured.

The young man doesn’t get up, no, he scoots his chair out of the lineup and proceeds to make the most obnoxious *squeee squeeeeee* noise as he scoots it over to me. “Okay, okay. Now the tricky part, would you rather fuck, marry, or kill Iron Man, Superman, and Thor?”

“Can we toss you into this equation?” I ask.

He cups his hand over his mouth in an irritatingly ridiculous way. “Oh wow, how forward, I never would have guessed. You move so fast. You should at least buy me dinner first.”

“Why are you choosing *me* to irritate?” I ask as I wave to the woman. “Irritate her.”

“Why me?” she asks.

The man is not deterred. “Fine, fine. One last question and I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

I am fully aware this is a lie, but if there’s a *single* chance I don’t have to coat these walls in his blood, then I’ll take it.

“Are you ready?”

I stare at him.

“It’s a really important question.”

I’d fucking marry Thor so he could strike this asshole down. Just... explode him.

“If you had the chance to eat a Pokémon, which one would you eat?” he asks.

It is at that very moment that the kid’s life forever changes because if Harker hadn’t walked onto the scene, I would have done something I surely would have *never* regretted. Maybe I would have regretted it a little—not because he doesn’t deserve it and is an innocent bystander but because it’d be a bitch to explain to Harker.

“Hey, sorry about that,” Harker says as he walks up.

“It’s A-okay, I made a new friend,” the irritating man says as he passes Harker a folder before trying to give me a high five. I stare at him, so he then switches his high five to Harker who gives it to him before he heads off on his adventure to irritate people. It’s a wonder he’s lived this long.

“Sorry for making you wait, Nicole,” Harker says as he hurries into his room and gathers some stuff that he passes to her. She waves one of the binders at him in farewell.

“That’s okay,” she says, and with that she’s off.

Harker shuts his office door and turns to me.

He has to see the rage dripping off me but looks like he doesn’t care a whole lot. With effort, I unclench my jaw to ask, “What the hell took you so long? You told me to be here by ten and ten is long gone. We’re late.”

“Oh, for the assassin? No, you’re good. I have the answer about whether or not he’ll work with you right here,” he says as he flips open the folder the annoying man gave him. There’s a sticky note right inside that says: Fuck nah.

Harker closes it and looks up at me. “Wow... you sure failed that meeting.”

I stare at him for a long moment as what is happening slowly, ever so slowly sinks into my mind.

“That guy... the assassin sent *that* guy to decide?” I growl. “He literally sent the most irritating, annoying human *on earth* to decide?”

Harker’s eyebrows knit. “No, that’s *the* guy, Kade! I didn’t think you’d fuck it up this badly. What’d you say to him? Len’s a little picky, but he clearly didn’t like you *at all*. Usually, he gives people a second chance if he’s a bit uncertain, but you get *no* chances, my friend.”

I grab Harker by the collar and give him a good shake, really hoping I can knock some sense into him. “You are telling me that *the* guy I need to keep from *dying* is that nerdy man I was about to off outside your office?”

“You were going to *off* him? Like... get him off?” He’s scrutinizing me now, even throws in a hand motion of getting someone off. “Did you lay a hand on him? Is that why he was so offended? I mean you’re handsome, Kade, but that’s a bit forward, isn’t it?”

“Kill, Harker. Murder. I was going to murder him.”

Harker’s eyebrow is shooting toward the sky. “You were going to murder *an assassin*. Do you hear yourself? You literally have the worst temper. And an extremely big ego if you think you can kill an actual *assassin*.”

I stare at the man, positive this is a huge joke. So positive that I start laughing as I smack his shoulder. “You’re hilarious. Good one. Good one. Very funny. Loved it. Five stars. Now fuck off and when you actually have someone worth a damn to help me, let me know. Remember, if I die, you get a pay cut.”

Harker sighs before nodding. “I remember. But Kade... it wasn’t... a joke.”

I ignore him as I leave his office.

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## LEN

“Helloooo,” I say as I answer a phone call while wandering down the many stairs to the first floor. Elevators really aren’t my... thing.

“So... I take it your meeting with Kade didn’t go overly well,” Harker says.

“The guy’s never once thought about which Pokémon he’d eat, Harker! Everyone knows it’s Oddish!”

“I’m pretty sure not everyone knows that, Len. So you’re really not going to help him?”

“Uh, that would be correct,” I say as I finally reach the bottom floor and push through the door into the lobby.

“You literally decided this based on the fact that he wouldn’t eat one of your... whatever they are?” Harker asks.

“Correct,” I lie. “Very correct.”

I won’t tell Harker the real reason because he simply doesn’t need to know someone’s kryptonite.

“Will you do me a favor and think about it again?” he asks.

“Hmm...” I say as I step outside. “I have to go.”

I hang up as I glance over to the left where I see the glint of something up on the rooftop of a building diagonal to me. My eyes slide right over to the black car waiting along the side of the road. Slowly, I walk over to it and glance at the small hole in the window, little cracks forming around it.

The man inside is slumped against the steering wheel with a hole in the side of his head.

Interesting.

A warning, perhaps? A warning to Kade about what’s to come if he doesn’t play by Norn’s rules. Really, he sure found a good one to piss off, didn’t he?

“What the fuck are you...” Kade freezes about halfway across the street. He didn’t notice anything was wrong until I turned my body away from the car, revealing the window.

They don’t plan on killing him, at least not yet, but why? Why legally take what Kade has when Norn could just pry it from his cold fingers? How fascinating... but not fascinating enough to work with him.

“Your buddy doesn’t look so hot. He normally like that?” I ask.

Kade gapes at me. “Does he normally have a *hole in his head*?”

I shrug. “I was just asking. Different strokes for different folks, you know? That kind of thing.”

Kade is still just gaping at me, so I give him a look that clearly states, “I’m not the weird one here” and hurry off toward my car.

What I don’t expect is for him to storm after me and tear the passenger door open as I’m getting in. He looks down at my pile of comic books on the seat and obviously plans on swiping them onto the floor.

“I would think *very* hard about that,” I say.

So he waves to them and gives me a minute amount of time to move them into the back seat.

“I don’t remember asking if you wanted a ride. I actually feel like I remember the whole thing about you wanting to get far away from me, and thought I was annoying, *and* how you told Harker that you considered ‘offing’ me.”

The tightening of his jaw tells me he wasn’t aware I heard that last part.

“You are going to drive me to my casino and you’re going to remain silent for the entire drive,” he says as he gets into the passenger seat and taps his foot in irritation.

I start the car, put my seat belt on, then stare at him.

“Why are we not *moving*?” he asks.

“Because your seat belt isn’t on.”

“Are you planning on getting in an accident?”

“Yes, that’s on my schedule for eleven o’clock.”

He glances at the clock then smirks. “Then good thing it doesn’t take you twenty minutes to get to the casino.”

I stare at him.

He stares at me.

Oh, this man has absolutely no knowledge of how to respect someone. It’s literally going to kill him inside to do as I’ve asked. The men after him won’t even have to work hard—he’ll have died from rage and stubbornness at the rate he’s going.

He grabs the seat belt with so much anger that it immediately locks. *That* pisses him off even more as he starts jerking against it repeatedly, but now that it’s locked, it refuses to give him more.

“You have to let it go back in to unlock,” I say, in case he’s not aware of this tidbit. Maybe he’s always had someone to buckle the seat belt for him.

“I *know*,” he growls as he jerks on it some more.

“I don’t think you do. You’re keeping it locked during your little temper tantrum. See, watch. Wheeeee,” I say as I slowly pull my own seat belt out and slide the clasp back in for demonstration.

He’s now staring at me, which makes me assume he needs help with the matter. He does strike me as someone who has everyone do everything for him. So I lean over and try to pry it out of his hands, but he refuses to let go. I’m forced to push his hands and seat belt up until it releases and start to pull it back down.

“And there we go!” I say as I feel him wrap it around my throat.

“Oh dear god, I want to strangle you! That would be a beautiful end to this miserable day.”

“Ha... ha ha. You should always ask others if they want to participate in your kinks before you make them a part of it,” I say as I roll and wiggle until I pull free. “Now that we’re all safe, let’s go.”

I start driving, leaving the gunman still watching Kade behind. Did Kade ever even notice him? I don’t think he did. Although, he seems to realize they don’t want him dead yet.

“So Harker claims you’re an assassin,” Kade says.

“Does he? That’s hilarious.”

“I thought so too. Funniest joke he’s played on me in a while.”

“You’re trying to con me into changing my mind and helping you?” I guess.

“There is absolutely nothing in this world that would make me even remotely want you to change your mind. I will not leave my life in the hands of someone who has toys in their car,” he says as he flicks a plush twenty-sided die that I’ve hung from my rearview mirror.

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s ridiculous. *You* are ridiculous and a waste of my time,” he says as he pulls out a cigarette.

“Don’t smoke in my car.”

As I slow for a red light, he stares me right in the eyes as he lights the cigarette then blows the smoke into my face. The smell of smoke immediately makes my stomach clench.

I reach up and pull my plush die down. “You know how this works?”

“I don’t give a shit how this works.”

“Basically, whether or not you do something depends on what number you roll. So if, for example, I roll above a... seventeen, which is very hard, then I’m going to take your cigarette, and I’m going to shove it down your throat if you don’t throw it out the window. Fun, eh?”

He stares at me before blowing smoke in my face again. I toss the die and watch in wonder as it lands right on a twenty.

“Oh looky there, I’m fucking lucky,” I say as my hand shoots out and I grab a handful of his hair, tearing his head back as I pull the cigarette out of his hand and aim it for his mouth, leaving the hot end nearly brushing his lips as he stares at me, rage unlike anything I’ve seen on him crossing his expression as I press my lips up close to his ear. “Do not try me, do you understand? Now get out of my car.”

I slam the cigarette down in his hand, undo his seat belt, and throw open the car door before shoving him out in one fluid movement.

Closing the door, I remember something and roll the window down.

“Hey-o, just wanted to mention that the red car two back is tailing you. I think they want to rough you up or something, so I’d kind of start running if I was you, but up to you! Later, gator!”

And off I go, leaving him gaping there on the side of the street as I hang my lucky die back up.

There’s a very tiny part of me that feels just a sliver of guilt over the past few minutes, so I end up calling Harker.

“Change your mind?” Harker asks, sounding excited at the thought.

“Not in the slightest, I just thought it’d be a decent human thing to tell you that your buddy Kade’s about to get the shit beat out of him on the corner of Ninth and Sixth.”

“And... you didn’t think it’d be worth helping him out?”

“Can’t say I did,” I say before hanging up and merrily heading on my way home. I have to drive with the windows down for a bit to get the smell of smoke out, but it shouldn’t take long.

---



## KADE

The moment I'm out of the car, it speeds off. If I had a gun on me, I probably would have wasted every single round on that car and still not have been satisfied. There's a light burn on my hand from me not grabbing the cigarette properly when he forced me to take it, but my attention turns to the red car growing nearer.

Len could be lying. He could want to watch me scurry off with my tail between my legs, or he could be telling the truth.

Either way, I fucking hate him. Now more than ever, I want to choke him and make him regret trying to turn me into a fool.

"Fuck," I hiss as I turn from the road and try to disappear down the street, but the guy wasn't as wrong as I'd hoped. Four men get out of the red car and start trailing after me. I pull out my phone and quickly make a call to Harker.

"Already have people on the way," Harker says, telling me that this Len guy must have given him a heads up, and why oh *why* does that irritate me even more? "Where the hell is your driver?"

"He's dead in front of your office."

"Fucking hell, and you decided to just walk?"

"No, I decided this asshole buddy of yours could give me a ride," I growl.

"Then why'd you get out of the car?" Harker asks as I notice a different group coming from in front of me. They're trying to shoo me down an alleyway where they'll block me in and make my life miserable.

I guess the only thing I have going for me is they're not going to kill me. No, they want to beat me down, humiliate me, and show me that I'm nothing compared to them.

Angrily, I tug on my tie that feels annoyingly tight and rush across the street, but there are more over here. What a fucking joke.

If I run, I'll look weak, I'll look scared, and I cannot look scared. I have to act smart.

The fucking smart thing to do would have been to toss out the damn cigarette.

Anger surges inside me at the thought of how Len dared treat me, enough that I end up spinning around and rushing right for the closest asshole. He tries dodging my hit but I end up clocking him under the chin with an uppercut.

He stumbles back and then they're all closing in on me. There's ten or so and they swarm toward me as I see people on the street disperse. They don't run, they're used to shit like this in this godforsaken city. But they also don't want to be a part of it, so as the first fist flies, they casually turn the other way.

The second one doesn't go down as easy and by then they're all on me, punching and kicking as I try to protect my face and get as many hits in as I can, but I'm not a skilled fighter.

One socks me in the stomach hard enough he knocks the air out of me, and I miss the hit that comes straight for my head. It's hard enough it makes darkness creep into my vision, but as I come back, I come back throwing punches.

There are just too many and I'm not skilled enough to keep up with them.

And then they're gone.

I stagger back and look up as a black car pulls up and a group of my men get out. Harker is rushing toward me, gun drawn, but they're already gone.

This was just a warning. They just wanted to play.

I spit blood onto the ground as I look up at Harker who tries to usher me toward his car.

"You alright?" he asks.

“I’m *enraged*.”

“We need to play our cards carefully against Norn,” he says, like he thinks that’s where the rage in my body is aimed at.

“Why did you go out without guards, boss?” a man who works as a guard for the casino says.

“I’m not wasting all of the casino’s security on myself. Let’s go,” I growl, but I also hate the idea of Norn thinking he’s scared me enough that I need gobs of people protecting me.

I’m shoved into the back seat as two burly guards cram in on either side of me and Harker gets into the driver’s seat. I light a much-needed cigarette as I seethe, my eyes glancing down at the burn on my hand from the last cigarette I’d lit. It doesn’t hurt anywhere near the way my face currently does, and my ribs ache, but I don’t think anything’s broken.

I don’t say anything as they head to the casino but the moment I’m inside, I look around me.

Since it’s early, the casino won’t be in full swing for a few hours, so besides a few regulars, the only people here are ones who work for me.

“I want *everyone* in the back room *now*,” I bark and people fucking *scramble*.

*This* is how people treat me. *This* is how people should act around me. I turn and point at one of the guards. “Jump,” I growl.

“W-What?” he asks, like he misheard me.

“I said jump.” And the man jumps.

“Oh. My. God,” Harker says as he grabs my face in his hand. “You’re so pissed *not* because of Norn sending *ten men* to rough you up and kill your driver, you’re pissed that Len doesn’t listen to you.”

“Where’s he live?” I ask.

“You have other things to worry about, I do believe. Like someone out for your head,” Harker says.

“You said he’s the best you know.”

“I... did say that, but clearly, he hates you. The Len I know would never just... leave you to get the shit beat out of you. He hates you and... I can kind of see why. You’re being a dick.”

I ignore him and turn to the thirty or so people. “We’re going to increase security. Norn’s crew won’t damage the property, he wants control of it, so I’m confident that he’s not going to fuck with it too much. But he’s trying to back me into a corner until I have nothing left to do but sell. I need four guards on me at all times until we can find a way to make him regret even looking our way. We can’t allow him under our skin.”

Because I know there’s a reason he won’t just kill me. There’s a reason he wants me still alive. So I can’t cave yet. I can’t cave at all.

I turn to Harker. “Address?”

He flashes his phone in my direction.

Harker: Kade wants a word.

Len: A word? Sure. The word’s no.

Harker: I don’t think that’s the word.

Len: He wants another word or two? Tell him to not be a little bitch, the world doesn’t revolve around him. And, my god, stop being so angry all the time!

I smack his phone out of his hand. “I need a drink,” I growl.

# CHAPTER 3

SIX DAYS LEFT

## LEN

I stare at the invite. It has to be the fourth one this month. Who the hell thinks I want to go to this thing? Do they not realize I'm a busy man?

Setting the comic book down, I sigh and tear the invite open while wondering if I personally told them to their face that I have absolutely *no* interest in joining their stupid thing, they'd stop sending these things.

With the letter open, I find that it says the exact same thing as all the other ones I'd burned up:

*You are cordially invited to The Anonymous.*

*We welcome you to enjoy a drink, play a game, find a job or two, and maybe even discover someone to pass the time with.*

*However, there are two simple rules: any form of violence, scrimmage, or heated words will not be tolerated, nor will any discussion of The Anonymous outside of its walls.*

*Disregard either of these rules and you forfeit your life.*

*If you think you can follow these guidelines, you are welcome to join us.*

*Your code is 8205. When you arrive at the Menagerie Hotel, present it to the concierge and you will be brought down to The Anonymous to mingle with the elite.*

Mingle... with the elite? Does it *look* like I'm a mingler? I don't drink, I'm positive the games they want to play aren't something like *Zelda*, and what the hell would I need to find a job for? Jobs come to me, not the other way around.

Sighing, I pull on my gaming hoodie and decide that maybe if I just show my face and explain that I don't

appreciate them sliding sketchy shit under my door, they'll stop.

I know where the Menagerie is; there's probably no one in this city who doesn't know where the grand hotel is that sits like a beacon in this dreadful city. The hotel has sat for many years as the city grew and expanded around it, darkness creeping into every corner.

When I reach the building, the valet is eager to take my car, but I don't want anyone I don't know in my vehicle, so I park it myself before making the walk up to the front door. Stepping inside the hotel, I look around in wonder and question who the hell needs so many chandeliers? I feel like they could feed half the starving children in the city by selling just one of them.

With a sigh, I wander in farther until I find a man who is blatantly eyeing me, like he knows who I am. I eye him right back as he waves at the elevator. So this is obviously the concierge.

He looks crazy proper and gives me a knowing smile as he waves a white-gloved hand at the elevator. "Welcome to the Menagerie Hotel. Please, allow me to guide you," he says, and I feel weirdly disappointed he doesn't have an English accent.

"Uhhhh, I'll take the stairs."

He hesitates, his weird persona clearly not used to statements like this. "Um... sir, I'm sorry, but you must take the elevator."

"Well, I don't want to take the elevator, I want to take the stairs."

He seems a little uncertain as he waves at the elevator again like he's only been given two things he's allowed to do with his shiny white gloves and that's to wave my ass in and press a button.

"There are no stairs," he says.

"Well, that sounds like a fire hazard. Maybe I should report that to the local fire station."



He stares at me with more hand waving going on. I feel like he's trying to convey the part where if I mention this weird club to anyone, someone's going to off me. I kind of feel like someone always wants to off me, so the threat kind of sucks.

"If you want to join us, you must get in the elevator."

"This a scam? This feels like a scam. You trying to sell something? Is that why you guys keep pestering me with this stuff?" I ask. "Like get the hint. It's nine o'clock and I already feel like I'm out too late."

"This is a luxury," he says, sounding kind of offended now. "Only the elite are... I've said too much."

"You sure have... are they going to off you now?" I ask, like I'm honestly concerned. "Ooh. Do *I* get to off you?"

He's glowering at me now, which I feel like is mildly unfair, but I take a deep breath and step into the elevator. He seems pleased as he hurries in, and I give him the stupid code. The moment the doors close, I grab onto the handrail in the elevator as a tightness surrounds my throat. It's like a hand has wrapped around it and is slowly closing.

I can hear the man saying something, rattling off something that I surely don't care about as that hand tightens and tightens until the doors open and I lunge out before drawing to a stop.

Finally, I can breathe again, but what now? What have I done? Now I have to go up the goddamn elevator to get out. Or maybe I'll have to live here...

My eyes scan across the people moving around, and I feel extremely out of place in my hoodie and skinny jeans. There's music and people milling about and literally everything I hate dealing with... and to top it all off, there's Kade sitting at the bar.

He's clearly got Spidey senses or something because he seems to notice me the moment I step out of the elevator. I try to pretend like I wasn't on the verge of suffocating as I strut up to the bar and wave the bartender down.

“What can I get you, gorgeous?” the woman asks.

“Absolutely nothing, thank you. Can I talk to the boss of this place or whatever and tell him to fuck off, and that I don’t want to come here and join his... gang or speakeasy or whatever this place is, and to stop sending me these stupid letters.” I hand her the letter addressed to me so she can tell them who I am.

She seems surprised as she stares at me. “You... you don’t want to come here?”

“No, thank you... unless you guys ever have like a *Smash Bros.* tournament?”

“I’ll suggest that for next time,” she says. “But I can pass along your request.”

“I like you. Anyway. See ya.”

I turn and *really* catch Kade’s eyes then grimace when I see how black the one is. “Wow, that looks painful. What happened?”

Kade glowers at me. “You know what happened.”

“Oh nooo. So saaad.”

He gets up, his chair scooting back as he comes toward me.

“I’m pretty sure the little dorky invite said no fighting,” I say.

“I’m going to follow you out of here, and *then* I’m going to kick your ass,” he decides.

I make a show of shuddering. “I’m just... thinking about how embarrassing that’ll be for you and kind of feel bad.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “I wish you the best in your misery.”

He has some phenomenal restraint as he stares at me. “I... cannot explain using words to convey how much I dislike you.”

“We could battle it out...”—I whip out my Nintendo Switch—“with a game of *Mario Kart*.”

“And then you say something like that... and it makes me like you even less.”

I laugh as I drop my hand and tuck my Switch back into my hoodie. “See ya around... or not if you get...”—I draw a line over my neck—“dead, ya know?”

Pleased with myself, I head over to the elevator before staring at the disgusting thing. Oh, fuck. Why did I even come down here? What did I solve? I got to see Kade’s beat-up face... I guess that was fun.

Fuck.

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## KADE

Why does he do this to me? Why is it that even when I'm merely enjoying a drink he comes in and rains on that parade as well?

But if Harker is right, I need to swallow my pride and get him to work for me. So I toss a bill on the counter that will more than cover my tab and tip, then head over to the elevator, slipping inside before the door shuts.

I open my mouth, planning on telling him exactly how irritating he is, when I get a look at his face. He's pressed back in the corner of the elevator, hands clenching so tightly onto the railing that his knuckles are white. His eyes are closed, but the moment he hears me, he opens them and quickly looks away.

The concierge turns to me, paying no mind to the man who seems to be having issues in the corner as he gives me a smile.

"Floor?"

"Lobby," I say since I see that one is already lit up and assume that's where Len is going. All of the snippy comments I'd had stored up to deliver to him leave me as I awkwardly stand in the elevator. Even though it was a short ride down, I feel like time has stopped on the way up, drawing it out and making the silence extremely uncomfortable. When the door finally opens, Len slips out and hurries through the hotel.

My guards are waiting in the lobby and rush after me, but I'm fixated on Len now. When I reach the door leading out, he turns to look at me.

"If I didn't know any better, Kade, I'd say you were stalking me," he teases, like the events in the elevator didn't even happen.

"Do you know how long I've been going to that club for?" I ask. I was first invited back when I was helping my father with far too much illegal shit. And now that I have the casino

running, I'm one of the most influential men of the city, so no one second-guesses my presence there.

Len doesn't respond, so I continue. "How much money do you want?"

"Is it *your* money or someone else's? If it's yours, I'd want a lot of it, if I'm being honest," Len says.

I grit my teeth. "How much money do you want to do what I'm asking?" I say, not wanting to spell it out in case there's anyone listening.

He turns around and walks up to me before reaching out and cupping my face between his hands. The gesture is overly familiar and all four of my guards gawk at the kid who has the balls to do such a thing.

Then he uses his hands to physically shake my head, which makes me growl as I smack his hands away. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Seeing if it rattles when I shake it. No rattle... which *could* mean it's empty."

"This is a joke. You're a joke. Do you even *own* a gun?" I ask as I grab for him and yank his hoodie up to see what he's even carrying. Sometimes seeing a gun is enough to tell how skilled the wielder is... or how cocky. "You don't even have a gun on you."

"Don't I? Maybe it's somewhere else. Wanna see if you can find it?" he asks with a wink.

"Guards, let's take this man back with us to the casino... I want to talk to him," I say as I start toward my car.

Len starts to hurry off toward his own car until one of my guards, a man named Jerry, grabs Len's wrist.

Len stares down at his wrist then looks at me. "Am I being kidnapped?"

"Get in the car," I say.

Len puts on the brakes, forcing my other three guards to help with the situation. "I'm being kidnapped! Help! Help!"

Someone!”

I glance around at all the people immediately looking at us as my guards try to force Len’s rigid body into the back of the car. “Knock it off,” I hiss, hoping he quiets down.

“Knock it off? You want me to enjoy my kidnapping? Are you planning on abducting me and getting me to fall in love with you? There’s no heart in there to love, is there?” Len asks as he grabs onto the sides of the car while my men continue to push and shove him into the vehicle. Jerry’s got his hand on Len’s face and is doing his very best to cram him inside.

“Stop making a goddamn scene and get in the car.” I feel awkward at this point and hope we’re far enough from the hotel that someone doesn’t come out and try to figure out what’s happening.

He falls into the back seat, much to the satisfaction of my guards, and then pops out through the other door as my men dumbly stare at the spot he’d been. I come around to the far side of the car and block him before he scurries off.

“Get in the car.”

Len leans against the car as he watches me, a grin on his face. “Are you going to get in the car too? Because if you are, that sounds dreadful. No thank you.”

“Get in the car so we can have a discussion.”

He steps up into me, pressing so tightly against me that I can feel his body firmly against mine. I’m not sure if he was planning on making me back off or what, but I refuse to move. He’s around my height, but he doesn’t look imposing. It’s not like he even *acts* menacing or seems like someone to fear.

That’s why I ignored him at first. And even now... I still don’t believe he could be an assassin, but there’s something about the way he unexpectedly moves that makes me question him. The way he’d grabbed me in the car when I’d lit that cigarette wasn’t the movements of an amateur.

“The world does not revolve around you. You will *not* get everything you want in life acting the way you do,” he says. “I’m busy this evening.”

“I’ll give you a million dollars,” I say.

“I already have another job this evening.”

“One that pays a million?” I ask incredulously.

“Actually, the payout is even better,” he says as he pushes my arm up and slips under it before walking over to his older car. He could buy a much better car with the money I’m offering him.

“Boss?” Jerry asks.

“Go back to the casino,” I snap before I hurry down the street and grab the passenger door of Len’s car. I’m honestly surprised to find it unlocked as I let myself in and glower at him. “I want to see who’s paying you more.”

Len shrugs. “Gonna whip out your dicks and measure them too?”

“If I have to,” I say, really wanting a cigarette, but I saw how that went down the last time I was in the car.

Len stares at me for a long moment before I realize he’s waiting for me to put my seat belt on. Irritated, I finally cave and put it on before he pulls out into the street.

“If you really are an assassin, why are you letting your face be shown with me?” I ask.

“No one cares who I am,” he says. “Everyone sees an incompetent man who has, for some reason, caught your eye. Maybe they think you find me handsome. How flattering.”

I snort because if that’s the conclusion they come to, I find it even more irritating. “I don’t sleep with men like you. I have a much more... refined taste in men.”

“Dodged a bullet there,” Len says as he wipes fake sweat off his forehead while he turns and heads toward the outskirts of town. He pulls up outside a shopping center and parks before a store that *very* much looks like a comic book shop.

“Are you seriously... going *shopping*?” I ask.

“Make sure if you stay in my car you don’t get shot and bleed all over my stuff. I have some mint condition stuff in the

back that I really don't need you to spill your guts all over." And off he goes.

For a full minute, I sit in the passenger seat, anger rolling through me. No one has *ever* treated me like this. From a young age, I was forced to work hard to reach the spot I'd gotten to. My father didn't make growing up easy. Hell, I wasn't even allowed to grow up. I needed to immediately be capable of doing shit a kid my age should never have to do or see. I wasn't given time to go... play around like this guy does. I wasn't allowed to slack off or hang out with friends or play mindless games.

When my father once found a fantasy book in my room, he yelled and told me how I would become useless letting media rot my brain. Then he dragged me away and made me watch him tear the fingernails off a man who owed him money.

I shove the car door open and get out before heading into the store. Everyone turns and looks at me when I enter, like they immediately know that I don't belong, but a bubbly-looking woman gives me a smile. "Welcome! Can I help you find anything?"

I plan to ignore her but when I scan the room and find that Len isn't around, I realize that I shouldn't brush her off just yet. "The guy that just came in here, where is he?"

"Ky?"

I hesitate as I realize that he might go by a different name with this group. "He looks like a nerd."

She waves around the room. "Take your pick."

Fuck. "He's got... hair that's... light brown. Kind of shaggy. About my height. Wearing a hoodie."

"Yeah, that'd be Ky, he went through that back door," she says, so I head after him. When I reach the back room, I find Len seated before a large flat-screen TV where a group of four people are playing a video game.

"Oh, hey, you're still alive!" Len says, like he's shocked by this discovery.



“No thanks to you,” I say. “Are you ready?”

“Not yet. Want to play?” he asks as he tries to hand me one of his controllers.

“No.”

The young woman in front of him looks back at me. “Who’s this?”

“I hired him to glare at people I don’t like. He’s *phenomenal* at it. Does a real good job too.”

“Oh dayum. Do you think I could hire you to go to my mother-in-law’s and glower at her? It looks effective.”

“I have to pay him per glower, so if you could keep him from glowering at you, it’d be great,” Len says.

“You guys ready for the next round?” a teen in the front asks.

“Yep, let me add Kade’s character in. He clearly wants to play,” he says as he forces a controller into my hands. I immediately set it aside as Len holds up his. “See how these buttons here have letters? You’re going to use this one to attack and see the button back here, this one blocks.”

I stare at him. “Do you understand how much money you could be making right now?”

He ignores me and keeps trying his hardest to show me how to use the stupid controller. Why will he not *listen* to me? Why does he refuse to even *pretend* to listen?

“How much do you have to pay for *that* glower because that’s an impressive one,” the woman says.

“When you’re that skilled, you can’t be cheap,” Len says, attention riveted on the game. I lean into him to make sure he can hear me over the sound of the stupid fighting on screen.

“Do you think I’m a joke?” I ask.

He tilts his head while never looking away from the screen. “Why do we have to talk like this? It’s a bit awkward whispering in each other’s ears. Like wow, bad boy, you’ve got some fine-looking ears on you.”

“I will have you *murdered*,” I growl.

“I want you to look at the screen. See the guy in green there? That’s you,” he says before his character fucking punches mine right off the platform.

His phone beeps and he checks his smart watch. “Oh, I need to run. I’ll come back to smoke your asses tomorrow.”

“You wish,” the woman says as Len gets up and heads through the door in the back. I trail after him, half wanting to go home and half curious who his client is.

“I hope it’s Norn,” I realize.

“What? You want the guy who wants you dead to hire me?” Len asks in surprise. “That’s strange even for you.”

“I do because I want to sic my entire team on you and make you regret being absolutely irritating to me.”

Of course, that only amuses him.

Outside, he wanders over to the far end of the employee parking lot where a young man of probably sixteen or seventeen is leaning against the wall. He looks up when he sees us, and I can instantly tell he’s nervous. Len gives him a warm smile as he walks up and holds out his hand.

“Hey there,” he says.

The young man bites his lip as he shakes Len’s hand. “I-I was told you were the one who could h-help me out.”

“I sure would love to try,” Len says. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“Me and... my sister, we’ve been alone for years... My sister is a couple of years older than me and... she was able to keep us off the streets by selling herself. This guy... he took an interest in her. He treated her really nice and bought her all of these necklaces and paid for us to have this fancy room. And then he tells her she owes him for all of that stuff. That they weren’t gifts. He started selling her, b-but he’s mean and... hurts her and won’t let me see her anymore. I tried getting her out, but he nearly killed me, and when I saw her, she was covered in bruises.”

He drops to his knees and tears open a raggedy-looking backpack. He digs through it, pulling out worn clothes and some bread. A sucker falls out when he seems to find what he's looking for. It's a small amount of cash that he holds out to Len.

"This is... this is all I've got, but... I'll do anything you want. I can... do other things too... but if you don't like men... I'll..." he says, and I realize that this teenager is asking if sex with Len and the wadded-up cash of maybe forty dollars is enough to get Len to do a job for him.

"You have the name of the guy?" Len asks.

"R-Ricky Grandal..." he says before grimacing because he *knows* what that name means. He *knows* that Grandal is right there in the seediest part of this city, and while not many like him, he has a good following built off forcing men and women into his service.

Len would have to be absolutely insane to accept anything that this kid can offer in exchange for a job like that.

"Let's see..." Len says as he looks down to where the kid is holding out probably everything he has. Len reaches past it and picks up the sucker. "Can I have this?"

"Of course. You can have everything."

"Nah, this'll do. Thank you," he says before setting a hand on the teenager's head. "I'll see what I can do."

And with that, Len starts to head around to the front of the building.

"T-That's it? Are you... are you expecting more when it's done? That's fine! That's okay! I'll give you everything."

"Nah, just the sucker is plenty. It's grape. My favorite," he says before disappearing. I'm left standing by the kid, and more than anything, I'm fixated on the look on the teenager's face. There's so much raw emotion in it. So much... hope. It's a face that I doubt has seen much hope, and he's staring after Len like he's just found himself standing before his very own guardian angel.

And then he starts crying.

It makes me feel uneasy, so I quickly hurry after Len who is getting into the car while licking away on his sucker.

I get into the passenger seat and shift my attention to him. “You chose a *sucker* over my million dollars?”

He points the sucker at me. “You would be correct. And it’s grape!”

“Why?” I ask.

Len’s eyes hold on to mine. “Because I like him. I don’t like you very much. You’re an asshole. You’re cruel. You’re mean. And you think the world revolves around you. That kid, on the other hand, has nothing but is willing to give me *everything*. He would give me every cent he has, the clothes off his back, and even his body to save someone that isn’t even him. So really... if we look at it that way, he offered me a whole lot more because I can’t imagine that a million dollars would even put a dent in what you own.”

I stare at him as I realize that he’s correct. If I offered him everything like the kid did... he’d be an extremely wealthy man. He’d be one of the wealthiest men in this city. But I didn’t. I offered him what I thought he deserved for the job. Honestly, if he hadn’t given me such a fuss, I’d have offered him even less. But isn’t that because I’m a greedy man? Because without the money and the prestige, I have nothing. Would I even *want* to live if I had to give him everything I have? What would I have then? What would I do if I handed this man everything... even the clothes off my back?

He’s staring at me, and I feel like he’s wanting an answer to something, but I don’t know if I can give it. Or is he just enjoying this? He thinks it’s funny making me think this way? Looking down on me or...

I hold his eyes and realize that he doesn’t really look like he’s ridiculing me. He’s got a kind expression on his face.

“Where do you want me to drop you off?” he asks.

“I’m going with you,” I say. And I don’t even know *why* I say it. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“You sure?” he asks with a raised eyebrow. “You realize you’re involving yourself in someone else’s affairs, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay... then I suppose we should get going.”

“You do know the risk of killing Grandal, right?” I ask.

“Yes, but the reward is so much better,” he says.

“You are a fucking enigma,” I realize.

That makes the biggest smile bloom across his face, startling me. “You think? I don’t know. I’d like to believe I’m a pretty average guy.”

He drives through the city and parks behind a building to watch the back door of a club. As he does that, he clambers into the back seat and rummages around before laying the rear seat down. He drags a bag in from the trunk and pulls it up to the front seat. He takes out a hat and plops it down on my head before pulling one on himself. Then he hands me a face mask.

“I still feel like this is a setup. That Harker set me up and that you’re actually some regular guy and Harker is laughing and laughing. You don’t look the least bit badass.”

Len glances over at me and grins. “Thank you. Are you staying in here or coming in with me?”

“I sure as fuck am not staying in here. I mean... I’m destined to die in six days, I might as well get my fill, you know? Do I get a gun?”

“Do you know how to use a gun?”

“Eh,” I say with a shrug.

“You’ll fucking shoot me in the back and be all, ‘This is what you get for not worshiping the ground I walk on and sucking my toes.’”

“If anyone *ever* sucked my toes, I would probably kick them.”

“That sounds extremely kind of you,” Len says. “Ready?”

“Now?” I ask.

“Yeah, now. I’m a busy man. There’s an anime I like that comes on at midnight that I really don’t want to miss.”

“Excuse me? Are you...” I just shake my head. I have absolutely no idea how else to handle this insane man. So with my hat in place and a mask covering the lower half of my face, I follow him. There’s a big part of me that questions if I’m going to get murdered tonight following this man around.

“Don’t dis the show until you try it.”

“Do I look like I watch cartoons?”

“They’re not cartoons. Oh god, don’t get me *started* on this. You’re going to have me all riled up. Now you’re coming over to my place and we’re watching some true TV, you hear me? And I’m going to teach you how to play video games.”

“So... you think by making sure my last week on earth is hell, you’re preparing me for life after death?” I ask.

He grins at me as he reaches the back door. “Exactly!”

The door is locked, so he knocks on it. The music in the club is pretty loud, so he hammers on it some more before the door slides open and a man looks out. The man is likely expecting someone he knows, so he seems a bit uncertain upon seeing Len.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Just here to have a word with Grandal,” Len says before looking beyond the man at the door. “And there he is. Grandal, a word?”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” the man says from where he’s sitting at a table with a group of about five men. Two get up when they see that Len’s someone they don’t know. “Get this fuckhead out of here.”

And without hesitation, Len pulls out a gun and shoots the man holding the door open in the head. He swings the gun over and with five perfectly aimed shots, he shoots the remaining five men before stepping into the room. I’m just standing there gawking from the doorway as he steps over a body while Grandal scrambles for his gun.

It's not Len *killing* the men that has shocked me, it's that Grandal is known for having some quick and ruthless guards at his side. They're men that absolutely *no one* fucks with because they're ruthless, cruel, and good at what they do.

None of whom even got a gun out before they met their end.

Grandal has just pulled out his gun as Len steps up to him and rams the butt of his gun into Grandal's nose. The man's head snaps back as Len snatches the gun from Grandal's hand and the sound of his nose cracking fills the room. The man flips out of his chair in an attempt to get away from Len who is walking over to the door leading into the club before switching the lock on. Then he walks over to Grandal who's leapt to his feet.

Len shoots him right in the knee and the man crashes to the ground. "Where are the women you've been selling?" His voice is cold and there is absolutely no sign of the grinning, obnoxiously joyful man.

"Fuck you! Fuck you!" he hollers. "Help! Help!" But the noise of the club is too loud.

Len walks over to him and squats down as he watches him, the expression on his face almost blank. "You have one more knee."

"Fuck you."

Len presses his gun to it and pulls the trigger. Grandal screams but Len shows absolutely no remorse.

"You like raping women? You like hurting them? How about you tell me where they're at, and then I'll take pity on you."

"I'll tell you! They're at our warehouse. Down by the river."

"I happen to know the place. Let's go," Len says as he reaches down and pulls Grandal's belt off before wrapping it around Grandal's throat and just dragging him through the door I'm still standing in.

“Thank you,” he says, like I was holding the door open for him and Grandal and not just gawking at him. I soon see why he parked so close as he drags Grandal over to his car, pops the trunk that has been lined in plastic, and dumps his body into it before he slaps tape over Grandal’s lips and winds more around his wrists and ankles. Then he shuts the trunk and gets back in the car as I gape at him.

I mean... I’ve seen my fair share of torture, blood, and death, but I guess I just didn’t expect it out of Len. And all for a fucking sucker.

I get in and he pulls out onto the road.

“So you’ve really never watched anime?” he asks as the man in the trunk kicks away.

“Can’t say I have.”

“You, my friend, are missing out. I’ll show you some wonderful classics. I have so much to show you before your untimely demise! We’ll have to work fast!”

I glare at him, wondering why he seems to think this is a fun joke at my expense. The drive, thankfully, isn’t very long as he rambles on about his favorite classics like I could possibly care. All the while, the guy in the trunk is losing his damn mind, and rightfully so.

“Okay, hold that thought, I’ll get back to it,” Len threatens, because it’s definitely a threat when I don’t give a shit.

He puts the car in park, gets out, and heads up to the warehouse. There’s a guy up front who seems to notice him coming and appears perplexed more than anything. Len says something to him that I miss from my distance but clearly, whatever the man’s answer was, it wasn’t good enough because I see Len stab him in the throat before tossing his body off to the side and slipping in through the door.

I wander after him, wondering if I’m supposed to stay back with the prisoner or if I’m also invited on this journey through slaughterland.

Honestly, I don’t have to worry too long because as I reach the door he comes out. I’ve only just managed to make it to



the entrance and he's already done.

"They didn't have too many guards here, which was their mistake," he says as he goes back out to the car and pops the trunk. He grabs Grandal, drags him out of the trunk, and heads off on his merry way.

Grandal thrashes and mumbles as he's dragged into the warehouse. I trail after them as I realize that there are at least six bodies in the hallway alone and question at what point Len thought that "there weren't too many guards here."

I step over a dead man as Len turns right into a room where I realize there are a bunch of women warily watching us.

They seem fearful when we walk in, but when they see the state of Grandal their fear turns to curiosity. Len parades Grandal to the middle of the room as the women gather around him. Some look like husks of the person they once were, and others don't even seem to have enough life left in them to care.

Grandal is shaking his head wildly and manages to rub one side of the tape off as he starts screaming. "No! NO! Stop! What are you doing?"

"Did you ever stop when they asked?" Len asks. "Did you ever show any of them mercy?"

Grandal is delirious as Len shoves him forward and the women stare down at the man squirming on the ground, begging and pleading but it all falls on deaf ears.

"If you don't want to do it, I can," Len says as he holds his gun out.

"No," one of the women says as she takes it. "I want to show him a good time."

"If you need me, I'll be right outside," Len says as he sets a hand on my back and directs me out.

"You're just..." I point back in the room as I'm pulled out of it. "Going to let them have at it?"

"It solves nothing," Len admits. "Killing the source of your nightmare honestly solves very little, but sometimes,

when you're pushed and shoved and absolutely ruined by someone, getting that closure can give you hope. Can help you realize that when you stop someone that's plagued your nightmares, you can do anything. That you can *survive*. And that your nightmare really was just another human after all."

My mind drifts back to Len's expression in the elevator. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"I've just seen a lot of shit... and watched a lot of TV. Oh, there's a graphic novel you need to try. The main villain is a self-centered man *just* like you!"

"Funny," I growl.

He gives me a shrug. "I thought so."

It's not long later that the door swings open, and the woman holds the gun out to Len. He takes it from her and the other women come flooding out around her. They look out at the guards and not a single one of them looks horrified. They've seen too much that this shitty city has to offer them. Some of them look to be in their late teens, others young women... people who shouldn't see this many dead men and have no reaction.

"Thank you," the woman who'd taken the gun says.

Another grabs Len's hand. "Thank you..."

"You don't need to thank me. There's a bus stop right outside. Let's get you out of here," Len says, but the women won't let him go. They're grabbing him and hugging him and crying, but he just ushers them outside. It's like they see him as a support and aren't sure if they can do it without him.

He takes them to the road and still, they're not prepared to let their savior go. Do they not realize that they still have a whole road ahead of them? That this is just the start to a new life? Or is that why they're struggling to let go?

Many are likely addicted to drugs and other things that they won't be able to readily get without their clientele. Many don't have the money for a roof over their heads... so is it still better?

I rock back on my heels as I pull out all the cash I have on me. It's around two thousand that I pass to Len.

Len looks down at it. "You can give it to them yourself."

The idea of that makes me hesitate, so I shove it in his hands and walk back to his car to wait for him. It isn't until the bus comes and goes that he returns to the car and looks over at me.

"That was—" he starts.

I scowl at him. "Don't say it."

"Really nice—"

"I fucking said *don't say it*," I growl, but Len is giving me a huge smile.

He reaches out and tries to cup my face, but I smack his hand away. "There is a heart in there. There really is. Some things are just... shocking."

I ignore him, regretting everything.

"Want to go watch anime with me?"

"Absolutely not."

"Want to play some video games?"

"No part of me wants to play video games."

"You know you want to."

"It's the last fucking thing I want to do."

Len just laughs as he puts the car in drive and pulls away.

# CHAPTER 4

FIVE DAYS LEFT

## LEN

There has to be something in my brain that doesn't always work quite right. I, one hundred percent, have absolutely no reason to be outside of Kade's casino. I've already stated that I wouldn't take the job, but here I am.

I wasn't wrong in telling him that he was a dick, but last night he handed over money to those women that he never even had to admit he had. Hell, he could have given them a hundred and gone about his day.

No, the money won't be enough to live off for long, but for many of those women, it'll change their lives. It'll give them a chance to get their feet under them. A roof, clothes, food... a chance to find a job.

So here I am, curious if it was a one-off, that he just had so much money that it didn't even matter to a man like him, or he'd done it because there's a teeny-tiny, minuscule heart located somewhere in his chest.

I step into the casino and instantly make a beeline for the back. I don't *hate* social things like this or clubs, but I sure don't like them either. It's always so loud, and so many people, and of course he lets people smoke in here. So here I am, with my hand clamped over my nose, rushing through the place.

When I reach the back, I find a guard who looks like he'd have an idea where Kade is.

"Hey, can you tell Kade I'm here? Tell him his new friend has arrived."

The man just stares at me, then with a wave of his hand to shoo me off, he turns back to another guard who is clearly more important than me.

He must think that the wave is enough because he starts grumbling to his buddy as he checks his phone. "I've been

here twelve hours at this point and just want to go home. My daughter's first birthday party is in an hour."

The other guard also chooses to ignore me; this one doesn't even look at me as he angles his body toward the first guy, so I step back just a little to listen. "Kade wants this place locked down tight in case Norn stirs up trouble, which we all know he's going to do, but we're going to be dead from exhaustion by the time he comes. He really needs to hire more people," the other says.

"He won't though. He hates hiring people he doesn't trust."

"Then he can deal with the consequences of overworking us. I already feel like quitting."

Clearly, no one cares that I'm patiently waiting as I step in closer to them. "Sooooo... can I just go on back, then?" I ask as I reach for the doorknob.

"Fuck off, man," the guard says as he puts his arm out.

I stand there for a moment, then look to the door, then back at him. "But Kade is in there... and I'm out here... do you see the problem? Either of you?"

"Who is this fuck?" the first guard asks the other.

The second scrutinizes me for a second before he says, "I dunno, want to kick his ass?"

"He does look kickable."

I look them over then glance at myself. "Why? What part of me looks kickable?"

"Every part," the first guard says.

I smack his hand away and pull open the door before one of them grabs onto my midsection and starts pulling me away. Clinging onto the doorknob, I glance into the room and find Kade talking to some people from his spot in a large chair.

"Kade! Kade! Hey, Kade!" I call.

"What the fuck?" he asks as he stubs out his cigarette. "What are you doing?"

“I guess your guards don’t like me or something. They said I look ‘kickable,’ which I feel like is a mildly unfair way to judge me,” I say as they hold me, now unsure of what to do with me seeing as Kade has acknowledged me.

“Um... boss... do you want to... see him?” the guard holding me off the ground asks. He’s a bit worried now that he’s declared me the enemy when Kade knows me.

“Sure.”

The guard quickly puts me down and pats me on the shoulder. “All you had to do was ask to see him.”

I turn on him with wide eyes. “DID I?”

“I’d have let you in if you’d have simply said something,” he says before following me into the room that fucking stinks. I grab the ashtray and toss it in the sink before running water over it, hoping to kill the smell a little.

“God, you reek,” I tell Kade as everyone in the room stares at me like I’m an alien. Last I checked, I’m not... but does one *really* ever know?

“What are you doing here?” Kade asks, which makes him weirdly sound like he’s not elated by my presence.

“I wanted to see if you still had your head or not,” I say as I grab a chunk of his hair and give it a tug. “Eh! Looky there, it’s still attached. Firmly too. How nice!”

“No thanks to you.”

I grin as I slide into a seat across from him. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. You haven’t gotten shot, punched, or threatened once while I was around. Also, you need to give your poor guys a break and this dude over here just wants to see his daughter’s first birthday party. If you’re not careful, your employees might off you before your nemesis does.”

Kade scowls at me. “You seriously think you can come in here and tell me what to do? If he wants to keep his job, then he’s going to stay right here.”



I stare at Kade and wonder at what point he became such a dick. Was he born a dick? Pop out already barking orders and making everyone else miserable? Or when was he formed into one?

His face twitches and then he tsks before looking up. “Jon, take the evening off, but you better work twice as hard tomorrow.”

The man looks shocked. No, let me rephrase, they *all* look shocked. Like the attention of every living creature in the room *snaps* over to Kade who is doing a valiant effort of pretending not to notice.

“T-Thank you! I will! I’ll repay you!” Jon says as he fucking *bolts*, like he’s terrified Kade’s going to go “Ha ha, just a joke. Work ten more hours for falling for it.”

“The rest of your guys look hungry,” I say. “I mean...” I smack the gut of a man near me who looks like he could crush me with a flick of his fingers. “Skin and bones.”

Kade stares at me before the expression turns into a glower. “They’re allowed to eat during their break. I don’t starve them.”

“They *do* have your life in their hands, though. I mean... I don’t know about you, but I’d definitely be more willing to protect someone who just bought me pizza than someone who didn’t.”

Kade’s eyebrow rises as he stares at me in disbelief. Then he lets out a giant sigh and hands one of the guys his credit card. “Order some fucking pizza. And from that place downtown you guys wouldn’t shut up about last week.”

The guy he handed the credit card to stares at it like he’s holding a precious breakable object. “Like... like... *you* want pizza.”

“Enough for all of you.”

The man is glancing around nervously now. “W-What kind?”

“I don’t give a shit. Just order whatever you guys want.”

The man seems too terrified to comply, so I grab the credit card and pull out my phone. “How many guards are here right now?”

Kade watches me closely and I find that the look he’s giving me is quite a curious one. He’s a handsome man when he’s not being an asshole, but I know looks don’t excuse actions. He can be pretty all day long but the moment he opens his mouth, it kills any idea of attraction. “About twenty guards.”

“Hmm... Google says eight pizzas for that many, but let’s go with ten. I mean... we want to keep them satisfied,” I say as I make the order. “I’ll get some two-liters too. And... want some breadsticks?”

“Whatever you want,” Kade says, eyes still on me.

“I love breadsticks.”

“So was it actually just you who wanted pizza?” Kade asks.

I grin at him before handing him the card back. “I *do* feel a bit peckish. It’ll be here in thirty minutes.”

“Great,” he says as he slips the card into his wallet. Then he takes out his pack of cigarettes even though the stench of the last one still hasn’t fully left.

“Can you please not smoke?” I ask as I hold his dark eyes.

He stares at me with a raised eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I say as I get up and wander over to the TV. I start setting up my Switch as he grumbles behind me.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re so damn needy.”

“I know,” I say as I come around to where he’s sitting in a large chair and give him a shove before squeezing next to him. “So as promised, I brought that game I think you’ll like.”

“I’m not playing any of your fucking games,” he warns me as I hand him a controller.

He seems to notice we have a gawking audience because he looks up at them and gives them a wave. “Fuck off.”

They scurry off quite quickly until there are only a couple in here with us.

“If you let them have shit, they’ll just keep asking,” Kade grumbles, which I think is rather ridiculous.

“You think?” I ask as I look over at him. “Or do you think that by treating them like they’re human and showing them that you care about them, they’ll like you more?”

Kade seems to sour at that, and I can’t tell if I hit a nerve or if he’s just annoyed at me. “They’re not here to be friends, they’re here to do a job for me and get paid.”

I watch him for a moment as he stares right into my soul.

“Fuck, you’re annoying,” he decides on.

I smile at him before leaning my body into his shoulder. “Am I?”

“Extremely. Why the hell are you sitting so close to me?”

“I’d think you’d love that! I mean... if someone came in to kill you, the bullet would have to go through my body first. I could just... throw myself over you in a heroic act. It would be the greatest love story never written.”

“That’s true. Please make sure you jump in front of any bullets for me.”

“I will. Just for you,” I say as I take his hand and force the controller into it. “*Smash Bros.* time! Are you *ready*?”

“Absolutely not. I have things to do.”

“You’re going to be dead in five days, I mean, really... what do you even need to do? You *have* to have gotten your scowl quota in for the day.”

And there’s another scowl to add to it! “There are many other things I’d prefer to be doing right now. Maybe I’ll find myself someone to fuck, then.”

I gasp. “Oh... honey, no... this is so much more fun.”

“Than *sex*?” he questions.

“I may be a bit... biased but I tend to believe anything with me is more fun than sex with some rando who’s gonna be all ‘Ooh, your cock is as big as your wallet, fuck me harder. Ooh la la, now buy me something!’”

He doesn’t think I’m anywhere near as funny as I think I am, but I do get a snicker out of a guard near him. When Kade turns his eyes onto the man, he looks prepared to lay down his life. Kade huffs and returns his attention to me.

“Cute.”

“Aw, thank you. I paid extra attention to not brushing my hair today,” I say as I notice he’s put the controller back down. I grab his hand and practically force it back into his fingers. “Do we have duct tape? Anyone have duct tape?”

“You are not taping this piece of shit to my hand.”

“Someone’s in a mood. Is he always this moody?” I ask the guards who absolutely *refuse* to even acknowledge me at this point. They know their jobs, and perhaps even their lives, are on the line. “You know what fascinates me the most? Like... look at these guards. They’re fucking wary of you, and why? You can’t fight. You don’t know how to use a gun. You just know how to sit pretty and scowl.”

“Who invited you in here?” Kade asks, but I’m having far too much fun to leave.

“I just... it’s like a train wreck. I can’t look away.”

“You literally can’t wait to watch me die, can you?”

“It’s gonna be *gruesome*. So much blood and gore.”

Kade grabs the front of my hoodie, drawing me in so close he could nearly kiss me, and for some reason, my eyes betray me by looking down at his lips even though he’s clearly winding up to start complaining some more. But his expression tells me that this time, he doesn’t mean it. He’s not truly angry. “You are a fucking menace.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Len the Menace. It has a nice ring to it, dontcha think? Alright, let’s pick your character. You totally look like a *Wii Fit* kind of guy.”

“I don’t even know what that means. Does the character suck?”

“I’m not going to give you the *worst* character. What kind of person do you think I am? Nah, nah. You’ll be good,” I say as I pick my character and start the game.

“Why the hell do I look so damn useless, and you have a sword?”

“It’s all about the moves, baby,” I say as I try to show him how to play. He just sits there like he’s miserable. “Do you want my help? If you want my help saving your life, you play the game.”

“You said you’re not helping me anyway,” he mutters, but he finally presses a button.

“There ya go,” I say. “Look at those moves!”

“This is fucking stupid,” Kade complains, but he keeps smacking on the buttons. He seems to be getting into it now. I try to tell him different move sets, but he seems to prefer to just hammer on one button and call it good.

“You guys want to play too?” I ask as I hold controllers out to the guards as well.

They stare at them like I’ve offered up rattlesnakes.

“Kade doesn’t care. Come on,” I urge.

“Take the damn controller and murder his smug ass or you’re fired,” Kade says since he seems to be in some deep struggle at the moment.

By the time the pizza arrives, I’ve gotten more to return and join in and as they watch Kade cusses profusely at the screen. I even manage to get a full party of eight playing. No one, absolutely *no one* but me attacks Kade’s character, but hey, it’s a start.

“You realize that if someone came in right now, we’d all die?” Kade asks.

“At least we’d die having fun and with our tummies full!” I say.

“This is stupid. You are ridiculous.”

I shove a breadstick in his mouth, positive that if he doesn't have anything nice to say about how much fun he's having, he shouldn't be able to say anything.

“Why do you keep giving me the most useless-looking trash?” Kade asks once he's free of the breadstick.

“He's actually giving you some of the highest-tiered characters and giving himself lower ones,” a guy standing behind him says.

“Of course he is,” Kade grumbles.

I grin at him. “Some call me Saint Len.”

“I got shit to do,” he says as he finishes up the round and hands me the controller. I pass his and mine off to others who were watching and follow Kade as he wanders out into the casino. “So did you come here just to gloat? Or do you finally want to be hired?”

“Sorry, I already have a job tonight.”

“Of course you do,” he says as he moves through the thick crowd and over to a roulette table. He says something to the lady manning it as I notice a man who is gripping a woman's wrist. He's squeezing it tightly as she tries to lean away from him. He jerks her in close and whispers something in her ear that makes her pale considerably. She turns her bruised face away and the man promptly smacks her across the cheek.

I glance over at Kade to see that he notices but promptly looks away, like it's none of his business, and I truly believe that he doesn't think it is. Kade sees me looking at him but turns away and starts toward the back.

“You're not going to do anything?” I ask, anger rearing its ugly head.

“What do you want me to do, Len? I'm not goddamn Robin Hood.”

“Your authority is fucking up here, Kade,” I say as I hold my hand above my head. “You don't need a gun or anything to just... make people listen to you or to change the lives of

people around you. You have so much power and don't even need a weapon to use it. But you're so stuck in your damn bubble that you don't see that. You think that you don't need to worry about anyone outside your bubble, but Kade, from the way I see it, you're the only one in there. Doesn't it get lonely? Don't you get tired of pushing people out of it?"

Kade spins on his heel and gets up in my face before shoving me. "Why the hell do you think you can analyze everything I do? I want to hire you. I want to pay you *money* to do a *job* for me. And instead, you scrutinize me and make it so everything seems like it's some kind of... redemption bullshit? I don't need it, Len. You're not my goddamn therapist."

I nod slowly, his attitude immediately making a bad feeling grow in the pit of my stomach that reminds me exactly why I don't deal with men like him. "Okay... okay." I put my hands up. "Fine. I knew from the moment I met you that I didn't want to work with you. I have no fucking idea why I thought that maybe my first impression was wrong."

I turn around and walk up to the man who's still harassing the woman. "Let her go."

"Who the fuck are you?" he asks.

I grab the wrist of the hand still wrapped around her arm. "I said let her go."

"Fuck off, man." He tries shoving me back, but I push his free hand to the side before squeezing the one I have until he lets go of her. Then I push her behind me and point to the door. "Get the fuck out of here."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he snaps, and I don't even give a shit about handing him an answer. I just can't stand people like him.

I grab a hold of his throat and press up into him. "Fucking leave the premises or I will break your fucking face. I am *not* in the mood."

"You want to fight?"

“Sure. Let’s fight,” I growl as I let go of him and make my way to the front door. He comes after me, ready to knock me out, rage and alcohol pushing him right along. At least he has the decency to wait until we’re outside before he comes after me, of course when my back is still turned to him. I step to the side, turn and punch him in the face so hard he collapses right there and doesn’t get back up. He doesn’t even groan, just goes straight down.

Then I head toward my car.

“What do you think you’ve solved?” Kade yells after me. “You know that woman will go crawling right back to him. Sucking his cock and begging his forgiveness because no one in this depraved city has any goddamn sense.”

I turn to face him. “She very well might. And those women from last night might go find themselves another man like Grandal. I can’t control the actions of people around me, but I can give them a chance. It’s up to them if they want to take it or not.”

“Yeah, because you’re just some hero.”

I shake my head. “Needed the last word, huh? That why you followed me out here? Need to fucking measure dicks again, huh?”

Kade shakes his head as anger burns deep in his expression. “I wanted a fucking service from you. Not someone on some mission to change me. I don’t need to *change*.”

“Don’t you?”

“Maybe you’re the one that’s wrong because there isn’t a goddamn person out there in this world who really gives a shit about you or me. They all care about themselves. You have to learn to protect yourself because no one else will.”

I strut up to him. “You want to know why I declined the job?”

He glowers at me. “Enlighten me.”



“Because you are an absolute dick. Why should I risk *my life* for some self-centered asshole like you? I fight and I risk my life to protect people from assholes *like you*.”

“Then why do you keep coming back?” he asks as he throws his hands up in the air.

I shake my head because I’ve questioned the very same thing. “Because I thought maybe I was wrong about you. Clearly, I’m not. Have a nice life... even if it’s quite short.”

Kade rushes up and throws a punch at me, which I dodge. That pisses him off more, so he throws another at my face. I lift my arm up in a sweeping motion and redirect his hit so he slams into a car now that his balance has been knocked off. He’s pissed now and comes at me again as I step to the side and slide my leg between his, catching him off balance as I grab a wrist and fling him down onto his back.

It knocks the wind out of him as he hits hard on the blacktop and stares up at the sky.

“Fuck,” he whispers.

I stare down at him for a long moment, feeling mentally exhausted.

“You have to only care about yourself,” Kade eventually says. “No one else gives a shit what happens to you. Even at a time like this, there’s not a single damn person in this city that’d stand up for me if I didn’t pay them. And I know that when the time comes for someone to kill me, every fucking one of them is going to back away.”

“*You* did that,” I say. “You caused them to treat you that way.”

“No, that’s how life *is*,” Kade yells, still refusing to get up. “I learned that from a young age. I learned that watching my father beat my mother and smack me around. But you know what? She’d *always* go back to him. She didn’t give a shit what he did to either of us because, to her, it was worth it. To her, I needed to just man up. I learned from a young age that everyone, *literally everyone*, turns their back on you. I asked for help. I begged for help, but no one would face my father.

No one cared.” He sits up, refusing to look at me as he rubs at his head with his hands. His suit is dirty from the parking lot, he doesn’t look as pristine as he usually does... and dare I say vulnerable?

He shakes his head as he finally looks up at me. “Opening yourself up and caring about others just destroys you,” he says. “It only opens you up for more pain and hurt when you realize what kind of person they truly are.”

“But it could also save you,” I say. “No, it’s not always going to be easy, and especially in a city like this, most people are more eager to stab you in the back than offer you a hand. But all those little things are what make it worth it.” I hold my hand out to him and for a long moment, I’m not sure if he’s going to take it before he wraps his fingers around mine and I pull him up to his feet. “I don’t like cruel men. I don’t like men who use their power to belittle others. And I don’t like men who smoke. If you can prove to me that you’re not one of those men, then I’ll make sure Norn is dead by the end of your week.”

Kade’s hand is warm in mine, and I find that he’s staring down at my fingers. “Then you might as well shoot me now.”

I smile at him. “I like it most when men can prove me wrong. There’s a heart in there and it might be fucking rusted shut, but with enough lube, it might open up.”

“You’re so damn strange.”

“Thanks.”

He takes a deep breath and releases my hand before looking around. “I shouldn’t be out here. Who knows who’s lingering around.”

“Oh, Norn’s men? Yeah, there were two out here when I arrived earlier, but I shot them both. You owe me for that one. Have a good night, Kade. I’m tired.”

He watches me for several seconds, like he wants to say something else, before he nods and watches me get in the car. I glance in my rearview mirror as he finally turns around and walks back to the casino. I watch as the door opens and the

woman I'd stopped from getting harassed steps outside. She stares down at the man who's writhing on the ground and jumps as Kade kicks him right in the gut. Then Kade puts a hand on her back and directs her over to a guard. He says something before heading inside.

Kade's not perfect.

None of us are.

But I firmly believe a man like him could make a difference. He doesn't need a gun or need to know how to fight. No... Kade's got his own power, if he learns how to use it.

# CHAPTER 5

FOUR DAYS LEFT

## KADE

As I walk into the casino, a guard I don't remember the name of smiles at me. It instantly makes me wary. "Good evening!" he says, and I'm so surprised by the declaration that I momentarily just stare at him.

"Good... evening," I say, highly suspicious about this. Is this a new tactic for murdering someone? Get them off guard before going in for the kill?

"Thanks for the pizza yesterday, I'd forgotten my dinner and really didn't want to pay casino prices."

"Oh... you're welcome," I say, and the guy even pats me on the shoulder as I head for the back. About halfway there, Harker pushes away from a card table and hurries over to me.

"The guards are in awe over you," he says with that annoying look on his face. I'm confident most of his looks are annoying but this one just takes the cake.

"Shut up."

"Are you... embarrassed?" he asks with a teasing tone.

"Don't you have some more money to lose?" I grumble.

"I actually just won a hundred dollars. A hundred dollars, Kade! I want to hear more about this pizza party you threw last night. I heard there were even breadsticks! Were you wanting to get someone's breadstick and thought it'd impress them?"

My mind drifts over to Len and I scowl at the idea. "Trust me. I don't want him. I just fucking want him to murder Norn," I growl. "I'm still skeptical that he can." I say this even though I've seen that beneath his strange exterior he actually seems to know his stuff.

That makes Harker stumble to a stop. "Oh? You had *Len* over here? So that's the mystery guy they were all talking about. How did you pull that off?"

“I didn’t pull off shit,” I grumble. “He arrived *on his own* to harass me *on his own*.”

“He still won’t work for you?” he asks. “God, this is hilarious.”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure he just showed up in the hopes of watching me die.”

Harker laughs before noticing someone waving. When I look up, I see it’s his wife who I give a nod to. “Oh, I’d love to hear more about your miserable life, but the wife calls. Maybe try showing up uninvited to his place... naked, you know? I mean... maybe he’ll save your life if you show him the power of your penis.”

“I am firing you when this week is over with,” I decide.

He laughs before turning toward his wife. “That’s not going to happen. Who else could stand your cranky ass?”

“Fuck off,” I grumble as I head into the back when my phone beeps. I glance down at it and realize that it’s an address—Len’s address if I had to guess by all the eggplant emojis Harker’s sending along with it. I mean... it *is* a tactic. The way Len watches me tells me that he’s not completely repulsed by me but...

I don’t think I could do it. I don’t think I could stoop so low.

“Hey, boss, your friend left this,” Harry, one of the guys who’d played with us last night, says as he hands me a bag holding Len’s junk toys.

“Hmm...”

I set it on the counter as Jon glances over at me before walking up. “Thanks again for last night... really, I don’t know how to tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I say, trying to wave it off.

“It is to me,” Jon insists. “My wife got in an accident and hasn’t been able to work, and I’ve been working two jobs to keep things going so I’ve missed a lot of my little girl’s firsts... I was happy to not miss this one. Real happy.”

I nod slowly, feeling weird because at the end of the day, was it really me who did any of this shit? It was Len. I never would have even considered giving them anything... because I'm a heartless asshole, just like Len said.

I need a fucking drink. "Yeah, that's good... maybe you should take the rest of the week off," I say.

He watches me for a moment. "You really think Norn's going to get that ballsy?"

"He's already killed multiple guards of mine," I say. Most of them, I didn't even know their name. I went to none of their funerals. I need to have Harker send some of my money to their families. It can't bring them back but maybe it'll help.

Jon hesitates but ends up shaking his head. "I just... I can't. We have medical bills, and this job pays so much better than my other one."

"And then someone shoots you in the head and who does your wife or daughter have?" I ask. "Use your paid time off."

"I... didn't know we had paid time off," he says.

"I didn't either," I grumble as I turn around. "I need a drink."

What the fuck am I doing? Even one person could make a difference and stop more from dying. But I'm the one who could keep anyone from dying if I sold to Norn. If I handed it over.

But then I'd have *nothing*. There would be absolutely nothing left of my life. I know Norn wants the casino to launder money he makes selling weapons. He'd reached out to me in the past, asking to make a deal, but I turned him down. Norn never gets turned down, so now he also wants the prestige that comes with it. He wants people to know that he's knocked down one of the highest-standing men in this city. One of the richest. He wants to watch me squirm and give it all up to save my life. He wants the satisfaction that he came out on top.

I shake my head, pushing those thoughts back as I head to the bar, or more specifically, to a man who frequents the



casino and my bedroom quite often. I slide into the chair next to William, causing him to look over at me.

“Hey there, handsome,” he says with a sexy grin on his face. “You’ve clearly been busy; I haven’t seen you around all week.”

“Dealing with irritations and the like,” I say. “Let me get you a drink.”

I wave to the bartender who already knows what to bring the two of us. William pushes his stool closer to mine and smiles at me. His hand rests on my leg as he looks at me seductively. “Anything I could do to help... relieve some stress? I’m sure there’s something,” he says with a wink.

“I’m positive there’s something as well,” I say as the bartender sets our drinks before us.

William’s hand creeps higher up my thigh as I lean into him. William has tried for years to get something more out of me, but I’m definitely more of an every now and then kind of guy. He’s attractive and nice without being irritating like Len is. He’s also an extremely alluring man, and while Len is attractive, this man has more of a... sexiness to him with his low V-neck and tight pants that leave little to the imagination. When he wants something, he knows just how to purr when he talks.

Why the fuck am I comparing him to Len? Damn Harker getting in my head about absolute bullshit.

“What’s wrong?” William asks as he lifts his hand, looking like he’s worried he’s offended me.

“What?” I ask, uncertain what he’s going on about.

“You seem off today. Why don’t I make it better?”

I watch him closely as his hand returns and see the watch around his wrist that I bought him. When we were walking to a hotel last week, he’d stopped outside the store and declared how much he wanted that watch but didn’t think he’d ever be able to afford it. It was nothing to me, so I bought it for him.

It was enough money to pay his rent for months. It cost more than the money I gave to the women that Len said I changed the lives of. Running my fingers over the watch, I turn it a little to face me. “You like that watch?”

“I do! I saw today they had different colored bands for it. I thought how neat it’d be to have different colors,” he says.

“How much are they?”

“I don’t know... a few hundred a piece. But wouldn’t red have looked much better with my outfit?” he asks as he tilts on the stool so I can get a look at his ass. Not sure why red matches his ass better, but a week ago, I would have handed him the money without a second thought and pulled him off to bed somewhere.

I lean back and see Jon talking to the bouncer and laughing at something he said.

“It’s funny how things work,” I say.

“What’s that?” William asks.

“How there are some people in the world that are just good, you know? Born good, die good but nothing good ever happens to them. And then there are people like me who just have it all and there’s not a damn good thing about me.”

He shakes his head. “Oh, don’t believe that. You’re really good in bed. And you’re really good at giving gifts,” he says as his hand rests on my cock, just light enough I can feel him through my pants.

“I forgot I have something to do,” I say as I get up and head toward the back room. William, who really wants his watch band, chases after me.

“What do you mean? I’ve been trying to chase you down all week, then I finally find you and you’re leaving?” he asks.

“What? Since you saw they had new bands you’ve been trying to chase me down?”

William looks a bit startled before shaking his head. “No! I’m not like that. You know me. We have fun! It’s all good fun!”

I nod and slip through the door where I grab the bag full of Len's junk before heading to the back parking lot. I don't bother calling for any of my guards. Honestly, I don't even know why as I walk out to the car. Maybe I don't give a shit or maybe I don't think Norn will do anything just yet, or maybe... I don't want more people to die because of me.

Instead, I send a text to Jon and tell him that I'm headed out before getting in the car. William tries getting in but I lock the door before he can.

"What the fuck?" he asks.

"Goodnight, William."

"What's wrong with you today?" he shouts through the window he's standing outside of.

"It's a question I've been asking myself all day," I say before putting the car in drive and heading off toward the address Harker had sent me.

The drive's not far, barely ten minutes before I pull up outside a large apartment building. I park before taking a moment to second-guess what I'm doing. Why would I turn down a fun piece of ass for this?

With a sigh, I get out and go up to the front door before pressing on the buzzer. A man comes to the door but stays safely behind it. In this area, my guess is that while he acts like a concierge, his real job is security.

"Good evening, sir."

"I'm meeting someone," I say as I flash him two hundred dollars.

He hesitates then nods before holding the door open. "Right this way."

"Room 302."

"Ah right. Thank you, sir," he says with a smile as he takes me over to the elevator and sends me up it alone, his eyes focused on the money like such a small amount has just changed his whole world.

I reach the third floor and walk down the hallway. It was foolish of me to expect that Len lived in a high-class apartment. I just assumed any man that could snub his nose at a million dollars thought that it was chump change. But of course Len wouldn't live in luxury. That's just not who he is. The apartment building isn't run-down or on the poor side of town but seems average in every sense and... just fits Len.

I knock on the door and wait a minute before it swings open, and a very confused Len looks out at me.

“Well, this is unusual. Did ya come to murder me? Punch me again?” he teases, and the look on his face tells me that he's reminiscing about how awful of a fighter I really am.

“My back is still sore from the last time I punched you,” I grumble.

“Hold on... Last time you punched me or—more accurately—the last time you *tried* punching me. It's a huge difference,” he says as he stands there with his messy hair. He's wearing sweatpants that hang on him and are covered in comic book characters. His shirt is two sizes too big and still... there's just something about him.

Something that makes me really *look* at him. Makes me realize that when I look at him, there's nothing I can pull apart like I can with a guy like William. *Is* William sexier? I guess he is, but isn't that just because of his actions and clothing? The look of glee on Len's face is undoubtedly sexier.

Fuck.

I push all those stupid thoughts to the farthest corner of my mind where they undoubtedly need to wither and die. “I brought your junk.”

“Oh my god, you're the sweetest. I was going to pick it up earlier but ended up marathoning *The Avengers*. Have you watched it?”

“I don't watch senseless TV,” I say as I hold the bag out, which he takes. Now my job is done, and I can leave and do something worthwhile with the days I have left.

“Oh no... you’re just... you’re just so manly, what’ll you ever do if you watch TV! What if it makes it harder for you to growl at people?”

I knew better than to come here. “You’re not funny.”

Len grins at me as he steps back. “Come in.”

“I don’t want to come in.”

“Then stand out in my hallway and breathe heavily outside my door. *But* I’m popping popcorn and about to dive into the next movie.”

“I don’t want popcorn. I just wanted to drop your junk off.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry that I offended you with my popcorn. I should have offered you something manlier. Um... okay... uh, let’s see, manly... manly... I got a big ol’ chunk of moose meat in my freezer. Slaughtered that moose with my bare fists. I just fucking leapt onto its back and I was so manly it died on the spot.”

I rock back on my heels and fight the grin on my face. “Why are you so ridiculous?”

“It’s how I live my life,” he says as he backs up, and I find myself drawn in. He shuts the door behind me as I look around the open concept room and again... find myself questioning if it has to do with his aversion to small spaces. Or maybe he just hates elevators.

There’s something that tells me I’m better off not asking. Not yet, anyway.

He heads over to the kitchen where he sticks some popcorn into the microwave and gets out two bowls.

“You must have been really aching to get sassed to come here,” Len says. “Did you miss me?”

“I firmly believe you caused trauma to my brain after you body slammed me on the ground last night,” I say.

“Wow, I sound like a dick. You alright?” he asks as he leans against the counter.

“No. Today someone thanked me for pizza. Someone else told me that he’d never been happier than seeing his daughter’s first birthday party. I told him he should take paid time off. They don’t even *get* paid time off. And then, as if my day wasn’t horrible enough, I turned down a very nice piece of ass.”

The way the grin on his face just *blooms* makes me want to walk right out that damn door. “Oh no! That’s absolutely awful. Tragic! Do you think... do you think you’re going to make it?” He reaches up and feels my forehead. “You feel really warm, but I’m wondering if that’s because with how dead your attitude is, I thought you’d be cold to the touch.”

“Funny.”

Len seems as proud as a peacock as he grabs the finished popcorn and two beers. “Thank you. Did it feel good?”

“Blue balling it?”

That makes him chuckle and I try my hardest not to like the sound of it. “No, being thanked. It’s funny how doing kind things doesn’t only affect those you’re nice to. It makes you feel good too.”

“No, I feel like shit. I feel disgusting,” I say, even though I don’t. “Maybe I feel guilty.”

“For?”

“For not even knowing the names of the men Norn killed that were guarding me.”

“Sadly, that’s a risk many people take in this city when they choose to work a job like they have. You can’t blame yourself for that. I know that’s a risk I face every time I do something for a client. That’s why I make sure I like them enough to take that risk.”

I watch him for a long moment before looking away.

“Anyway, the past is the past. Let it die and focus on the future. Our future is chowing on popcorn and watching a movie or playing a video game. Which would you prefer?”

“Neither.”

“Want to read? I have a pile of graphic novels that I’ll probably never get through at my current read-to-buy ratio,” he says.

“Absolutely not.”

Have I ever been to a man’s house who offered such mundane things to do? I don’t think so. They generally either want something or we have sex... which then leads them to wanting something. And then I leave.

“If I could buy you anything in the world, what would you want?” I ask.

“Ohhh, that’s a tough question,” he says. “I’m really craving a root beer with this but I’m all out.”

“What else?”

“Two things? I don’t know. I don’t really need anything. What’s with this weird question?” he asks as he leads me over to the couch. “Do you think I look poor and you feel bad for me or something?”

“I definitely don’t feel bad for you. I feel bad that you’re weird, but that’s it.”

“Ohhhh, you love my weirdness. Admit it.”

“No.”

Len sits on one end of the couch and I’m left staring at the options. I could sit in the middle next to him, but then isn’t that something someone does when they want in the other’s pants?

I choose the far end.

“You ignoring me? I asked why you’re asking these strange questions,” Len asks.

“Because I want to know.”

He raises an eyebrow as he turns to look at me and tosses a piece of popcorn at me. It hits me right between the eyes, making my scowl deepen.

“I’m trying to fix that wrinkle between your eyes,” he says.

“Sure as fuck isn’t going to fix it doing that,” I grumble.

Len smiles and tosses another. “Ohh, you’re right. It just got worse!”

“Answer my question.”

He stops throwing shit at me and sighs. “I don’t want anything, Kade. And... what I do want, you can’t buy with money.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

Len hesitates, hand poised above the bowl, before he plasters on a smile that he somehow seems to think he can pretend is real. “Your hot bod,” he says, but I’m fully aware it was said to distract me from my question.

I debate not letting it go, but I give in and push it to the side. “I guess when I’m dead at the end of this week, you can have it. I’ll write it in my will. Being dead, I’ll have no use for it.”

That makes him shake his head. “No! Please no! I’m not... no, that’s not my thing. Thank you for your consideration.”

“You going to stuff it or something?”

He starts laughing. “Stop! You’re making me seem like an absolute creeper. I’m not! That’s horrifying. People would think I was a serial killer!”

“You said you wanted it.”

“Not anymore! I’m too traumatized.”

“You shouldn’t be so picky,” I say, taking a bite of the popcorn as he grabs the remote.

“I like you,” Len says. “You’re actually kind of funny once I rip off all the disgusting layers.”

“I’m unsure if that was supposed to be a jab or a compliment.”



“Best kind of compliments are the ones that make you second-guess everything,” he tries to assure me. I’m not very assured. “How about since you’re a movie virgin, we start with a half-hour show? Think you can handle that better?”

“I’m not a movie... just stop. The more you talk, the more I question why I’m even here.”

He seems proud of that as he clicks over to a TV show that starts playing. I can immediately tell it’s not something that I’m going to enjoy, but as the minutes stretch on, I find myself focused on it for some reason. Even after my popcorn bowl is empty and I’ve sworn I’ll leave after the first episode, I find myself staying right where I am as the second episode starts.

“You like it, don’t you?” he teases.

“I’d rather rub my nuts on a cheese grater than watch another,” I grumble.

“Ah, you really like it. I knew you would,” he says as he scoots over before lying down on the couch, head on my lap.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I stare down at him.

Len rolls onto his back and smiles up at me. “Enjoying TV with you.”

“There’s only one reason I ever want someone’s head down there.”

He makes a show of looking thoughtful. “I just... can’t figure that one out. Ah well,” he says as he reaches up. I foolishly think he’s going to pull me down for a kiss, but instead, he smacks my cheek.

“Thank you for not smelling like an ashtray today. You actually smell good for once.”

I scowl as I consider why I don’t, then decide I don’t want to use that much brainpower on him. “I didn’t do it for you. I don’t smoke all the time. Usually only when I drink and then when I’m angry.”

“Oh no! You must go through what? Five packs a day in that case?”

“I’m only angry when I see your face.”

“Oh wow!”

“Stop with the sass.”

He’s clearly proud of himself as he rolls onto his side as the next show starts. Even though I’d found myself wanting to know what happens next, my eyes travel down to the man on my lap, feeling almost hypnotized by him as my mind runs wild.

In my thirty-seven years have I ever once done something like this? I don’t think I have.

Reaching down, I tug at his hair so he’s well aware this isn’t cute, but it does nothing to deter him. He just flashes me that smile as he glances back at me before turning to the show, and I find it strange.

My parents weren’t very loving. They never hugged me or kissed me as I grew up. So maybe it wasn’t that none of the men I was with wanted to do this kind of stuff... maybe it was that I never let them. Or I thought they were too clingy, so I never met with them again.

So why am I letting this pest?

Fuck...

And why does it feel... comforting?

I tug on his hair again, annoyed he’s making me think stupid thoughts. He twists a little again to eye me.

“You’re so evil!” he declares. “Here I am, giving you the amazing luxury of holding my head, and you repay me with evilness.”

“Exactly,” I say, and as he turns his head back to the TV, I notice something under the collar of his shirt. I run my finger down his neck to hook his shirt and see just the hint of raised skin, probably from a scar. But before I can investigate further, he smacks my hand up and quickly retreats to the other side of the couch.

“Do you want something else to drink? I’ll get you another beer,” he says before hurrying off.

Well... I don’t think that’s how that was supposed to go.

“I haven’t finished my first, I’m fine,” I say as I look behind me to where he’s staring into the open fridge. I have the feeling that he’s seeing something in there that’s quite different from what I can see.

“Let’s play one of your dumb games,” I say before stopping myself. What the hell am I saying or doing? Do I feel *guilty*? Why the hell would I feel guilty? All I did was touch his neck.

He shuts the fridge and stands still for a moment before turning to look at me. “Okay...”

“Okay?”

Len nods but he looks uneasy as he comes back from the fridge with nothing in his hands. He turns off the show and grabs a controller from a different game thingy and hands it to me.

“Sorry,” I say.

He smiles at me. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I was just thirsty,” he says, which we both know is a lie as he sits down without anything to drink. “What about this game? I think you’ll love this one.”

Len clicks something that looks as stupid as the one we played yesterday, but his expression isn’t as tight. I slide over next to him and he holds the controller out as my leg presses into his. “So you force me to learn the other one, and now hand me a different one? Why aren’t they the same?”

“Different consoles. Your controller—”

“Say no more, I’m already bored.”

He grins as he points at the buttons. “They’re not that different, alright?”

“Just tell me which button I can mash.”

“This one you’ll actually have to do stuff other than mash buttons.”

“I already dislike it.”

“You’ll love it, I promise,” he says, genuine smile back as I find my eyes drifting to his neck. I want to draw the neckline of his shirt down, run my fingers over his skin again and see what he has hidden beneath.

But I also want to know what made him this way. A seemingly innocent, smiling man who can slaughter with such ease.

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“I guess I should get going,” I say.

“Look, you didn’t even get your ass kicked in the game today,” Len says. “I’m so proud!”

“Yes, because we were on the same team. I remember you carrying my body at one point.”

“You still looked very sexy beating on that controller,” he assures me.

“I’d rather be beating on something else,” I grumble.

Len gives me a look of amusement, but he doesn’t offer. “Are your guards going to meet you at the door?”

“I came without them.”

He hesitates, his look clearly stating that he believes I’m an idiot—a thing I’ve questioned a time or two myself. “Why would you come without them? Why are you being careless?” He almost sounds pissed, and the conviction in his words surprises me.

“Because... what does it matter, Len? Why let them get killed for the hell of it?”

“If they’re good at their job, they wouldn’t get killed,” Len says as he goes into his room and comes out with a gun and a holster that he fastens on his side.

“Let’s go.”

I watch the enigma head off. “You’re taking me home?”

“Yeah, I’m not going to sit here when you’re likely to wander off into death.”

“I thought you didn’t want to help.”

“I’m not saying that I’m going to go trot up to Norn, but I’ll take you home and tuck you into bed.”

“How lovely. Will you read me a bedtime story as well?”

“You better bet your ass I will,” Len says as he heads through the door and locks it. I walk toward the elevator before remembering his aversion to them and skip past it to the stairs. He follows me down them and onto the first floor as my mind wanders and questions why he’s helping me. Together, we head out, but instead of aiming for my car, he goes for his.

“You’re not afraid people will recognize you and come for you?” I ask curiously.

“Not really. The license on the car belongs to someone else anyway.”

“Did you kill the previous owner?”

“Nope. I paid for it.”

“What about your name? That real? The people at your geek cave called you something else.”

“Oh, Ky? Yeah, my name’s Kylen. I use Len for business and Ky for pleasure.”

“So when I get you in bed, I have to call you Ky?”

He glances over at me and grins. “Not that kind of pleasure. In bed you call me Sir.”

I snort because I’m pretty sure that’s not happening, and the way he laughs tells me he’s not being serious.

“What about you?” he asks as I get into the car. “What’s your pleasure name?”

“Your Majesty.”

“Oh, yes, I could see that. Very clearly. Are they required to lick your scepter too?”

“I guess you have to follow me into bed to see.”

“You have to be a fuck and run kind of guy. You have that look about you.”

“What else is there to do? Do I get ice cream or something if I stay?” I ask.

“I guess you’ll have to stay sometime and find out.”

“I’m pretty sure the kind of guys I sleep with aren’t serving ice cream in bed. They’re probably talking about the next expensive thing they’d like me to buy them.”

“Ouch. Do they even tell you the sex was good first?” Len asks as he drives in the direction I tell him to head in.

I think about that for a moment because I never saw an issue with it before. It was the way I preferred it, right? “I’m sure.”

“Is it something like ‘Oh my god, you are so fucking sexy, but you know what else is sexy? This new car that you could fuck me into.’ Is that kind of how it goes?”

“It... has. Okay. Let’s analyze your sex life.”

“Dude... it’s a bit dusty down there. You’re going to have to blow on that cartridge to get it working.”

“I don’t even get what that means.”

Len just shakes his head. “In simple terms, it’s been over a year since I’ve had sex.”

That snaps my attention over to him. “How? I’m sure there’s a weirdo just like you out there,” I say, honestly surprised by this. Len’s attractive and he’s extremely selfless, kind, and witty. There’s absolutely no way he couldn’t find someone to sleep with.

“I just don’t do flings. I’m really only attracted to people once I know them and can trust them.”

“Trust them? Couldn’t you pop their head off? You threw me into a car with your fucking... ninja moves.”

He waggles his eyebrow as he quickly glances over at me. “Did you like that move?”

“Then tossed me *on my ass*.”

“Did you like that one too?” he asks, clearly proud of himself.

“No. I liked neither of them, thank you,” I say. “Turn at this light.”

“Heading off to rich man’s land. You think I’ll get shot for driving my cheap car through here?”

“It’s a possibility, but then there’d be a body and that’d look even more tacky than your car,” I say.

“You make a valid point. I’ll make sure that if I get shot, I’ll drag my body to your building.”

“How pleasant. It’s this place here. You can drop me off out front.”

“And let you get murdered somewhere I can’t watch? No, sir. I wanna be front and center,” he says as he pulls into a parking spot and gets out.

“Sometimes your desire to watch me die concerns me,” I say dryly.

“Only sometimes? Fascinating. Now let’s go.”

He follows me into the high-rise where I run my card at the door and let myself into the building that I’d moved into about five years ago. I have the entire top floor to myself, which has far too much room and what has to be one of the best views of the city. I head over to the elevator before looking at him. “I’m on the top floor.”

He grimaces as he looks up. “How many floors is it?”

“Ten. I’m taking the elevator.”

Len warily stares at it and the look he’s giving it makes me wonder if his journey ends here. “What are your chances of

dying by the time I walk up ten flights?”

“Probably pretty high.”

He swings his hand at me, and I don't even realize it until he's stopped it next to my face. “Your reflexes are atrocious. How have you not died from that alone?”

“I don't think you can die from horrible reflexes,” I promise him. The look on his face tells me that he doesn't feel so certain.

“Clearly you need the exercise, come on. Up the stairs we go.”

I stare at the stairs in reluctance. The idea of going up a couple of flights is alright, but trudging up ten? “I'd rather face what's in my room alone.”

He glances over at the elevator I've called and the moment the doors open, there's a look on his face that I find I don't like. There's so much trepidation in his expression which is usually so jovial that it bothers me.

It's just an elevator ride. That's all it is... he'll survive just like he did at The Anonymous, so I shouldn't even worry about it.

Len's eyes are fixated on that space, body so tense that it's like he has no comprehension of the outside world; it's just him facing off with it.

I set a hand on his shoulder, and he recoils like he had on the couch. “Stairs are this way. I better get something good out of this,” I say, trying to play it off like I didn't notice his reaction. Pulling open the door, I head through it and find that Len is right on my ass.

“I'm sure I'll be fine if I go up alone,” I say as I glance up the massive stairwell.

“N-No, what if someone's waiting in your room? They probably won't kill you yet, but they're going to want to scare you. There are a lot of ways to scare someone into getting what you want,” Len says.



“I don’t scare easily unless you whip out that dumb game thing you have,” I say.

“I’ll make sure to whip it out tomorrow too. We can play something else. Did you like the game we played today or yesterday’s better?”

“Neither. I’d rather clean toilets.”

“Maybe you’ll enjoy a cleaning game, then!”

“That wasn’t what I meant!” I grumble as I trudge up the stairs. “How many more flights do we have to go?”

“Only seven.”

“Dear god. Do you know what I’m used to doing?”

“Looking handsome and angry? I would think that would burn a lot of calories, so I assumed you’d be extremely fit.”

“Well, I’m not,” I say as I keep going. By the fifth floor, my legs have a good burn to them, but Len looks as happy as can be. By the seventh floor, I’m regretting all of my past decisions and he’s rattling off different games we can play tomorrow, all of which sound dreadful. “Do you not see me *dying* here?”

“You do look a little... glistening. And not in a sexy way.”

“I’m sweating.”

“Sounds gross.”

“The thought of being murdered is starting to sound better. Imagine if I walked up all these stairs only to get offed when I get to the top. I’ll die looking miserable.”

“I’ll make sure to fix your hair before your body is picked up,” he promises. “There’s little I can do about the horrible look of pain and torture on your face, though.”

“Thanks. You’re so helpful,” I say sourly.

He’s proud of himself, which is irritatingly clear when I look at his face.

“Don’t you just play video games all day long?” I ask. “Why are you so in shape?”

“I also run every morning, lift weights, and train. Do you want to join my daily workout?”

“Absolutely not.”

Len shrugs. “Your loss.”

Once he’s power walked up to the top, he smiles down at me. “You can do it!”

I flip him off.

“That’s the spirit.”

I flip him off with both hands.

He still seems to be having the time of his life as he waits for me. And when I finally show up, he gives me a thumbs-up. “You are magnificent.”

“You are irritating.”

Len isn’t deterred as he steps out onto the floor. There isn’t much of a hallway since the whole floor is mine and it’s the top floor in the building. The only place to go is through the door leading into my place. I type in the door code, and he slips in front of me, swinging it open.

He takes one step into the dark room as I reach in to turn the light on for him, but just as quickly, he shoves me back. As I stumble into the doorframe, he turns to the side and grabs for a shadow in the darkness. With a knife I hadn’t even realized he was holding, he quickly stabs the man in the neck multiple times before turning and shooting a guy in the head with a silenced gun. He grabs me and shoves me hard toward the kitchen counter, which he seems to be using as cover as I hear a bullet ping off something near him.

“Stay,” he says, like he thinks I’m planning on waltzing out there and getting my head blown off.

“Where the fuck am I going to go?” I ask as he slides around the side, and I hear more shots before a door bangs open. Then another. The fighting seems to have stopped, which makes me question if they’re all down and Len is checking the rest of the area.

“I’m *really* hoping this wasn’t a surprise birthday party or something,” Len says.

I peek over the counter and see at least three dead men and one writhing on the ground.

“No one likes me that much,” I assure him.

“I would say good but then that sounds weird too,” he says as he grabs the hoodie of the guy who’s still alive. “Bathroom?”

I point.

He drags the man off as I look around the room. Norn’s guys aren’t slackers. They’re the best money can buy because he doesn’t care how ruthless or fucked up they are. The more violent they are, the better, but that’s how you end up with criminals and the like who get off on killing and torturing.

Slowly, I wander into the bathroom where I hear the water running.

“I love the giant tub, but it sure takes a while to fill up, doesn’t it?” Len asks as the man stares up at him with wide eyes. “We’re going to be here all day at this rate, and I don’t have all day. I’m getting sleepy.” He flips the man over so he’s facing him. “What’s Norn planning?”

“Fuck you,” he says, and in response, Len punches him in the face.

“Wrong answer. What’s Norn planning?”

The man spits at Len and quickly gets punched in the face again. Blood begins running from his nose, coating his face red.

“What is Norn planning?”

“Stop! You fucking asshole!”

Another punch.

Len’s carefree attitude is completely gone. It’s strange that he looks no different, but there’s just an aura about him that tells me he’s not one to be fucked with. There’s so much cold concentration in his face as he punches the man again. And

then when the man refuses to give him anything, he grabs him by the back of the neck and pushes his head under the water. The man thrashes and flails, splashing bloody water all over the place.

When Len lets him up this time, the man goes, “You fuck \_\_\_”

And he’s back down again.

Meanwhile, here I am, just standing in the doorway, watching whatever the fuck is happening. This time, when Len lets him up, he comes up coughing.

“Say something I want to hear or you’re going back down.”

“N-Norn just wanted to hurt him a bit. We were supposed to tie him up and remove his nails... beat him up some and tell him that Norn was waiting for him.”

“How’d you get in?”

“S-Stole a keycard to enter the building from some man and made the cleaning lady tell us the passcode.”

“And what are Norn’s next plans?”

“I-I don’t know! I really don’t! He doesn’t tell us shit until we’re doing it.”

“I’m feeling a bit... generous this evening. So I’m going to let you go and you’re going to hand deliver a note to Norn, alright? Kade, a pen and paper, please?”

I back out of the bathroom and quickly retrieve what he’s asking for. As he takes the pen, I notice his knuckles are a little torn, but he pays them no mind as he starts writing:

*This is your warning. You’re playing a game you’re not going to enjoy the end of.*

Then Len slips it into the man’s front pocket and pulls him in close. “If you do not personally hand deliver that to Norn, then I will find you, and I will break your legs and make you wish you were dead. Do you understand?”

“Very much.”

“Fantastic. Now fuck off.”

He hurriedly leaves the room as Len watches him go, but I can't look away from Len who has reached for the hand towel in the bathroom. “Sorry I made a mess of your apartment; I tried to fling that one guy onto the tiles before shooting him so he didn't get your carpet all bloody,” he says.

What the fuck? What the hell is this? And who takes the time to make sure the dying person misses the carpet?

But more importantly, why am I unreasonably turned on by this man? Why is it that he's so goddamn sexy? *Was* that sexy? What about him is so appealing? I enjoy having sex with men. They scratch an itch. But this isn't an itch, this is a fucking fire. This is...

“What?” Len asks.

In two quick steps, I'm into the bathroom, slamming him against the counter as I wrap one arm around his waist and pull his face toward mine with the other hand. My lips mash against his as a hunger unlike anything I'd ever felt consumes me.

I *need* him. As a man who has bought anything I've ever wanted in my life, I've never felt a need like this. A desire to have something. To hold him and touch him and make him mine.

He's so surprised that he fumbles, and I don't know why I immediately think it's cute. Clearly, he doesn't have experience with men just ravishing him after he beats the shit out of someone, but that tension fades as he presses into me. I feel his cock against my thigh, and it just cements the fact that I need him. I need to feel him and touch him and make him writhe beneath me.

I brush my tongue against his lips, *needing* more. And when his lips part, I let my tongue tangle with his as my fingers slide into his messy hair.

I grab the front of his pants and swiftly unbutton them, and when he gives me a nod with his face turning red, I drop to my

knees and yank his pants down. His underwear is still on, so I mouth his cock through them as I look up into his eyes.

“You want me to suck your cock?” I ask as I slide my fingers under the waistband.

Len’s face immediately becomes even redder. The confident man who just fucking destroyed multiple men while keeping my “carpet clean” looks flustered and it fucking *feeds* the flames. It’s like someone just dumped kerosene on them.

I need to see more. I have to see the flustered look grow as I suck his cock. I pull his underwear down, freeing his cock that I stroke with my hand while watching him closely.

He’s refusing to look at me now, but his hand is gripping tightly onto me as I swirl my tongue around the head while my fingers run down the base of it as he grows hard from the attention my tongue and hand are giving him.

“You like that?”

“Stop asking questions!” he mumbles.

“Look at me.”

He bites his lip, head tucked away. “I can’t.”

“Look at me, Len.”

He hesitates before glancing over at me as I take his cock into my mouth, sliding down the length. Len moans, and it’s the fucking greatest sound I’ve ever heard. How has he done this to me? How has he pulled me out of my own ass and made me want to do anything he asks?

I reach into my pants and pull my cock out, stroking it as I move over him. His fingers are digging into my shoulder as he muffles a moan.

Pulling off his cock, I look up at him as my hand glides down his length. “I want to hear it.”

“Shut it. You don’t need to hear anything,” he mumbles as I take him again, free hand sliding up his thigh, and this time, he can’t hold back the moan.

“I-I’m going to…” he says, and I find it ridiculously sexy that he can’t even say come. What the fuck is this? Why is this so fucking adorable?

I rub the base of his cock with my fingers as my mouth moves over him until I know he can’t take any more. He’s leaning hard against the countertop as he comes. As I pull off him, I stroke my own cock, not able to take much more after the display I was given, the way he made me cave and drop to my knees before him. The way I want to see him squirm and pant beneath my touch.

I come into my hand then rise and kiss him again, just one last quick kiss. I thought a blow job would be enough but now I want to see him under me. I want to watch him writhe beneath my touch, murmur and moan.

“Well… um…” Len mumbles, face still red.

“You’re so fucking—”

“We should probably… get going,” he says, sounding embarrassed.

I mean… really, that might be the smart thing to do. But my brain seems to have taken a hike a while ago. It makes me wonder if I could get even more from him if I leaned back in. But with a deep breath, I finally agree. “I guess we need to get this mess dealt with.”

“Y-Yeah,” he says. “I have a… cleaner. I’ll call them.”

And off he hurries, flustered and adorable and… what the fuck am I doing?

Is now really the time for this? Now, when Norn could have been sending more in and I was distracting my help by sucking him off?

My timing is shit… clearly.

But when I walk out, Len is one hundred percent back to being composed. He turns to me. “We need the room code.”

“Oh… 7214.”

“They’ll have it cleaned up shortly. Come on, you can come back to my place.”

“Do I have to walk down the stairs? Because staying with the dead bodies sounds better than the stairs.”

“You sure as fuck do,” he says as he hurries off, and I’m left following him. “You’re also sleeping on the couch.”

“What? What am I on the couch for?”

He glances back at me, an evil expression on his face. “Because you didn’t call me by my pleasure name.”

“Oh my god. Fine. I’ll call you ‘Sir’ next time.”

“Good,” he says. “You’re still on the couch.”

“You’re ridiculously good at torture,” I realize.

“Thanks. And what’s it matter? You said you weren’t a man who stuck around after sex. I’m just doing what you’re used to. I’m kind like that.”

I stare at him as he heads for the stairs and question if that’s right. How dare he deprive me of this? With a sigh, I give in and trail after him.



# CHAPTER 6

THREE DAYS LEFT

## LEN

When I walk out of my bedroom, I see Kade lying on my couch. There's something fun about seeing him there and I think it's because he truly believed that he could persuade me not to leave him in the living room. He tried getting me to cave last night about sharing my bed with him, but I held firm.

He doesn't need everything he wants when he wants it.

"Did you sleep well?" I ask with a smile.

Kade glowers at me. "Does it look like I did?"

"My bed was sooo roomy. You should have simply asked, and I'd have shared with you."

His eyes get wide, and he even whips out some hand motions as he stares at me. "Did I not ask multiple times?"

"Huh," I say as he throws the blanket back and gets up.

"Is my place good to go back to?"

"I don't think you should go back to your place where people were waiting to rip your nails off last time. Do you not like your nails? And what do you need that I don't have?"

"Clothes. I didn't even think to grab them last night. I was too... distracted."

My cheeks feel hot at the mention of what distracted him. I try to push it off by waving at my perfectly amazing clothes that I'm currently displaying. "You can wear my clothes. We're similar sizes."

"Do you have a suit?"

"I do!"

He looks skeptical but I assure him I'll get it out while he gets ready in the bathroom. So as soon as he's off, I wander over to my closet and pull it open before pushing through all of my stuff until I find the suit I'd gotten to cosplay as the Joker a few years back. I mean... there's nothing wrong with

the bright purple, but judging from the look on Kade's face as he comes out of the bathroom, it's a travesty.

"I will not wear that."

"Then wear one of my hoodies."

Kade sighs extremely loudly as he comes over and starts flipping through my hoodies until I see his entire body just give up and he grabs one. He pulls it on, and I don't know why I absolutely love seeing the well-dressed man sporting one of my hoodies.

"You look mighty fine."

His deadpan look tells me he's not quite so sure. "I need to go to work."

"I'll drive you, but once you're at the casino, stay there. I'm sure Norn is going to be pissed after last night. I have some stuff to do, so I'm going to deal with that and then I'll be back to pick you up. I'll make tacos. Do you like tacos?"

Kade watches me for a moment, and I realize that maybe I'm destroying his soul by being too familiar with him. Maybe domestic stuff hurts his very being, but if I'm getting stuck watching his ass, I'm not planning on starving while doing it.

"Okay."

"Okay?" I ask.

He nods slowly. "Yeah. Okay. That... sounds... decent."

I grin at him as I realize it's killing him inside to be decent. "How do you feel? Do you feel better being a respectable human being?"

"Not in the slightest."

"You like it, and you know it. Let's get breakfast and head out, then."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have a job," I say.

Kade hesitates, his attention clearly caught on that. "What kind of job?"

“A job to kill a man.”

“How?”

“Does it... matter?” I ask.

He seems uncertain about this before looking away. “What happens if you get killed... and can’t help me?” he settles on.

I stare at him in disbelief. “Are you... are you *worried* about me?” Oh my god, this man has *changed*. Is he... dare I even say that he’s being *cute*?

“Not in the slightest, I have no idea what would give you that idea. I just need you around to complete this job for me. Harker told me to use the power of my penis to seduce you into saving me, so you need to get ready for that.”

He says it so deadpan that I immediately start laughing. “Oh my god. Of course Harker did. I love it. Okay... I’ll be prepared for this level of seduction.” Because last night... that wasn’t Kade trying to seduce me. No... the look he gave me... it was like I was driving him crazy, and why? I don’t even know what about me could when he’s so used to people who are nothing like me.

“Just... don’t die or it’ll be annoying for me.”

And he believes romance is dead. “I promise I’ll be careful. It’s an easy job. I’m shooting someone from very far away, and they have absolutely no idea I’m coming. I’ll be done and out within an hour or two. And you will stay put in the casino the entire time?”

“Yes, sir,” he says with a sarcastic undertone.

“No, that’s my pleasure name. You don’t use it outside of pleasure time.”

He steps up into me and places a finger under my chin. “I can make it pleasure time.”

I consider this for a moment, which is not what he was expecting. Clearly, he assumed I would dive right in, but it’s no fun if I don’t make him work for it a bit.

“With you?” I ask.

“Of course with me. Who the hell else?”

“Hmm... I just... I feel like it was only a day or two ago that you were... saying so much evil shit to me, you remember that?”

“Not at all,” he says, lips close to mine. “Did that even happen? I don’t think it did.”

“I’m positive it did. You called me nerdy, then ridiculed my clothes and my beautiful games.”

Kade seems to contemplate this, trying his absolute hardest to get me to cave while refusing to admit he’d done any of that. He thinks he’s going to get *me* to kiss *him*, but I won’t. I like teasing him because really, isn’t the reward best when one has to work for it?

“Why do you drive me crazy?” he asks before taking the lead and pressing his lips against mine. I part my lips, giving him what he wants since I want it too. I need to feel more of him, but I also feel like this is too risky. He’s proven he’s not a complete dick, but could it be a show? Could he just want to use me for his own gain?

I can’t imagine...

But I’ve been deceived in the past and really, only time will tell.

“We need to get going,” I say.

He seems reluctant, but there’s nothing he can do about it as I pull back and head out of the room.

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The job goes smoother than I even planned and as I head back to my car, rifle in hand, I shoot a text to Kade that I’m heading to the casino and am still alive to pester him and make him play something else dreadful this evening.

He isn’t always the most eager to reply to me, but after last night, I thought his response would come sooner. Hell, by the time I make it to the casino, I still haven’t gotten a reply.

I pull around to the back, since the front parking lot is already busy, even at this early hour. The employees park around back, but I doubt anyone's going to bitch about my car, seeing as I'm taking Kade with me for the evening. I already have all the ways I will torture him planned out and fully intend to force him to sleep on the couch again unless he proves to me that he's changed.

When I reach the side door, I don't even have to pull out my ID, the guy at it is all smiles. "Hey, buddy! Don't remember your name but come in, come in," he says. "Did you bring your Switch again?"

"I did. Kade in the back?"

"Nah, he's not here. Said he had some business to take care of and left about an hour ago," he says. "A guard got killed last night and Kade didn't take it well. He was pretty pissed."

That makes me hesitate. Of course Norn would start picking at what he could reach if he couldn't tear Kade apart. "How'd he get killed?"

"I don't know. We didn't find the body in his car out back until this morning. He was a real nice guy. It's really too bad. I didn't know him very well, but he always greeted everyone with a smile."

"So Kade left with guards, I hope?" I ask, hoping he at least had half a brain.

"Not a single one. He fucking waltzed out without telling anyone and sent a text that he was going out," he says before shrugging. "We have no idea where he went, so I guess we just have to wait for him to return."

"Can you double-check that he's gone?" I ask. "And call me if you hear anything."

"Yeah, I can do that," he says, and after getting my number, he heads off. I hurry back to my car and call Kade, but of course he doesn't answer because that'd be too easy. Then I call Harker.

"Hey, Len," he answers.

“Do you know where Kade is?”

“Not right now. He stopped in about an hour ago. Said he needed some paperwork and then was headed back to the casino... why?”

“His guards haven’t seen him since he left and he’s currently alone. What did he get?”

“I... he said he wanted an income report from last month. I told him where to grab it since I was too busy to get it for him. Let me look,” he says as I impatiently sit in my car, unsure of what to do now. What if Norn’s men took him? He’s pretty useless when it comes to fighting. They could have finished off what they started last night, and they’re not going to be happy about what happened to their men.

Fuck. Why didn’t I keep him with me? Force him to stay with me at all times so something like this didn’t happen?

“Oh, you little shit, Kade...” Harker says. “I think he’s going to make Norn a deal.”

“*What?*” I ask in disbelief. “No... he’s... why would he?”

“Fuck if I know. The Kade I know is stubborn as hell and would rather die than willingly hand something over.”

But is that the Kade I’ve been dealing with? The man who I’ve forced to face his own insecurities? The Kade of last week wouldn’t have budged, but I literally forced him to see that others have feelings and lives, and that if he was planning to continue down this road he was on, it was going to be a lonely one.

Fuck... he can’t do this. He can’t walk right into Norn’s domain and believe that even if he gives Norn everything he wants, Norn will happily take it and allow him to leave. It’s all a game to Norn, one that he’s so far not won. And while he’ll enjoy Kade willingly handing things over, it wouldn’t be as fun as tantalizing him and forcing them from him because Norn prefers watching others suffer.

What does Kade think he’s doing?





## KADE

As I walk toward the building, there's a part of me positive that I'm about to have a bullet in my head. Clearly, I've already lost it if I'm here, but isn't Len right? I've been a self-centered dick for so many years.

I've only ever cared about myself, fully believing that the only way to survive in this world is to cut everyone else off. But as I was walking through the casino and heard about Harry getting killed, everything just snapped into place.

Len's right, I am an asshole. I'm a huge asshole who has only ever cared about myself. Even if I lost my casino, I'd still have more money than damn near everyone in this city. More than those women who'd been forced to sell themselves and are now tasked with turning their lives around... if they can even do it. I have more than the guard who works two jobs and still smiles every damn day. Or the teenager who was willing to give Len everything he had, including himself, to get his sister back.

And here I am, on my golden throne with so much money after spending years of my life pushing myself into a corner that no one else was invited into.

If I think about it that way... I might be richer, but don't they have more than me? They have people who are happy to see them come home every night. They have someone to care about them and make them feel loved.

My mind flashes to Len and that smile of his, and I can't help but wonder what it'd be like to deserve that smile. To come home to something like that instead of living miserably alone spending money in the hopes that I can buy something to make me happy.

What right do I have to stand my ground and let the happy people around me get picked off one by one? And hell, what if Len really did go up against Norn? There's a reason Norn's untouchable and able to make these threats. There's a reason

he can sell black market weapons without the police stopping him, and I expect Len to put his life on the line to stop him? Really? That's my plan?

Len is just too damn kind-hearted. I've waded through the sins of this city since I was born and I'm not sure I've ever come across someone as good as him. Someone who would risk his life for a grape sucker some kid on the street had.

I can't let him die for someone like me. I'm definitely not one of the ones who deserves him to put his life on the line for them.

So I find myself walking toward the building Norn does his shady shit out of. It's stupid going alone, but hell, if I'm going to die anyway, I might as well die alone.

"Look at this. Do my eyes deceive me or what?" the guy smoking a cigarette outside the door says.

"Where's Norn?"

"Right this way," he says with a grin as I'm led inside.

I feel like I should have gone home to get a suit or at least something more professional than this stupid gamer hoodie of Len's, but there's something weirdly comforting about it. I guess, really, what's it matter what I die in? Hell... is anyone even going to go to my funeral besides Harker?

I bet Len would.

The hallway leads me deeper into the building and over to the offices where the man comes across the only closed door which he knocks on.

"Come in," a voice behind it says.

He pushes the door open and waves me inside the room that stinks like smoke. Clearly, I'm the last person Norn was expecting to see judging from the clear surprise on his face.

"Well fuck me, Kade, definitely didn't expect that you'd waltz into my office today," he says with a grin. "How are you? We haven't caught up in years, have we? Last time I saw you was your father's funeral, right?"

“Sure was,” I say as I sit down across from him.

“I miss your father. He took me under his wing and taught me everything I needed to know to make my business boom. I just... I still find it so damn funny that after all I did for him, he handed the casino over to you.”

“Yeah? It was pretty funny, wasn't it? It was especially funny when I told him that if he didn't, I was going to kill him. Then imagine when he strangely died after you thought the casino was going to be yours. You killed him too soon, Norn. If you'd have just waited, I'm sure he'd have switched it back. He never did like me, and he thought of you more like a son than he ever thought of me.”

“You wanted nothing to do with this side of the business,” Norn says as he waves at the factory around us.

“You're right. My father thought the only way to make money and exist in this city was the illegal sales of weapons but since he's died, I've reinvigorated his casino and made the profits grow beyond anything he could have imagined. Maybe he shouldn't have written me off after all.”

“Maybe, and I thank you for that. At first, I really didn't have much that I needed to do with the casino. After you sold me this end of the business and washed your hands of it, I was content. But now... Kade, your casino just... it really would help me out quite a bit, and honestly... it was always supposed to be mine.”

“Was it?” I ask, not quite sure it was, but of course he'd think so. He always thought he was owed everything. But I know he wants to use it to launder money, it's the perfect setup for him... I'd just hate to see all my hard work destroyed like this.

“It was. So are you here to tell me to back the fuck off? I don't appreciate what you did last night.”

“And you think I did? Really? You were going to have them rip my nails off and beat me up? That was your solid plan?”

“So you decide to come and complain about it to my face, then?”

“No, I came to sell to you,” I say. “I can’t win. I will absolutely hate seeing you destroy everything I worked for, but at the end of the day... there’s nothing I can do about it. Your manpower alone will make you win this war. So why keep letting people die when the end result is going to be the same? Might as well save some people from dying. Let’s make the casino yours.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his surprise quickly overwritten by something unreadable. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I say.

“Hmm...”

Of course he won’t be happy. Norn is never happy. He was a street kid who was prepared to hurt, rob, or kill to get his way through life when my father stumbled across him. I didn’t know much about him, but my father loved bragging about his ability with a gun. My father would send him off and tell him who to kill and Norn would deliver every single time. It never mattered how skilled the opponent was, he always left the dead in his wake.

He quickly grew into the son my father always wanted, and that was his choice, but at the end of the day, my father’s preferred son sentenced him to death. Because when Norn hit a glass ceiling that allowed him to see what he could have while being unable to break through with my father standing on top, he realized that he’d do what it took to get there.

So he killed my father, only to find out that I’d taken it upon myself to keep Norn from getting the things my father once promised him.

By selling Norn the warehouses and the illegal side of the business that I wanted no part of, it kept him quiet for years, but not anymore. I knew he wouldn’t stay quiet forever.

Norn sets a piece of paper down and slides it over to me, and I realize that the wrinkled paper dotted in bloody fingerprints is the same one Len had written on last night.

“Offer’s changed. I’ll buy the casino from you for a very pretty price, but I want you to bring the guy who wrote this to me first.”

He wants Len? What does he want him for? Does he think he can use him? Norn has always collected the strongest in the city, but Len would never work for him.

That puts a grin on my face. The idea of Norn thinking that Len will work for him amuses me. This is the very kind of man that Len works to eradicate.

“He won’t work for you.”

“Whoever said I wanted him to work for me?” Norn asks.

“Oh? You’re going to kill him just because he stopped four guards from beating me up?” I ask skeptically.

“I’d think you’d want to kill him too. He is the one who killed your father, after all,” he says.

*That* surprises me. Well... more accurately, I guess that makes me amused for some reason. It makes sense. Len’s whole goal is to kill those who make the lives of others miserable. And of all people, wouldn’t that be my father, the very man who dispersed illegal weapons that aided in the deaths of so many?

“Good,” I say.

“Good?” Norn repeats with a raised eyebrow. “Wow, you really are harsh.”

“Yeah? You think so? I think my father got what he deserved.”

Norn simply seems amused, and I know it’s all a power move. He wants to appear confident and cocky as he looks down on me. “I suppose that’s true. He was a pretty awful man. You know what, Kade? I love that hoodie you have on. That wouldn’t happen to be Kylen’s, now would it?”

I hesitate as I realize that something isn’t quite right here. “I thought you killed my father.”

“I did. But you see, when you’re smart like me, you don’t have to do any of the dirty work. That’s what people like Kylene are for. I’ve been good, you know, Kade? I tried really hard to just step back, let Kylene do his own thing because that one bites. And when he bites, it fucking hurts. And I guess... I mean, technically that’s my fault. He was always so strong-willed and stubborn; he always wanted to see the best in people, but he was too fucking skilled with a gun. He was so talented that it was just a waste, you know? So when I had a chance, I showed him that he has to fight when I say fight.”

He leans back in his chair, watching me with a cold expression on his face.

“I mean... honestly, should I have even been surprised by your father picking you over me? Probably not,” he says as he shakes his head. “But the idea of Kylene picking you over me? Well, that’s fucking enraging.”

The door behind me opens and dread washes over me as I turn my head to look at the ten guards filing in. Not because of what they’re about to do to me but because I know what this means for Len.

“It’s about time he came home anyway,” he says. “And when he does, I’ll have a special treat waiting for him.”

“I thought this was about the casino.”

Norn shrugs, like the idea of me handing over what I raised up from my father’s pile of shit is nothing of consequence to him. “It is. But I mean... you just told me I could have the casino. Yet I’ve never before had something I could use against Kylene. He keeps himself closed off from most people. Yeah, I’m sure he’s had a friend here or there, but to find someone that would make him actually threaten *me*. ME!” He smacks his hand down on the paper and crumples it up, rage consuming his expression. “He *would threaten me* because of you? Oh... I knew right then that I finally fucking had him. And then you show up with one of his hoodies on... fucking hell, Kade. You’re just making my goddamn day.”

I stand up, rage filling me at the very idea that he would touch Len. How can Norn use him like that? The Len I know

is sweet and kind and he cares so much... maybe too much.  
“Don’t you dare touch him or you’ll get nothing.”

Norn is laughing as his men come rushing for me, telling me that he’s done with our talk. I shove my chair back into them before grabbing a stapler off the desk and flinging it hard at Norn. He’s not expecting it, so it busts him in the face, immediately stopping his laughter. One of the guards punches me. I try to block it, but Len is right, my ability to fight is practically useless, and even worse when there are ten guys.

I came in here knowing fully well Norn might kill me, but now that I know he’s wanting to use me against Len, I can’t let him. I try to block another hit but it only allows someone to punch me in the stomach.

Air knocked out of me, I stumble back and someone hits me in the face, making the world go dark. I manage to elbow someone and try to rush for the door but another tears me back. It’s far too soon that they have me on the ground, kicking me and hitting me, until someone drags me out of the room as I realize that I can’t tell which way is up.

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## LEN

My phone beeps as I get near the factory and I pull it out, begging that it's Kade.

When I see his name, relief washes through me until I realize it's a photo, and I dread what the image is about to show me.

I glance down at the photo and see Kade lying on the ground, face covered in blood.

What the fuck did he think he was doing? Why didn't he ask me before he ran off and grew a goddamn heart and lost his brain in the process?

Underneath it is an address and I know Norn's set me up. I shouldn't have written the note last night and threatened him. I knew better. I knew to keep to myself. I knew not to get wrapped up in Kade's battle, but between years of rage I'd built up while dealing with Norn and my desire for Kade, I couldn't stop myself.

And yet here I am.

Regretting everything.

I drive to the location, knowing that I'm walking right into a trap, but I don't hesitate. I get out of my car about half a mile from the place and pop open the trunk. Inside is a case I open, pulling out my rifle that will assist the gun that's at my side.

I move to a clear spot and find that I've been directed to a small building. I'm not even sure what Norn uses it for since it looks pretty desolate, reminding me again that it's a trap. He's not going to have me rush into one of his factories or warehouses where I could potentially hurt his business.

No, this is a trap to stop me, but I'm going to kill as many as I can first... I just wish I'd have bombed his fucking factories on the way here.

I open the stand for my rifle and get into position, peering through the scope as I familiarize myself with the area and find the location of the guards on the premises. They're on high alert and smartly using cover to keep an eye out for me. One man is waiting in what looks like a guard booth near the drive leading in. He's got an automatic weapon in hand and keeps pacing the area, looking for me, like he thinks he'll ever see me.

I wonder if he knows Norn sent him out here to die.

I pull the trigger and swing my rifle to the next man. This one is using the building as cover, but it's still not enough. The shot sends him flying back, out of my view, but I'm not worried. No one gets up after I shoot them.

Shifting the gun, I find a man watching from inside the building. He's standing so still I nearly miss him, but my bullet doesn't.

I wait a moment, wondering if the shattered glass alerted anyone, but the world remains silent, and I start moving in.

There's a span of open space which makes it harder to get across the parking lot without getting shot, but there are a few cars and the guard building that will provide cover. Keeping an eye on the windows, I look for anyone watching out for me and move in quickly. The moment I do, someone comes to the window, having noticed me, but I shoot them before they even get the chance to fire at me. It gives someone else time to shoot, but I slip behind the guard building before they can get an accurate aim. I lean out around it and find them. They take another shot at me but miss while mine doesn't. It leaves me time to reach the building, slipping alongside it as I get to the front door, pulling it open and heading inside.

Quietly, I move through the hallway, wondering if Norn's just going to blow it up when I step inside. Honestly, that'd be his best bet for getting rid of me, but the place doesn't blow.

No... instead, I find two more guards which I dispatch quickly as I tear open door after door looking for Kade. It isn't until I'm in the pit of the building that I realize I don't hear

anyone else. My eyes are drawn to the single closed door in the hallway that I make my way toward.

Reaching it, I pull it open and look inside, finding Kade lying on the ground at the far end of the small room dimly lit by a single bulb that can't fight off the shadows.

"Kade!" I yell from outside the doorway. "Kade, wake up."

He doesn't move. He doesn't stir at all, leaving me standing in the doorway, knowing I need to get in and grab him and go.

The room seems to cave in around him, the walls squeezing down tight as I realize how far away he looks inside that dark hole.

"Kade, please wake up," I urge as I set my hand on the doorframe. Anxiety eats at my stomach as I take a deep breath and slowly step inside.

I just have to grab Kade. I'll simply grab him and pull him out of here and go... I can do that.

Moving in farther, I feel like I'm stepping into an oppressive black pit.

And that's the moment the door slams shut behind me.

The air is immediately sucked out of the room, and I realize I'm going to suffocate as my lungs seize.

Quickly, I turn around and grab onto the doorknob, finding that it won't turn in my shaking hands.

"Kill him, Kylan, and I'll let you out. It's as simple as that," Norn says from outside it.

How the fuck did I miss him? I was so fucking focused on this room and grabbing Kade that I didn't even notice Norn getting close. He knew I wouldn't. He knew by simply throwing Kade in this room it'd break my focus.

"Let me out, Norn. Please, let me out," I beg as I beat on the door.

“Kylen... come on. You know that’s not how this game is played. Kill Kade and I’ll let you out,” he says, voice toying. It’s like his malicious words are bouncing around me as I beat and kick and hammer on the door. He’s laughing, of course he’s laughing. He loves it. He loves breaking me down, knowing how to control me, how to make me fear him.

“Len.”

I jump, startled, and look back at Kade who is reaching for me.

But all I can hear is Norn. “Kill him, Len. I’ll be back in an hour. If he’s not dead, it’ll be a day. You know how this goes.”

“No, no, no, please, please open the door. Norn, please,” I beg as I remember I have a gun and start shooting at the door, but all it does is deafen me in this small room.

“Len, stop, you’re going to hurt yourself,” Kade says as I feel his hands on me and I recoil.

“I need to get out. I need to get out. This is your fault! What the fuck did you think you were going to accomplish by going to him? Why did you do this to me?” I ask as I grab for my phone, but something about the building or possibly something Norn set up keeps the phone from getting any reception.

I can’t breathe. There’s no air in here.

I gasp as my throat starts to close and I drop to my knees when my stomach seizes. My nails dig into the door, desperately clawing for a way out.

Hands are on me, pulling me away from the door, away from my freedom, so I fight against him.

“I... can’t breathe...”

“Len, you’re having a panic attack,” Kade says as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me in tight. “You’re panicking. Nothing is happening. It’s okay.”

“My throat... it’s closing.”

“It’s not. You’re okay, it’s going to be okay,” he soothes.

I shake my head because he doesn't understand. He doesn't get what I'm feeling.

Even as I fight, he pulls me upright and squeezes me tightly against him.

"What do you feel?" he asks.

"Like I can't breathe."

His arms tighten around me, like they're encompassing me and squeezing me in close. "No, tell me what you feel," he says, hand sliding in my hair as he presses my face against his shoulder.

"Everything's closing in. I can't breathe, Kade. It's crushing me." My throat feels thick and it's hard to swallow.

"Close your eyes."

I force them closed, glad I don't have to face the walls squeezing in, but I'm not quite sure how much it helps. I'm not sure if it helps at all. But I can feel the squeeze of his fingers, the way they're tightening and pressing me so firmly against him. He tucks his head against mine as my mind runs wild.

"I'm right here. Can you feel me?" he asks, voice soft and gentle. I'm surprised I can even hear it over my own panting.

I hesitate before forcing myself to nod. "Yes."

"Good, I can feel you too. Len, you're the bravest person I know. There is no one else I know who would ever risk their life for people, knowing they'll get nothing in return. I know I've only known you for days, but you've proven to me that life truly is a better place with someone like you in it. When I stop cramming my head in my own ass and look around me, I realize that I'm insanely lonely. I've been lonely my entire life. My mother and father taught me from a young age that it wasn't worth it to care about others... so I didn't. I just stopped, but I didn't realize how toxic that was or what it was doing to me."

Kade's hand digs tighter into me as he continues. "In less than a week, you gave me what I didn't realize I'd been

waiting my whole life for. So please, let me repay it by helping you.”

I dig my aching fingers into him. “I... feel you.”

“You feel me?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t let go because we’ll do this together. We’ll get through this together, okay?”

“He’s not going to let me out. He won’t let me out until I give him what he wants. I know his games. They’re always the same ones. Again and again.”

“No, not anymore. My father played mind games with me, but he’s gone, and he can never touch me again. I’ve been stupid enough that I never woke up after the fact and realized that. But I’m here to tell you that no matter what fucked-up game Norn plays, there’s a reason why he didn’t kill either of us. He wants to use you, so you can’t let him. But you can give him what he wants.”

“He wants me to kill you. He wants me to kill you to get out of here.”

“So?” he asks before leaning in close so the cameras can’t pick up on his words. “I can play my hand at dying for you. He has a camera watching. Make it look real.”

I can’t pull away long enough to even tell that there’s a camera. All I can do is press in close to him and keep my eyes shut.

Kade’s hand rubs down my back as I try to pretend we’re anywhere but stuck inside this room. But we’re not. We’re here. We’re stuck here and when I open my eyes, I see the way the walls are looming over us, closing in on us, and my stomach seizes again.

His hand tightens around me. “Len, focus. There’s nothing in this room that can hurt you. It’s just you and me.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. But I do know that you can’t let him win. You’re going to get out of here and we’re going to stop him. And then I’m going to take you to the fanciest damn restaurant in this town and I’m going to treat you like a fucking king. I’m going to make you share your bed with me so I don’t have to sleep on the hard couch, and we’ll play your weird games that I kind of enjoy. And watch your geeky, nerdy shows. You wanted to make me watch that... Defenders or whatever.”

“*Avengers.*”

“Right.” And then I’m going to carry you off to your room and we can... role-play your weird little superhero stuff as I make you moan for me. But first, we have to get out of this room.”

“Why do you even want me?” I ask.

“I should be asking you that question, not the other way around, Len. Who wouldn’t want you? You’re insanely nice, sweet, and the most caring person I’ve ever met. So please, let me show you that I can be worth it to you. But to do that, you’re going to have to get through this, okay?”

“If I let go of you, the panic attack is going to return.”

“You only have to let go long enough to shoot at me.”

The moment Kade’s hands start letting go, I grab onto him tighter, panic eating through me.

“Focus.”

“I have to get out of here,” I say, my hand shaking as I reach for my gun. “Kade... fuck...” Fuck, fuck...

I hold the gun tightly in my hand and stare at him, my hand shaking so much I’m not sure I can even keep it steady. “I killed your father like this. He gave us a roof and food and clothes, and I killed him. Just like this.”

“He was a piece of shit.”

“Yeah... he was... but he was less of a piece of shit than everyone else I was surrounded with.”

I take a deep breath and calm my hand for just a moment before I pull the trigger.

Kade jerks back, the look of surprise on his face genuine as he stumbles back. “You... you actually shot me,” he says, voice showing his shock.

He touches his side, and his hand comes back wet with blood. “You actually shot me!”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I need out of here,” I whisper. “Norn, please, I did what you asked. Please. Let me out.”

Kade slides down the wall while looking at me in surprise. “Len?”

I crawl over to him as he sinks down to his back. “I’m sorry,” I say as I lay my chest down on him, needing to feel him. I’m at least covering him enough the camera might not see as I slide my fingers into his shirt and hold tightly onto him. “I’m sorry, please, Kade, I’m sorry.”

Kade’s quiet and I don’t like it. I don’t like the darkness. Without his touch, without his hands, it’s suffocating in here and I’m not sure how much longer I can breathe. My stomach seizes and I burrow my face against his chest, digging my nails into him as I hold him close.



# CHAPTER 7

TWO DAYS LEFT

## KADE

Norn's promise to let Len go if he shot me wasn't much of a promise. He made Len suffer far longer than the hour he agreed. Maybe he wanted to make sure I really was dead or maybe he wanted to break Len even more. Len never gets off me, hand clenched tightly onto mine, which I squeeze whenever I feel him close to breaking. It seems to pull him back down off that edge, but I'm not sure how much longer I can keep him from dipping into the darkness.

At some point well into the night, I hear the door open.

Len's entire body tenses, but he remains lying on top of me as it's swung open by a guard.

"Norn wants to see you," he says.

Len's fingers tighten on me as I wish I could see better in this room cast with shadows. He pushes off me and I can hear him scramble to the door, but I can't see shit without turning my head and I don't know if I'm allowed to stop pretending to be dead yet. Either way, I don't have to see to hear the noise the guard makes as he dies.

I should help Len, but I'm not sure what kind of help I'll be. Even so, I push myself up, thrilled to be able to move after having lain still for hours, but my bruised and bloody body aches. When I reach the door, I notice that there's a pile of dead men and can tell which way Len went by the bodies littered down the hallway. Before I head after him, I back into the room, positive that Norn is watching.

"You better be fucking careful, Norn. You've just sealed your fate."

And I confidently know that Len is going to make him pay for what he's done.

I step out into the hallway and just follow the bodies to find Len. When I reach him, he's standing outside, gun in one

hand, knife in the other, all alone. He's just standing there, unmoving as I walk up.

"Len, come on."

He doesn't acknowledge me as I come up behind him and take his wrist. He jumps and turns on me, like he didn't hear me calling for him.

"Hey," I say, voice gentle.

"I need to kill him," he whispers.

"You will, but right now, let's go somewhere and get cleaned up and composed and—"

"I'm going to kill him. I'm going to fucking slaughter him. I'm going to make it hurt. And I'm going to watch him die."

I grab Len's wrist and pull him around before drawing him into me. It feels mildly dangerous with the knife and the gun, but I still pull him in close. His entire body is tense and rigid, and I want to pull that out of him.

"We're going to a hotel, and we're going to just... relax for the night, okay? Now where's your car?"

He points in a general direction but refuses to move. "Go on back to my car. Here are the keys. I'll take someone else's car and I'll be back later."

I grab his face in my hands. "Len, I might not know how to fight, but I've been in this world a very long time and I know that people make mistakes when they're angry or upset or not collected, and right now... I wouldn't consider this collected."

"What are you talking about? I'm fully collected. I've collected all of my thoughts about how I'm going to cut off just a piece of each limb and watch him suffer. Then I'm going to lock him in a room and I'm going to leave him there until he dies."

"Yep, let's go," I say as I hook his waist and drag him after me. "I can't believe you shot me."

"It was a nick. I needed your reaction to be true disbelief. I wouldn't have really hurt you," he promises me.

“Yeah, well it still stung like a bitch,” I grumble.

“I didn’t trust your acting skills,” Len says as he lets me pull him along. “You only know how to scowl, so I didn’t know if your scowling would be enough. I’m just disappointed it wasn’t Norn who opened that door. He knew better.”

“I bet he did,” I say as I urge him across the street and in the direction he’d pointed earlier. He’s quiet as we walk, and I don’t know what to say. This isn’t my expertise. Dealing with people and their emotions is one thing I’ve never claimed to be good at. Hell, Len has proven to me that I suck at it.

But I want to comfort him. I *want* to make him feel better. I... I don’t even care about the ache in my limbs, the pain in my side, the blood dried across my face. I just want him to feel better. I want to see that smile. I want to erase the absolute panic I witnessed coming from him in that room. The way his hands shook, the way his body felt. The gasps of breath like he was *dying*.

I squeeze him tighter against me and he holds out a bloody knife. “You want a weapon?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Oh. It works really well.”

“I saw.”

“Oh.” He hesitates before continuing, voice low. “I’m not as good of a person as you seem to think I am. I’m over here preaching about how you should be a better person and the funniest part is I’m a thousand times worse than you.”

“I don’t believe that in the slightest.”

“I killed your father.”

“That’s fine.”

“Is it?”

I shrug because I sure as fuck haven’t missed him. “One hundred percent. He was fucking dreadful.”

“I killed whoever Norn told me to.”

“I can’t imagine he was going out and finding sweet old ladies for you to kill.”

“Maybe he was.”

“I’d still consider you the best person I know,” I say.

“But I’m not.”

“Doesn’t matter what you think. The only thing that matters is what I think because I’m self-centered and believe the world revolves around me.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Well, it does, so if I say that you’re the best person I know then I guess you are.”

He’s quiet for a bit as I continue dragging him after me. “You don’t have to try to seduce me or pay me or whatever, I’m fully planning on killing Norn.”

“I’m not,” I say as I finally see his car. I turn to Len and grab both of his wrists. He’s still holding both weapons and staring at the ground. “Len, look at me.”

His eyes slowly drift up to mine and I find that there doesn’t seem to be much life in them. His entire face is expressionless so I give him a shake, hoping I can get him switched back. “Len, I’m a dick. I’ve been a dick my whole life and yet you come along and in a span of less than a week you make me face my own dickishness. So fine. Pretend you’re not kind or whatever you’re going on about, but then at least understand that you’re a damn wizard or magician or whatever to get me to change.”

“You must have wanted to change because it wasn’t that hard.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“It was a little hard.”

“See? Now come on.”

I take him over to the passenger door and stuff him inside. It’s not the easiest of endeavors but I get him in and come

around to the driver's side to get in myself. Then I start to drive.

Len pulls the rifle off his back but beyond that, he keeps the weapons in his hands like he's prepared to kill the next thing that moves. I want to say something, but I'm not sure what, so we end up being silent the entire drive to the Menagerie.

The hotel is prestigious and probably not the best place to walk in bloody off the street, but I know that Norn won't fuck with us there. Fucking with us anywhere near the Anonymous, the club that resides underground, could result in an end to Norn's life even earlier than predicted.

There's a bottle of water in the cupholder so once I park, I get some napkins out and wet them before wiping at my face. It doesn't help much, but it'll have to do. Then I pull on another hoodie that's in the back of the car.

“Len, you need to put your weapons away.”

He clearly ignores me, so I take the knife and slide it into its sheath before prying the gun out of his hand which I put in the holster at his side. He doesn't seem willing to leave the rifle behind, so I find the case in the trunk and make him place it in there. Once finished, I take him by the hand and lead him into the hotel.

The man behind the desk eyes me but gets me a room with no questions asked when I insist on the largest room on the second or third floor.

We get lucky with one on the second floor and head up the stairs and into a large suite.

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## LEN

As soon as Kade is through the door, he motions to the bathroom. "I'm going to get a shower. Come take one with me," he says.

"No, I'm alright."

"Len. Please?"

"No," I adamantly say as I eye that small space.

He's staring at me, knowing that the moment he's closed that door, I'm leaving. So with a sigh, he walks up to me and holds his hands out toward me. My eyes fixate on them for a moment before I reach out and take them, feeling how warm they are.

"You're getting in the shower with me as payback for shooting me."

"I nicked you."

"With a bullet."

"Yes."

"Len," he says, tone cajoling.

I take a deep breath and look away from him, hands drawing back, but he seems reluctant to let go.

"Fine," he says as he sits down in front of the door. "I guess I'll remain here until you listen."

I assess him for a moment as I realize he thinks he can keep me in here even if I wanted to leave. "I could easily remove you from the door."

"I'd like to see you try to remove my wounded body from the door. I had to fight off ten men and did a wonderful job, if you can't tell by the look of my face."

"I... don't want to go into the bathroom... I don't really want to be inside at all right now," I admit.



Kade holds his hands out to me, like he's wanting me down on the ground with him.

"I'm sure this floor is disgusting," I say.

"I've sat on worse."

I drop down to my knees and give him my hands. He tightly wraps his fingers around them, pulling me in close as I collapse on the floor and take a deep breath that *fills* my lungs. It's like the first real breath I've had since that door closed. And with it, I collapse onto him, resting my head on his legs. "I'm sorry I acted like that."

"All badass? Fucking punching people in the throat and shooting everyone before I even had a chance to leave the room? You're sorry, and I'm the one who just wandered out going, huh... looks like I'm good to go."

I smile a little at that. "I guess that was rude of me. I could have saved you someone."

"Please don't. We don't want to make that mistake."

"After seeing you fight, that's fully understandable," I mutter.

Kade's hand slowly slides up my arm. "So... who is Norn to you?"

"My brother."

"And... all of this prestige Norn has, all of this power he built up over the years about being able to take down anyone... and the reason my father loved him so much... it was never him, was it? It was always you."

"Yes. He kept me in the shadows so he could claim that everything I did was all him."

"And when he couldn't control you... he'd lock you in a room."

His fingers brush through my hair and I love the feeling of it. I love his touch. I love the way he draws me from that darkness that threatens to tighten around my stomach. "Yeah. He liked to hurt me... if I didn't listen," I say as I

subconsciously rub at the scar Kade noticed on the couch a couple of days ago. “I don’t know why I didn’t fight him harder when he’d lock me in that closet... I was a better fighter than him, but it was like... when faced with him and that... small space, I just lost all control of myself. I could feel the walls closing in on me and every time he did it...” I swallow hard. “He wouldn’t let me out until I...” It’s making me feel uneasy even talking about it. “I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t need to,” he says, voice gentle. “You don’t have to tell me everything tonight.” He’s quiet as his fingers keep moving and I close my eyes, wanting to wallow in this bliss.

“I’m sorry I panicked in that room,” I whisper.

“I didn’t notice any of that; what I did notice is you fucking karate chop some guy into the wall. I also noticed that you came to my rescue, even though you promised you never would. And you want to know what I really noticed? You *shot me.*”

“I... vaguely remember that,” I say, glad he isn’t focusing on my panic attack or the way I’d lost my mind. It was so stupid. It was so senseless...

I reach over and pull his shirt up and look at the very shallow nick on his side. Definitely doesn’t need stitches and barely bled. “Looks fine.”

“You shot me,” he says as he drags me up, pulling me onto his lap so he can look me in the eyes.

“I did.”

“What if I’d moved?”

“Who moves into a bullet when they know someone’s going to shoot them?” I ask.

“I’m really dumb, Len.”

I smile at him as I squeeze him tightly. “I don’t believe that.” I reach up to his bruised, busted face and run a finger over his cheek. “You shouldn’t have gone without me.”

“Clearly. I was over there thinking I was being some selfless hero and see where it got both of us.”

“It was reckless.”

“I realize that now,” he says with a grumble. “But at the time, I was all like, look at how awesome I am. Refusing to let anyone else get hurt so I can be amazing. I bet Len will think I’m cool caring for others.”

I smile at him because I know he honestly believed that. “This is definitely not the life lesson I was teaching you. Like I was out there going, ‘You need to learn to take care of yourself and others’ and you go, ‘I bet that means I should just jump in with the sharks that have guns.’”

“Possibly,” Kade says as he cups my face and I lean into his touch. “Alright, I’m comforting you right now, not getting sassed.”

“Hmmm...”

“You have your playamajig thing?”

“My Switch?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s in my bag.”

“I’m going to take a shower, and then you’re going to torture me with it.”

I’m quiet for a moment. “How much torture?”

“As much as you want.”

“Fine.”

I sit back so he can get up and reluctantly watch him head into the bathroom. The idea of showering with him sounds nice but there’s nothing inside me that would get me to go into that small room until I absolutely have to. I’ll piss over the balcony if needed.

Kade leaves the door open as he strips and stares at me, like he’s afraid that if he blinks, I’ll be gone. He’s bruised all over, but he only seems to care about me.

“Do not do anything stupid,” he says.

“I’ll consider it.”

“Do more than consider,” he grumbles as he pulls open the glass door and steps inside the shower. I wander into the room and set my bag on the bed. Then I realize I’m actually rather thirsty and hungry. I check the menu, but the dining service stopped hours ago, so I head toward the door.

“I’m getting some snacks,” I say. “I won’t run off.”

“Alright,” he calls back, so I swing the door open and step out into the hallway. I feel like I saw a vending machine toward the far end of the hallway that I get halfway to before I hear, “LEN!”

Startled, I turn around to look at an absolutely dripping Kade running down the hallway with a hand towel barely covering anything.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“What the fuck are *you* doing? I asked you not to leave!”

“I’m not leaving. I said I was getting snacks and you said ‘Alright!’”

Kade slows down. “No, you said ‘I won’t run off’ to which I said, ‘*Alright.*’”

“Yeah, on my way to get snacks. Now you’re showing your ass to anyone who might want to see.”

He’s staring at me, not caring at all what he’s wearing... or not wearing, and I realize he looks a bit anxious. “Len, I’m serious.”

“I am too. I don’t even have my rifle on me. I’m not going to go kill him without having everything.”

Kade still seems hesitant but nods as he holds his hand towel tightly against his front. “Okay... okay, fine. Just... I’m going with you.”

“Like that?” I ask, eyebrows arching.

“One hundred percent like this. You know what? We’re going to fucking hold hands too.”

“Don’t you need two hands to hold up that towel?”

“Nope,” he grumbles as we go into the alcove with the vending machine.

“What do you want?” I ask as I stare down at his hand in mine.

“For you to listen.”

“I did listen!”

“I told you not to leave, and I trusted you wouldn’t leave. What happens if someone was waiting outside that door for you and shot you in the head? I’d have to go back to being a bitter asshole.”

“You act like you converted into a nun in the span of five days,” I say.

“I am a motherfucking nun, you hear me? Fucking saint. And I will turn back if you don’t make it worth my while.”

“Fine, what does Saint Kade want?”

“Everything.”

“You want one of everything?”

“But mostly you.”

I glance over at him. “Did you hit your head?”

“No, but I got kicked in it repeatedly.”

“Clearly explains the trauma and the romantic things you’re saying,” I say as I put a twenty in and start hitting buttons. It doesn’t buy him everything, but it’s enough to hopefully sate him. “It’s hard to do this left-handed.”

“Shouldn’t have tried running off, then.”

“I wasn’t... you’re not going to believe me, are you?” I ask as I squeeze his hand.

“It’s not likely.”

“I didn’t think so,” I say as I collect all the snacks with my left hand. I tuck a bag of Skittles into Kade’s hand that’s struggling to hold the towel. “You’re so wet.”

“That’s what happens when you run away.”

“I’m positive I wasn’t running away,” I say as I gather up everything else.

“You swear?”

“I very much do.”

Kade leads me back to the room where I hear the shower still going. He makes a show of locking the room door, then goes in and shuts the water off. After a minute, he comes out wearing a larger towel and slumps down on the bed before patting it.

Picking up the pad of paper that’s left on the desk as well as a pen, I go over to him. “So, see this?” I ask as I scribble down a crudely drawn human. “I’m going to detach his fingers first.”

Kade starts laughing as he watches me cross out each finger. “You’re drawing me a diagram about how you’re going to kill Norn?”

“I am! So then I’ll take his toes.”

“What are you going to do with all of these fingers and toes?”

“I don’t know. I guess just like toss them in a corner or something,” I say, not sure why this part matters much.

“You could display them, you know? Wear a little necklace with them.”

I stare at him before sighing as I realize how ridiculous I’m being. “OKAY. I get it. I’m being crazy.”

“No, no, no! I want to hear more. So once you’ve built a little Eiffel Tower in the corner with his fingers and toes, what are you going to do?”

“You make me sound like a serial killer!”

“No! I’m trying to pull out your creative side. Okay, so fingers and toes stacked to make a pyramid. What are you doing with the hands?”

I can’t keep the grin at bay. “Stop! This is horribly morbid.”

“You’re the one wanting to chop them off. So you chopping them off is okay but me recommending you take up an artful side project so they don’t go to waste isn’t?”

“Okay, you’re right, I’m sorry. I’ll stop talking about ways to torture him.”

“Good,” Kade says as he leans in and tips up my chin. “Because, Len... you’re a good person. Don’t let your brother make you think you’re not. You’re nothing like him. You are better than you even realize. And I fully believe that you wouldn’t be happy torturing someone even if you hate them.”

I mess with the bag of pretzels I have in my hand, finding it hard to meet his eyes because I’m afraid that if he knew everything about me, he’d realize that I’m not as good of a person as he thinks I am. But he tips my chin up again and my eyes catch onto his.

“Are you listening?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Are you retaining this information?”

“Not really.”

“I don’t give a shit what you did in the past. You are good. Okay?”

I squeeze the bag of pretzels so hard it pops open, startling me. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Unless you decide not to be mine, and then you’re not sweet after all. You’re evil.”

I smile at him. “I thought you didn’t date.”

“Maybe I just never found the right guy.”

“You’re unexpectedly sappy,” I decide before leaning in and kissing his cheek, which seems to be the only place not bruised or cut.

“Maybe,” Kade says as he takes the bag of pretzels I’ve been mutilating. “Weird... look at all this pretzel dust.” He reaches in and sprinkles some on my hand.

“Whoops... I was... holding the bag a bit too tightly.”

“Didn’t notice.”

“I think you need your ass kicked. You ever played *Mario Kart*?”

“Does it look like I have?”

“You’re going to regret everything you’ve said to me,” I determine.

“I doubt it,” he says as he tries to sprinkle more pretzel dust onto my hand.

“I don’t want this! I wanted a full pretzel!” I protest as I set up the Switch.

“I think there’s an eighth of one in here,” he says as he fishes a pretzel piece out and hands it over to me.

“Thank you. I greatly appreciate this.” I put it into my mouth and smile at him.

“It’s the sacrifices I must make.”

Kade wraps an arm around me and waves at my Switch. “So enlighten me. How must I be tortured this time?”

“By throwing bananas at me.”

“I can throw my banana at you.”

“Not until you’re better. I don’t want to hear you cry about how I shot you again.”

“I didn’t even get a Band-Aid.”

“I don’t have any Band-Aids. You won’t let me leave! Here,” I say as I hand him a bag of candy. “Hold that against the wound. That’ll cure it.”



“Will it?” he asks.

“Yes. Now let me show you how to throw bananas.”

“I know all about bananas.”

“Then you’ll be a natural,” I say as I tuck myself against him.

My brother knew how to control me and keep me by his side. He twisted me in a way that made me both hate and fear him and caused me to give him whatever he asked for.

It made me weirdly dependent on him, giving in to whatever he asked for because whenever I was free of him, I never really felt free. I was afraid he’d use anyone I cared about as fodder in this war between us. So I just never got close to anyone. But I guess I don’t have to worry about that with Kade... Norn already won’t look away from him.

“Thank you,” I say as I glance away from the Switch to look at him.

“For driving my stupid little go-kart right off this gaudy track?” he asks.

“For helping me keep from falling back into that darkness.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.”

Kade gives me a squeeze and kisses my forehead before turning back to the Switch. “Look! I’m catching up to you.”

“I’ve... I’ve already been around the track once, I’m just... passing you a second time,” I say.

“I hope you feel good about yourself.”

I grin. “I do. Thank you.”

---

When I wake up, I find myself pressed tight against Kade. I’d had trouble falling asleep and had lain for hours twisting and turning until he grabbed onto me and pulled me into him.

When he'd seen I was awake, he'd held me close and tucked his head against my neck, allowing me to feel at ease.

It's strange how another person can help so much... can make me *feel* so much. And can help chase away those nightmares. I was able to slowly sink into his touch and finally found sleep.

It seems that even in sleep, I didn't venture far from him as I found myself tucked against him when I woke up.

"Morning," Kade mumbles.

I catch his eyes. "Morning."

His hands slide over my waist and draw me in close, wrapping me tight. It's such a secure hold that I find it hard to pull away from it. But if everything goes right today, I can allow myself to be drawn into those arms every day.

"You're not running off just yet," he says.

"Yeah... but I have to," I say as I grudgingly slide out of bed. The room is cold outside of his arms and I immediately regret it. "I just... I need to finish this." Because the longer it remains unfinished, the longer Kade's in danger, and I can't just sit by and let that happen. I can't let this taste of happiness be gone before I truly get to enjoy it.

"Please just wait," Kade says as he follows me into the bathroom that I'm less than eager to go into, but at least I'm feeling better today. And I have to admit that having him in here with me makes it tolerable.

I grab one of the toothbrushes he'd gotten down at the desk when we'd arrived here. He watches me as I start brushing my teeth, and when it's clear I'm not answering—or waiting—he sighs and brushes his teeth while staring me right in the eyes. It's some weird kind of standoff, but he's sexy and only wearing his briefs so he gets away with it. When I finish in the bathroom, he follows me back into the bedroom and gives me a push, so I sit down on the bed.

"Just stay here," he decides as he hooks me with an arm and drags me back down with his weight. This time, I give in because I really do want to feel him.

“What if I stay for half an hour?” I ask, since he’s shockingly good at tempting me.

His eyes narrow. “Hmm...”

“We’re not going to rest easy until this is done,” I say. “You don’t understand that he won’t stop coming for us now that we’ve done this to him. He won’t give up until he ruins one or both of us.”

“Hmm...”

“Stop ‘hmming’; it’s getting us nowhere,” I mumble.

“We could run away.”

I look at him in surprise. “What?”

“Leave this city and just run.”

“You’d leave your casino?” I ask in shock. I always felt like that was his thing... like that’s what he lived for.

“I don’t want to, but I’d rather leave it and both of us be alive,” he says as he reaches out and takes a couple of strands of my hair between his fingers and tugs lightly. He’s got a wrinkle forming between his eyebrows as he says this, and I can tell he really is distraught over the idea of me putting myself at risk. I guess... I would be too if I knew he was the one going off.

I give him a smile as I lean into his touch. “Even though I haven’t worked for Norn for years, he’s kept a close eye on me. He wouldn’t let me leave. And he’s going to be more than pissed after this. I promise you that I’ll be fine.”

“Let me go with you.”

“That’s a horrible idea! Then I’ll have to watch you while trying to kill him. It’ll just add to the risk.”

“Right, it’ll keep you from doing anything risky,” he says. “You can clearly use a long-ranged weapon with ease. Use it.”

I’m quiet for a moment as I realize that I don’t really know how I want to do it yet. It all depends on where Norn is and the best option to end his life.

Kade's hand slides down from my hair and cups my cheek. "Len... for the first time *in my life* I want someone. I want to drift through life with someone. I want to relish this feeling of waking up and being tucked against someone... against you. To know that at the end of the day, when I come home, it's not to an empty house. Please, I don't want that taken from me."

I bite my lip before giving him a nod because the sound of those things... all of those things... I want them. I've never been a frivolous person; I've never been greedy or asked for much, but right now I want those things so badly. "Okay... but you have to trust me. I want those things too but we can only truly have them when he's gone. Norn is well aware many want him dead and is doing everything he can to keep himself protected. He doesn't show his face out in public and he sure as hell won't come out so I can shoot him from afar. *Especially* knowing I'm looking for him."

"No, he won't, but what if we force him out?" Kade asks.

"What are you thinking?"

"My father knew I was business smart, so he relied on me for a lot of the business aspect of things. This means that I have access to everything my father did. Norn doesn't know this, but if he hasn't changed some things, my father's account would still be attached to a lot of Norn's business."

"What does that change, though?" I ask.

"If I were to take this information and simply hand it off to the police, they'll be required to pull him in," Kade says.

I shrug because I really don't see how this will help us. "They've taken Norn in countless times, but they can't hold him. They know they can't, but they do it just to show the public that they tried but were 'incapable' of finding anything illegal on him. It'll happen again."

"Right... but that means we'll know where Norn is. I know a guy who works at the station who will be able to tell me when he's being brought in. Let's just say that to get to the secure rooms, they have to walk past a row of windows."

I raise an eyebrow. “You want me to shoot Norn when the police are escorting him?”

“I sure do.”

A grin forms on my lips at that idea. “You are devious and sexy.”

“Thank you,” he says as he grabs me and pulls me on top of him. “Now, let’s just stay here for a couple of days first.”

I lean down as he cups my face in his hand while his other hand wraps around my waist, and it’s the most tempting thing I’ve ever felt. It’s *nearly* enough to hold me here, but the idea of making a mistake and Kade losing his life for it makes me know that I can’t. Not yet.

I offer him a kiss instead, which he greedily takes, hands tightening around me as his lips move against mine. His fingers sink into my hair as he presses into me. His free hand slides down to my ass, squeezing it gently as I’m tempted even more, but I know I can’t be.

The moment I even consider remaining here all day, I’m reminded that neither of us are safe. The longer I’m here, the greater the chance that Norn will kill Kade. Breaking the kiss is one of the hardest things I’ve done, but I manage to sit up and look at him.

“Kade, we have to do this, and once we do, I’ll let you keep me here as long as you want.”

He hesitates before nodding. “Okay. Um... let me get Harker to bring my laptop here. Staying here is probably safest until we absolutely have to leave. I’ll also have him bring us food. I’m starving.”

“Those dust pretzels didn’t hold you over?” I tease.

Kade grins as he reaches over and grabs his phone before calling Harker. While he gets that situated, I call my cleaners and ask if they can bring us a different vehicle. It’s not generally something they do for me, but they’re more than happy to do so. Sometime before Harker arrives, a slip of paper slides under the door, and I realize it’s a valet ticket. I

slip it into my pocket and head back to Kade who is on the phone but smiles at me.

I don't know why that smile just stops me in my tracks. It's such a genuine smile, one that draws me in and refuses to let me go. Never did I imagine he would be the one giving it to me. Growing up, I knew Kade from a distance. I wasn't allowed to get close to him—my brother kept me locked away and refused to allow me to interact with others—but doing what I did, I was skilled at seeing things that others didn't want me to see.

And one of those things was Kade. He was rich and handsome, so of course I was attracted to him. I never stopped to think that his life wasn't perfect. I saw the abuse from his father, but I was so used to everyone being nasty and hateful that I was still jealous of what he had. In all the years I stole glances at him while he never even knew I existed, have I seen a smile like that?

He gets off the phone and looks up at me. "What's that look for?"

"I used to have the hots for you."

"What? I don't remember you at all. I didn't even know Norn had a brother."

"Because he kept it completely quiet. No one was ever supposed to know. But when I did jobs for Norn, I'd see you every now and then. I..."

There's a knock on the door and I pull away from what I was rambling about and head over to it. Really, Kade doesn't need to hear about my childhood crush.

"It's me," Harker says, so I open the door and let him in. My stomach growls the moment I smell food and I wander after him to the middle of the room. "I come bearing gifts. Can I just say, Kade, that it's wonderful getting to see your purple face. I was pretty sure you were going to die yesterday."

Kade scowls at the "purple" comment but nods. "I was too. But thankfully, Len's not as dumb as me."

I grin as Harker hands me a sausage, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwich before handing one to Kade. As I unwrap my sandwich, I say, “So I... taught him a life lesson and he took that lesson and threw it in the blender then tried taping it back together before going, ‘I bet this is what Len meant.’”

“One hundred percent,” Kade says as he pulls out his laptop and sets to work. It doesn’t take him long, and in the meantime, Harker and I play on my Switch.

Around eleven, Kade snaps the lid of the laptop closed and grins. “That one’s going to fucking hurt,” he says. “Now we just wait.”

“How much did you send them?” I ask curiously.

“Enough that they’re going to have no choice. I even sent a threat with it that I was willing to go to the newspaper if Norn wasn’t brought in and questioned.”

“I hope they don’t delay it by trying to go through and prove everything,” I say.

“With the security camera footage I also sent them, I feel like it’d be hard to delay it too long. I also lit a fire under their asses and told them that they had two hours or it was going out to everyone.”

“Damn, Kade,” Harker says, impressed.

“He got hot, didn’t he?” I ask. “Before, he was hot and then he opened his mouth and it was like ew. And now... now he’s hot all the time.”

Kade glares at me. “Excuse me?”

“Are you sure?” Harker asks. “That look he’s giving you right now makes me think he’s not a fully changed man.”

“Okay, he’s *getting* there, though. I can’t expect a miracle.”

Harker grins at me. “That’s true.”

I return the grin before getting up and going over to my gun case. “I guess let’s get ready. I’ve already researched the

location where I want to be. Norn will be busy until then, I suppose.”

“I’m sure he will,” Kade agrees.

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## KADE

How is watching Len work so mesmerizing? The moment he gets out of that vehicle, he's completely focused. And then here I am, trailing along after him like a lost dog. He knows right where he's going and how he's getting there, and still, I just stare after him.

"I think there's something wrong with me," I announce as we continue up the stairs. At least this building is only three floors, so he likely won't murder me with the steps. It'd feel quite ridiculous if I was still huffing and puffing my way up ten flights and he'd already killed the guy and headed back down.

"What's wrong with you? Allergic to stairs?"

"I just... I can't stop staring at you, and at first, I thought it was because I kind of like you and haven't really liked another person besides Harker before. But then I realized that no... I can't stop looking at you because I'm waiting for you to shoot me again," I say, which immediately makes him laugh.

"A nick! I nicked you! You're *fine*."

"Hmmm..."

And of course that joyous grin is back on Len's face. "Clearly you like me but are too afraid to admit it."

"Hmm..."

His smile widens as he reaches the top. He grabs the door leading out to the roof before leaning back and giving me a kiss on the lips. "Be ready to call me by my pleasure name after this."

"Oh, I'm ready," I assure him.

"And please, keep your head down. You're too pretty to get shot."

"*Again*, you mean?"

He winks at me and I realize I'd let him shoot me again just to see that smile on his face. I have something wrong with me, it's quite clear now.

"You sure you're going to be able to shoot him from this distance and not accidentally hit someone?" I ask.

"You saying stuff like that makes me want to move even farther away."

I shake my head because really, why would I doubt him? When we reach the roof, he puts me in a "safe" space as he sets up and waits. It's about forty minutes before the vehicles pull up, likely transporting Norn.

A moment later, Norn is ushered right inside. Using the binoculars that'd been sitting next to Len, I watch him walk in and realize that he's not even handcuffed. The police know they won't be able to pin anything on him and everyone in that building knows it's a waste of time to even try.

I look over as Len takes his phone out and calls someone before putting it on speaker. For a second, I'm confused why he's not taking the shot as I see Norn stop and dig into his pocket before giving the phone a look. He opens it, and suddenly I hear Norn's voice over Len's phone.

"Of fucking course this is you and Kade. What do you gain from doing this besides irritating me? You know I'll walk right back out of here."

"I just... I wanted to see your lovely face, Norn. It really has been too long," Len says.

Norn freezes and his attention shifts to the window as realization dawns on him. "Fuck..."

"Have fun in hell, brother," he says.

"Kylen, no—"

But it's too late. The window cracks as I see Norn's head snap back, feet stumbling after him. He staggers and then falls into a wall that he slides down. The shot hit perfectly between his eyes.

Len watches for a moment longer as everyone in the station jumps into action until they see the dead man leaning against the wall. Absolutely no one does anything to see if he's okay; no one cares. Seeing as there haven't been more shots, they don't really do anything besides stare down at the dead man who will never threaten either of us ever again.

When I look over at Len, he presses his finger down on the red "End Call" button and looks up at me. "It might not have been the torture I was envisioning... but I think I got the point across."

"You think?"

"He might need to contemplate that one a bit. He'll have plenty of time," Len says as he picks up his rifle and stashes it in his case. "I hope there is a hell and he's locked in a fucking box there."

"I hope so too," I say. "You good?"

Len catches my eyes and gives me a reassuring smile that seems quite genuine. "I am... Like I said before, killing your nightmare doesn't fix anything. It doesn't make the past any different... but it gives you a sense of power to know that even your worst nightmares can fall."

"Especially with a bullet," I say.

"Definitely then."

"Is it weird that was hot? That's definitely weird, isn't it? It was weird. I shouldn't have said that. Like not him dying, I'm not that morbid. Dear god, just... your... way of using a gun and the way you held it and how cocky you were when you *called* him, and how... fucking hell, I need to stop this train. This train is fucking derailing. Forget everything I've ever said. Hi, I'm Kade."

He grins at my fumbling, clearly enjoying my misery. "It'd be weirder if you thought it wasn't."

"Would it? Would it really? Are we both fucking weird?"

"Probably. I mean... have you met us?"

“True,” I say, but as I reach the door, I hold my hand out to him. He looks down at it in surprise before slipping his fingers between mine. “Let’s go to your place. Not mine. I am not walking up ten flights of stairs.”

“Sounds good.”

# CHAPTER 8

ALL THE DAYS LEFT

## LEN

Killing my brother felt more freeing than I thought it would. There was a part of me that felt like a noose that'd been wrapped around my throat for all my life was finally pulled away and I was able to take a deep breath for the first time.

Like I was stepping into a new act in my life.

As we arrive at my apartment and I reach the elevator, I turn to Kade and dangle my keys in front of him.

“Whoever gets upstairs first calls the shots,” I say.

His eyes are on those keys, watching them dangle. “Shots as in... I get to demand what sexy thing you do if I get there first?” he asks, eyebrows arching.

I lean into him and press my lips against his ear. “You get to call *all of it*,” I whisper. “You can tell me all about what you’re going to do to me.”

He starts jabbing his finger repeatedly against the elevator call button, knowing it'd be the only way he'd get to the top first. We both know his legs can't outmaneuver mine.

“And if you win?”

“You have to beat me at *Mario Kart* before we have sex.”

“Fucking hell,” Kade growls, hitting that button with renewed vigor. It's not coming any quicker than it was as I leisurely head off for the stairs. “Why's it so slow? Len! Len! NO! This is too slow.”

“So much *Mario Kart*.”

“Fucking hell,” he grumbles as he dashes for the stairs. Seeing him coming, I rush through the door into the stairwell and start running up the steps.

He's hot on my trail, and I realize he can actually move when there's something he really wants.

“Don’t do this to me, Len. I’d like to assume you’re joking, but I know you. You’re not joking. You will tantalize me and tease me, and we’ll never have sex, and we’ll die old and celibate because I’ll never beat you at one of your weird games,” he says.

“And you think you’ll beat me at this game?” I ask as I body block him from getting past me. He tries to squeeze past, so I use his own momentum to gently guide him to the ground.

“No! Len! Please!” he cries as I scurry off ahead of him, giving him a taunting grin the whole way.

“Oh, so sad, this ass was gonna be yours.”

“Hold on,” he says, getting an enlightened look on his face. “I have the keys. Rule’s first one inside.”

“Keys? Fuuuuck. I forgot I gave them to you... oh wait... these keys?” I ask as I dangle them in front of me. I’d snatched them when he’d tried squeezing past me, and seeing the *look* on his face makes it oh so worth it.

“No! Len! Dammit,” he complains as he scrambles up to his feet before I hear a thud and look down at where he’s fallen. “Fuck.”

I hesitate before turning around. “Are you okay?”

“Ah hell,” he grumbles as I hurry back down to him and take his hand.

“Are you hurt?”

“Len... you’re too sweet for this world,” Kade says as he snatches the keys out of my hand and pushes past me.

“You... *pretended to be hurt?*” I growl as I chase after him.

“I sure as fuck did because I know you’re a sucker,” he says as he shoves through the door into the hallway. I rush after him but he’s already at the apartment door trying to figure out which key opens it. I try grabbing it but he presses his body in tight so I can’t.

“That was dirty,” I tell him.

“Thank you.”



“You’re not being praised.”

“Sure feels like praise. I’m going to be extremely praised when I get through this door.”

“Well, you’re not.”

Kade laughs as he pushes the door open and stumbles into my apartment before yanking his shirt off. “Come to me! Or *come* for me, if you get my drift.”

“Oh, I get it,” I grumble.

He’s still laughing as he holds his arms out to me. “All mine.”

“You really thought I was going to make you play games until you won? I would never get laid if I did.”

“It would have been traumatizing.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say as walk up to him. He draws me in close, mouth inches from mine.

“Are you?”

“I’d have made you play naked so I could touch your joystick while you tried to beat me.”

“Okay... that does sound more fun than I was thinking.”

I grin as his fingers find the bottom of my shirt. He draws it up, the cloth sliding over me before being dropped down at our feet. His hands hook my pants, fingers gliding along sensitive skin as he unbuttons the front and slides them down, dropping them onto the ground so I’m standing before him naked.

When his eyes run over me, I *immediately* feel embarrassed.

“Stop... your eyes...” I say as I try to hurry away from him to find the sheets to hide under.

“No, no, no, where are you going?” he asks as he catches me and pulls me backward until his front is pressed against my back. “You’re so easily flustered for a man who is one of the

most confident men I've ever met. And can I just say that it makes you even sexier?"

My face has to be on fire at this point as I hear him unzip his pants. He drops them on the floor before drawing me back and I feel his cock pressed right against my bare ass.

"Can you feel how hard you've made me?" he asks.

I want to cover something. My face, my cock... I don't know, but the way his sultry voice sounds in my ear while his hard cock presses against my ass has me equal parts turned on and embarrassed.

"You like this?" he asks, one arm keeping me hooked there as he kisses my neck. His free hand slides around, and I watch as it dips down and grips my cock. "Len?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"Tell me you like it," he says, nipping my skin.

"It's... yeah?"

He rubs his cock against me as he strokes me, and I can't hide the moan. "Yeah, what?"

"Y-Yeah, I... stop! You're making me so flustered. I can't think."

He kisses a line down my throat as his hand moves over my length, and all I can think about is his cock that I need inside me. "That does sound like a problem. Issue is, I fucking love how embarrassed you get. It makes me want to touch you and watch every expression and listen to every noise you make."

I cover my face, positive that I can't handle this anymore. "No! You're... you're evil."

"I'm evil? I'm evil for finding you ridiculously sexy," he asks as he presses into me until I walk forward and hit the bed. He pushes me up onto it and I immediately try to scramble for under the covers where I'm positive we can have sex without him looking at me like that.

“Oh, no, no. You told me if I won, I get to have you do whatever I want. Or was that just cocky talk?” he asks.

“Yes! It was! Oh my god, turn out the lights and close the curtains, and then I’ll let you return.”

“Oh, you’re killing me, you’re so fucking cute,” he says as he catches me before I slip under the covers.

Kade slides his body against me as he reaches over and grabs the lube. He slides a wet hand down my ass, running his finger between my cheeks.

“I know what I’m missing. I forgot to call you sir,” he says as his finger teases me before he pushes it inside. “Does that feel good, *Sir*?”

“Oh my god, don’t bring that up. That was a joke and I regret it and—hmm...”

“Like that?” he asks as he rolls me a little more in his direction. His cocky look is too fucking sexy, but I don’t even know what to say or do. Kade, on the other hand, doesn’t stop talking. “You are absolutely gorgeous and all mine... I mean, if you want to be mine.”

“O-Of course I want to be yours,” I whisper.

He catches my lips, drawing me deeper into the kiss as he pushes another finger inside me. “Good because the idea of anyone else ever seeing this expression of yours is too much.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Nah, not at all,” he says as he rolls me onto my back while he settles between my legs, condom in hand. “You are such an enigma, Len.”

“T-That’s Sir to you,” I say as I bite my lip, trying not to grin as he rolls the condom down his cock.

“Oh, silly me,” he says as he leans down and kisses me, hand cupping my cheek. “*Sir*, I’m going to fuck you until you’re moaning my name.”

I shake my head. “Just... do it, don’t announce everything!”

“I’m going to take my cock,” he says as he rubs lube over it.

“You are ridiculous!”

“And I’m gonna—”

“Fuck me, I get it, now do it!”

He’s laughing now, which makes me smile. “Yes, I do think I’ll get to that.”

Kade presses the head of his cock against my entrance before slowly pushing inside. I grip tightly onto him, holding him snug against me as he pushes in deeper. His hand strokes my cock as he settles inside me. It’s been a while since I had sex, but he’s gentle enough that his thick cock just makes me eager for him to move, though dear god, I would never say such a thing.

“Feel good?”

I nod, knowing if I didn’t, he’d drag it out of me one way or another.

“Good,” he says as he rocks his hips. He thrusts inside me as I grip tightly onto him, loving the feeling of him, the way he makes my body burn with pleasure, the desire that rolls through me. I haven’t had sex with many people, only two, but neither of them knew how to make me feel like this. Neither of them knew how to make my entire body feel like it was being taken over with bliss. And when he hits that sweet spot inside me, I moan, practically melting into him.

My fingers dig into his back as he kisses a line from my neck to my lips. His hand draws up my cock, fingers teasing the tip before sliding back down to the base.

As he moves inside me, I realize how lucky I feel. How it feels to *want* someone. To *have* someone. To care about someone like I care about him. And while I know our relationship is new, and I can never tell what will happen in this world, I find myself feeling more connected to him than I’ve ever felt to anyone.

I know it's not just the way he makes my body feel that has me thinking that way. No, there's so much more to it.

Kade thrusts into me and draws me in close as I arch into him. The pace of his hand on my cock quickens as he senses I'm close and within moments, he pulls me over the edge. I moan as I come, pleasure rippling through me as I grab tightly onto him. He thrusts deep into me as he groans, clutching onto me as he comes.

He kisses my neck, then my lips as he pulls out of me and rolls onto his back, guiding me down on top of him. One of his hands cups my ass as the other runs up my back, making me shiver at the light touch.

"How can you be absolutely perfect?" he asks.

"I think you're confused."

"Trust me, I'm not."

"Hmm..." I mutter, face reddening again as I tuck my head against his chest. It makes him chuckle as he kisses the top of my head. For a while, his hands explore my body, moving over me, touching and stroking as I lie, feeling absolutely exhausted after the last few days' adventures. It's so hypnotic that I must fall asleep because the next thing I know, I wake up to find myself tucked in his arms.

It's early evening, so I slowly slide out of the bed and grab my underwear, pulling it on.

Kade murmurs something but he doesn't fully wake from his nap as I head into the kitchen. I get a bowl out but don't get very far before he calls to me.

"Where did you go?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I say as I finish up before carrying the filled bowls back to bed and holding one out for him.

"What... is this?" he asks as he looks down at it.

"You asked if you'd get ice cream if you stayed in someone's bed instead of fleeing... I told you that you had to wait to find out."

He takes the bowl from me with a grin. “Huh... I do like this. But I know the main reason I do is because of the company. Before you sit back down, get your little geek thingy.”

“You like playing video games, don’t you?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” he declares but as soon as I retrieve it, he pulls me in close and I tuck myself against him.

# EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER



## KADE

The casino is in full swing as I wander through it and head to the back.

“Headed out?” Jon asks.

“Yeah. I need to get going. Everything seems good here. How’s your daughter doing?”

Jon smiles at the mere mention of her. “Just fucking adorable, you know? Like how did I have any part in making something so cute?”

“It is questionable,” I say, which makes him laugh.

“See ya. Have a good night.”

“You too,” I say as I head out back to get into my car and drive for home.

When Len and I decided to move in together, I bought a house on the outskirts of the city. One with a nice, open floor plan that Len feels comfortable in and one that I don’t have to miserably crawl up ten flights to get to, though Len considers it good exercise.

While the house is extremely nice, it isn’t the extravagant mansion I once would have picked. Len has never made me feel like I have to flash around my money to get his attention, and honestly, I think he dislikes it.

When I reach the house, I unlock the door and step inside to see Len sitting on the couch, controller in hand.

He pauses the game and immediately looks over at me. “Welcome home.”

And really... isn’t that what I’ve spent my whole life not knowing that I needed? At the end of the day, I could lose my casino and all my money, and I could still make it with Len by my side.

I used to be jealous and resentful of people like that... people who had things I thought I'd never have... or maybe I thought I didn't deserve to have them.

"What's that look for?" Len asks as he gets up to walk over to me.

"Just thought you were looking handsome," I say, which is the truth... even if it wasn't my main focus.

No matter what I have, this place has always felt more like home because of who is waiting for me when I walk through that door.

Len pulls me in for a kiss before he says, "I have a job tonight."

"I'm going with you," I decide.

"It's not a risky one," he assures me.

I stare at him until he sighs. He has to know by now that it doesn't matter to me if it's risky or not, I hate letting him go. But Len has done so much good in the world that I can't fathom telling him no, even if I want to beg him to stay home and stay safe.

A part of me still feels like he's trying to repent for what he's done in the past, but that's why I tell him again and again how good he is.

"I still don't want you to go alone... and you know how much I love watching you work," I say. "I can't help it if you took my cool guy persona and broke it down until all that was left is me loving everything you do."

"I did what now?" Len asks as he cocks his head.

"You took all my stoic, badass credits and just destroyed them until I was all 'I love you, Len, you're the greatest thing in this world. Nothing else matters. Not even money.'"

"You know what? I was going to complain, but I *am* the greatest thing you'll ever meet, so I just can't."

That makes me laugh. He always makes me laugh and smile and... any of those things I'd pushed off for so long. He

pulls me into his world and holds me tight and proves to me that this life is worth living.

I know he has monsters that haunt him, but I make sure to stay by his side and help him through all of them, though it still won't ever be as much as he did for me. Because he gave me a reason to live and love and care for someone other than myself.

I also learned that Len doesn't always do jobs for next to nothing; he often takes easy jobs that pay well, which he then uses to help others.

It wasn't always as easy for me to see the good and bad in people like Len can, I think that's something just he can do, but it is easy for me to help when I can... especially when I have more money than I know what to do with.

“BUT THEN. When I get home, we're going to marathon this list of movies and then we're going to play this new game that just came out that you're going to *love*. It has naked people chasing you in it... they might be cannibals, but I promise you'll love it.”

“Christ.”

Len gives me a grin. “I knew you'd love it.”

That makes me laugh. “You're ridiculous.”

“You love it *and* you love me.”

“I very much do.”

“I love you too. Now let's go shoot some shit and play some games,” Len says as he gives me a tug.

This man could lead me absolutely anywhere and I would follow.

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Winters started writing stories as soon as she was old enough to turn her ideas into written words. She loves writing a variety of things from romance and comedy to action. She also enjoys reading, horseback riding, and spending time with her pets.

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