



# REVIVAL

KATE BENSON  
AND

*USA Today* Bestselling Author  
KATHY COOPMANS

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Revival

A Raven's Oath Novel

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*Live by The Oath. Die by the blade.*

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# PROLOGUE

*Kaci*

*Five Years Ago*

*“Remember what I told you, kitten. Kneel. Am I understood?”*

*I try to answer, but I can't say the words. They suddenly become sour and bitter on the tip of my tongue, with such a bad aftertaste as I swallow that it sticks to the roof of my mouth. The thought of saying them has me wanting to flee.*

*To run far away.*

*To disappear and become invincible with no traces of the old me to be found.*

*It leaves my heart heavy that I can't respond as tonight was meticulously planned. It was well talked out and was something I wanted. Something we both did. I'd thought about it all day. Excited and thrilled to please the man I love.*

*To learn something new.*

*To play and explore.*

*To strengthen us.*

*To take our relationship to new heights.*

*Flashes of the people who, years ago, ordered my compliance infiltrate my mind, quieting everything else. They used to make me submit to them, too, though it was never consensual. Not like it is at this moment with him. Submitting to them was the only way they kept their promise.*

*They never broke it.*

*They only broke me.*

*Leaving me shattered and splintered.*

*Now those demons are coming back to haunt me. To try and ruin the best thing that ever happened to me.*

*They want to take away happiness.*

*I can't allow them to do that.*

*Keeping my head tilted downward, I try to focus, to stay in my mind's safe place, yet my stomach lurches as I take in the darkness surrounding me. The blindfold meant to send a thrill through my core instead shrouds me in doubt and fists my chest in fear as the life I'd fought so hard to rid myself of continues to swamp my mind. Emotion jams up my throat, clamping down so tight I can barely swallow. My head spins until I'm dizzy, anxiety rising from my pores in the form of beads of sweat breaking at the back of my neck.*

*I'm not sure I can do this. No matter how much my heart wants it.*

*He was so honest and direct, explaining everything when he brought this part of his lifestyle to me. He would be the only*



*man to train me, to ever touch me again and I want that. I still do. He said we would start slow and ease into it. He's always been so patient. So understanding of my past.*

*He'd been everything I wanted when we met several months ago. He promised following him into this new world would bring me pleasure beyond my wildest imagination and said the pain that came with it would be welcomed.*

*Embraced, even.*

*He'd keep that promise. I know he would. Yet try as I might, I can't answer the gentle command even though I know I'm safe with him.*

*While there's admittedly a part of being dominated, ruled by him that sends waves of pleasurable anticipation through my center, desire burning in my veins, that darker underside has fueled my hesitance, my fear, until it's overflowing. Because of it, pleasure isn't how I'd describe it.*

*Right now, it's proving painful for a woman like me.*

*It's knocking on the door to my past, beckoning the demons.*

*They are howling in my ears as if sitting on my shoulders.*

*They are mocking and ridiculing.*

*Memories swarm from every angle, clawing at my insides. My foster mother, and the men's haunting words are taking over my brain in their horror. The memory of my screams and crying take possession of my chest until I'm internally weeping.*

*When his fingers brush over my collarbone, I want to pound my fists into the mattress in fury at those demons.*

*Before agreeing to try this, I loved when he touched me. Craved him. Longed to please him. Right now, with these feelings coursing through me, I'm desperate to retreat.*

*His thumb presses beneath my chin, forcing my head to slant back until I feel his hot breath cascading over my skin. I yearn to meet the intense near pitch-black of his eyes.*

*They've always been these mesmerizing, darkened pools of obsidian that sucked me into their depths since the day we met.*

*Passionate and deep.*

*Loyal and perceptive.*

*Powerful and secretive.*

*My safe haven.*

*Despite his promise that I'd never have to go further than I was willing, that it would all stop with a single safe word, a part of me expects his impending disappointment, and I brace myself for it.*

*I have to.*

*I must, because somewhere else, deep down, I know that my denial of this, of him, will mean the end of everything.*

*The end of us.*

*As unbearable as that reality is, the words still won't come out.*

*They've been suffocated under an awful past I wish I could break free from. I don't want to lose him, but the alternative is losing myself, whoever she might be. No matter how consensual, how prepared, the risk is just too high.*

*The doubt coursing through me right now is far too much.*

*“Answer me, Kaci.” His demand is stern yet laced with encouragement. Maybe even drenched in the same fear jolting through my body.*

*No matter how much I love him, and I do. So much that no one will ever love him the way I can, but I know I can't give him what he wants.*

*Not tonight.*

*Maybe not ever.*

*“Kneel for me, kitten,” Blaze rasps, his lips brushing deliciously against my skin. “Be my good girl.”*

The words wrap around my heart, squeezing the grief tighter while sorrow twines around my ribcage like vines.

Pricking me.

Angering me.

Making my heart bleed.

I allow them to fester in my stomach, along with the man who said them.

The man I left behind.

The only one who has ever stolen my heart. The man who will hold it for the rest of my days.

Tears blur as I knock back another cheap shot of tequila I shouldn't be buying when I can barely make ends meet. As silly as it sounds, I need the burn to remind me I'm not really dead inside.

“Move on, Kaci,” I whisper to myself as I slam down the last shot. “Just disappear and get yourself right.”

“I can help with that.”

The voice from the barstool next to mine startles me, and I press my hand to my chest. My heart is pounding so hard it bangs against my ribcage. I hadn't noticed it was now occupied, but as I glance to my left, our gazes collide, and I feel a tremble make its way around the base of my spine. I try to avert my eyes but am somehow drawn to the wicked yet ironically calm expression holding me captive despite my fear and curiosity as to how this person can help me.

Before I can make sense of it, my insides make way for something else. Something deep within telling me, even though I don't know the owner of those eyes, I know them. They are somehow akin to mine, and so is the soul that wreaks havoc beneath them.

Ghosts and demons and ugliness swirl in their depths.

Devastation.

I swallow, wondering what made this person want to run, to hide away because that's precisely what they're doing, what they've done.

It saddens me to think they have been crushed and beaten down just like me.

“What?” I stammer, gulping and searching around the hole in the wall bar for I don't know what - an escape route maybe - before my gaze lands back on my new companion. An unexplainable feeling of comfort emerges. “Who are you?”

*Maybe a place to call home,* my soul whispers.

Call me crazy, or more likely drunk, but something tells me the help they are offering could either be the exception or the end of me.

Which one is the million-dollar question.

“I’m Raven.”

A black matchbook with a golden bird of the same name drops onto the bar directly in front of me. I pick up the folded cardboard and lift the flap, the immaculate script holding nothing more than a single phone number. A frown pulls at my brows when my blue eyes return to take this mysterious person in, and I’m met with the bottom of an empty rocks glass lowering from Raven’s mouth.

“If you want to disappear, call me. I’ll make sure no one finds you unless you want them to.”

# CHAPTER ONE

*Kaci*

The Texas humidity is heavy as the glass-paneled door opens, allowing the thick air to span through the noisy bar at the hotel. The slight warm breeze that was sweeping through whenever someone walked in or out earlier is nowhere to be found. However, the rumbling from the thunderstorm is much more interesting to listen to than the man next to me.

He's quite boring as he drones on about the different countries he's been to, those he would still love to see, and those he wishes to revisit.

I couldn't care less.

Crossing my legs, I shift slightly toward him on the barstool I've occupied for the better part of the last hour, eager to do what needs doing. It's time to wash my hands of the man who has taken up too much of my time.

The dress I'm wearing is black and far flashier than I usually wear when I'm working. My looks alone usually do the trick, but I liked this dress, so I bought it.

I'm not a bragger by any means, but my poor excuse of a mother who tossed me into the system at birth at least was kind enough to give me some excellent genes. I won't deny my looks and curves help when it comes to me doing my job.

The plunging neckline accents my full breasts in such an eye-catching way that it's been impossible for the man not to follow the lead down to my tanned legs and how my black stilettos extend the length of my figure.

This get-up is precisely what I needed to entrap the greedy mongrel with morals the size of the tip of my pinky finger. Although, some would question if I have any inside of me.

For the record, I do. It's why I love my job so much. A trade I never saw coming. One I'm better at than I thought I'd be. One I needed so badly to strengthen the center of me.

I found the woman I was supposed to be, and in doing so, I'm enjoying removing filth from the world. Those sick and twisted people who slip through the cracks by paying others off, or knowing how to slither through themselves, to keep them out of trouble for doing innocent people wrong.

They don't deserve to breathe, so I seek justice in the form of taking their lives.

I'll never extinguish them all, but each one I do keeps someone safe from the wickedness, the deceitfulness, and, at times, the vileness that hollows out a person's soul.

The only thing I hate about my job is when they touch me with their dirty rotten hands. It makes me sick to my stomach. They never know it because I purr like a kitten when they do. Little do they know, that's when my claws come out.

“Oh, I love Nepal,” I murmur, resting my palm with ease against my victim’s hard bicep, giving it a little squeeze, letting my touch linger, and faking a blush when his lust-filled brown eyes meet my ravenous baby blues. Ravenous, as in ready for him to bite down on the hook I’ve baited.

Then I’ll reel him in for the kill.

Literally.

“Do you go often?” he asks, slanting closer, and I lean in a bit more myself, careful not to let him feel the gun holding my poison dart strapped to my thigh as I maintain eye contact. I always look my prey in the eye with sparks of desirable lust. They never see what’s coming when I do, and the exhilarating part is the shock factor on their face when they feel the prick at their neck. “I’ve only been once. Perhaps we’ll have to go down together sometime. You can show me the sights.”

He won’t be going anywhere again except to hell.

Right where he deserves. Scumbag.

“Hmm,” I smirk, my red stained lips teasing as I allow my fingertip to trace down the muscle beneath his well-tailored, expensive suit. “I’d love that.”

His eyes light up, and I notice how their muddiness shifts into something pleasant, almost friendly. If I didn’t know what a horrendous piece of shit this guy is underneath his good looks and great body, I’d pity him knowing I’ll be snuffing out his light soon.

Fortunately for my conscience, I know exactly what kind of man he is. That always makes it easier, not that I mind so much either way. He’s no skin off my back. I’ll go home, clean



myself of any trace of him, and sleep like a baby while Raven's cleaners remove his body and burn him to ashes.

He'll vanish into thin air like all the others who came before him.

"I think that's my cue," he rasps, his voice husky with want. Without taking his eyes off me, he pulls a money clip from the inside of his jacket and tosses down an excessive amount of cash for the handful of drinks we'd shared. *Incredibly absurd, considering earlier I'd paid the bartender two hundred to substitute the gin in my tonic with tap water.* "Shall we?"

He extends his arm, his elbow crooking slightly to help me from the barstool, and I slip my hand in, careful to adjust my dress amid my fake stumbling. My laugh trails between us, and the stench of the scotch he'd been downing fans around my neck, making me internally cringe.

I love the smell of good scotch, bourbon, or whiskey. On him, it's just as foul as he is.

"I'm sorry," I lie, letting my eyes appear to grow heavy. "I don't usually drink this much."

"That's okay, sweetheart," he whispers, his aftershave making me stifle a gag. It's so intense that I swear he spritzed on half the bottle and walked into the fumes. "I'll take care of you."

I doubt it but let him think that for a few more minutes.

"Not if I take care of you first," I say, smiling wider as we make our way to the elevator bank in the lobby.

His aroused chuckle fills the small space as we step in, and I laugh with him, knowing our minds are swirling with two very different scenes.

This poor idiot thinks he's about to get lucky. I wouldn't sleep with filth like him if he were the last man on earth. I'm just grateful this long, drawn-out job is nearly at its end.

Though tonight was our first official meeting, I've been following this asshole for two weeks now, learning his routine, laying down the perfect groundwork so that tonight could come to fruition.

I'm usually in and out of a job within a few days' tops, but sometimes the people I go after aren't so easy to get alone.

This fucker was one of them.

From the outside looking in, Miles Ramos is a pillar in the community. He's the only child of now dead immigrant parents. He'd made his name in the area by becoming one of Miami's youngest real estate investors, then extending his ventures across the rest of the Gulf states. He golfs on Saturdays and rubs elbows with the elite at nearly every gala that's worth mentioning.

In his spare time, he's a luxury car enthusiast who fancies himself a Catador comparable to expert levels. Last year, he opened a charitable organization to help aid immigrant children in need, citing his parents as his inspiration.

On paper, he's a damned good man.

Behind closed doors, however, he's nothing more than damned.

A fraud, a thief, and his actions are inexcusable.

After close surveillance, it didn't take long to see why he'd been so successful and why Raven had put him on the infamous Oath list.

He's a backward Robin Hood, stealing from the poor to further line his own pockets. He'd used his organization as a front for his illegal activity, which included sexual assault, blackmail and a host of other despicable crimes I don't even want to imagine. If all he'd done were stolen a little money, Raven likely would have outsourced the job and passed it onto a smaller outfit than ours. In fact, I almost suggested that very thing until I realized Ramos was getting his thrills in more places than hotel bars and behind the wheel of his sports cars.

As the elevator dings and signals our arrival onto the penthouse floor, our gazes meet in the mirror doors. His eyes are hazy with desire, and he's had too much to drink to notice mine are filled with hatred.

We step inside, and I make a big deal of the luxury surrounding us, do what I can to stroke his bullshit ego more than I already have.

"Can I get you anything?" he asks, and I flash him a seductive look over my shoulder.

"Would you pour me a drink while I freshen up?" I reply, and he gives me a nod, pointing toward the double doors on the other side of the room. I start to walk that way, my heels clicking on the tile. I'm halfway there, my fingers trailing suggestively on the back of the leather couch when I feel my burner vibrate inside my bag. "I'll be right out."

I close myself in and reach into the base of my bag, my mind wandering as I pull it from the clutch and turn on the

faucet. There's only one person who calls me on this phone, and they usually don't while in the middle of a job.

I pull it to my ear, not saying a word.

"Everything is alright. I've assigned someone else to do your next job because I need you in Chicago to discuss another as soon as you finish," Raven says low over the other end of the line. I internally sigh in relief, remaining quiet even though excitement swells in my heart. "You know the drill."

I do. I'm to book the first flight out, and a rental car will be waiting for me.

When the line goes dead, I drop the phone back into my bag, tussling my long, blonde hair before carefully reapplying my lipstick. With a quick turn of the faucet, the sound of rushing water stops, and I swing open the door, facing Ramos again as I step out.

"There you are," he grins, closing the distance between us. The way he looks at me fills me with disgust, and I come so close to pausing in my steps, sliding a heel off and jamming it into his eye. "I missed you."

"You did, huh?" I take the proffered drink from his hand, and he nods suggestively, his lips tracing the shell of my ear. I tip my head to the side, my mouth curling into a wide beam. "Well, don't you worry. I won't miss you," I whisper, his movements suddenly stopping, and I soak in that pleasing shock when I shoot the dart into his flesh. "I never miss my mark."

Before the words register in his sick mind, before he has the chance to come at me, his body staggers backward, and

slumps to the floor.

The ciathine, my murder weapon of choice, slows his breathing the second it hits his bloodstream, causing a fluid leak to fill up the space between his lungs. He starts foaming at the mouth, clutching his throat, gasping for air, body curling into itself as every muscle in his body cramps.

It's a beautiful sight.

Sixty seconds later, his eyes glaze over, and just like that, he's no longer breathing.

Flatlined just like that.

I snap a quick picture to send to Raven, yank out the dart, and retrieve the small box from my bag to seal the weapon inside. It'll be sitting at the bottom of the ocean by the time I catch my plane.

"Thank you for the drink," I smirk, flushing it down the toilet and wiping away what little evidence I'd left behind. "I had a lovely time." I step over his body and make my way toward the door. "See you in hell, darling."



Hours later, I'm driving down Lake Shore Drive toward Raven's historic mansion near the north side of Chicago.

The sun rises beautifully over Lake Michigan. Memories flit through my mind of the times my foster sister Tara and I would wake early to sit on the beach and watch the breathtaking view as it bathed the city in a soothing, warm glow.

I grew up on the south side of Chicago, and the first time Tara and I ever saw the sunrise was two days after she turned eighteen and moved into my tiny studio apartment with me. It was small and uncomfortable, but it was a roof over our heads, and we never starved due to the two of us working as waitresses at a truck stop right off the expressway. The owners were loving people who made sure we went home with food every night.

When I moved out, I hated leaving Tara with our foster mother, Suzanne. It was only for six months, but I still visited every day to ensure she and the men that bitch invited into her home kept their hands off Tara. I let myself continue to be beaten to make sure it stayed that way until she was old enough to leave with me once and for all. The violent abuse I took when I lived there allowed me to save her. Suzanne knew I'd do anything to protect the only person who ever cared about me.

Tara and I might not be sisters by blood, but we are in our hearts. She means everything to me, and there is as much good in her as bad in me.

She developed epilepsy when she was twelve after a brain injury from falling off her bike. Keeping Tara after her accident meant more money for Suzanne, and when the state came around to check on her, we pretended our lives were perfect out of fear we'd be separated.

Before that, she lived as normal of a life as two girls who had a foster mother that would rather snort cocaine, party, and commit abuse could provide. All that mattered to her was getting her next fix and holding onto her man of the moment

as long as she could, even if that meant I took a beating from them, too.

Any act of defiance or threat to tell would certainly mean I spent hours locked inside a dark closet, my fragile little body starving, cold and terrified for what could happen to Tara without my protection. Suzanne would leave me in the blackness once her man passed out. She'd then take their money while she snuck out to meet her dealer.

When they woke up, they were livid, high, drunk, and needed something or rather *someone* to take their anger out on.

That was always me.

At least it wasn't my sister.

Tara now lives at Faith's Hope. An independent home for adults with disabilities. She has her own apartment, cooks, is active and has a job at the grocery store across the street.

She helps the staff with those that have disabilities far worse than she does.

Although she could live on her own, she has the most dramatic type of seizures, and they can happen anytime. They cause an abrupt loss of consciousness and body stiffening, twitching, and shaking. They sometimes cause loss of bladder control or risk biting the tongue.

It's vital when I'm not around to have her back that other trustworthy people can take care of her when she needs it most.

Not to mention, as long as she's there, she's safe from the unknown.

I've made more than a few enemies doing what I do. The last thing I'm willing to risk over it is Tara's safety.

After calling Raven and making the life-altering decision to train to become an assassin, Suzanne was the first person I killed. I watched her die without remorse, knowing any other children she might have taken in would be forever safe.

Pulling up to Raven's mansion, I swing the car to the back, park, and climb out. As I take in my familiar surroundings, I hope I have a little time to stay and spend with Tara.

Over the last two months, it's been one job after another, and it's kept me from coming home for a proper visit. While the multiple calls and video chats Tara and I make to each other every week certainly helps dull the sting of missing her, it's just not the same.

I won't agree to leave on another assignment until I've seen her.

The last five years of my life have been nothing short of a whirlwind. I knew things would change drastically when I walked out of that dive bar, but I never anticipated just how much.

It took me a couple of days to find the nerve to call the number written on that matchbook, but when I went back to my apartment that night, I knew almost immediately I would.

After denying Blaze and turning my back on everything we'd shared, I tried putting him out of my mind and focusing on me. I couldn't forget the man no matter what.

He's unforgettable.

He always will be.



He was my one and only, and treated me with kindness, patience, and respect. Even that night, after I'd climbed into my shell, hidden away from him, the anger I'd expected him to have towards me never made an appearance.

He said we would be okay, but I knew better.

Over the months I'd called him mine, Blaze Lennox had been the epitome of the perfect boyfriend. He'd done everything he could to try and take care of me, even when I told him he didn't have to. Blaze made sure that I knew exactly how much I meant to him.

He was flawless.

Everything I never had but always dreamed of.

In return, he asked me for so little other than my loyalty and affection.

The only thing he'd ever asked for beyond that was my submission.

I wanted to give that to him. Give him everything he'd given me. Yet, at that moment, I simply couldn't.

I needed to get a handle on my life and tainted past. To learn how to stand on solid ground.

So, my decision to join Raven's Oath wasn't hard to make.

Since joining, I've learned how to trust people within my circle completely. I might have trusted Blaze with my heart and body, but I didn't when it came to submission. Becoming an Oath Keeper taught me how to trust in so many ways.

I've found a new family, too. Once Raven made a place for me at the table, I met others who had come from backgrounds

like mine. For the first time in my life, I felt I had purpose and reason.

Now I fight for all the Tara's, the victims like me, and those wronged in any way.

It's what's driven me ever since.

Ezra Stone was the first I bonded with. He'd been a big part of my training and took me under his wing when Raven said it was time. Our relationship since the beginning has taken on many forms. First friends turned partners, then lovers, and finally, now, he and his new wife, Lily, are like a second family to both me and Tara. Hundreds of us have taken The Oath, become a part of this incredible thing Raven has built. I'd met many of them, but it would be impossible to know them all.

Even if Raven would allow something like that, there are too many of us, and The Oath is continually growing.

Raven's eyes raise to mine when I let myself into the study, and in them, I find the comfortable brown that hides so many secrets staring back at me. And as I make my way around the desk, I'm engulfed by a much-needed embrace.

"How was your flight?"

"Meh," I shrug. "I drank and slept."

Not nearly enough sleep as I need, though I won't tell Raven that. One iota of someone overly tired and another Keeper will be called in.

"I'm sure both were needed."

“Definitely,” I admit as Raven gestures for me to sit in one of the high-back chairs facing the deep Brazilian rosewood desk. “So, where are you sending me this time? I’m assuming close by since you asked me here.”

I’m ecstatic over it as the only thing I was going to enjoy about the assignment Raven handed to another Keeper was sleeping most of the nine hours to London on the private jet.

“I’ll get to that in a moment. I’m not one hundred percent sure on all the details regarding this next job, Kaci. I went in and did some preliminary work before I accepted the contract, but I don’t have as much intel as I normally do. I’ll be able to get you started, point you in the right direction, but that’s about as much as I’ve been able to do. I’m not in a position to keep digging for solid proof.”

My eyebrows lift. Disorder and confusion begin to tumble through my brain.

“Okay. Well, how long will I be gone this time?”

“It’s hard to tell,” Raven says as if that tidbit is something spoken all the time. It’s not, as in I have never been told it’s hard to tell how long I’ll be gone. Even with Ramos, I knew beforehand. Not having everything in detail isn’t like Raven at all.

Something is wrong. Whether it’s not having all the ducks in a row with this job or something else I don’t know. Whatever it is has Raven rattled.

Nerves on edge.

My body tenses, concern clogs my throat. “I’m sorry, but do you mind telling me what the hell is going on?”

“Excuse me?”

The air between us thickens slightly. I’m certain I’m about to get the ass reaming of a lifetime by the only living person outside of Tara and Ezra with enough clout to attempt it, but I can’t stand by and say nothing. I won’t.

“You know better than anyone how loyal I am. How ready I am to do the work needed. However, in the five years I’ve been working for you, you always have every detail and all timelines in place before I even get a call. What gives?”

“What gives?” Raven’s shoulders square. “What gives, Kaci, is that we live in a world filled with real monsters, and it’s our duty, our privilege, to eliminate them. Our mission statement hasn’t changed.”

I know that, but something is going on, and I have a right to know what it is before going out and doing a job that’s obviously complicated.

“Then what has?”

“Demand.” Those brown eyes fill with a challenge and a warning, changing right before mine to haunted. They remind me of the day we met.

Occasionally, I’d catch a glimpse of that look. I never asked what caused it or if it had anything to do with The Oath, though I’ve wanted to so many times.

I’m guessing this job has brought out Raven’s demons.

I don’t like that concept at all.

“This isn’t a typical job for us. I pick and choose who is worthy of our services. I assess. I decide what you do and

don't, and you show the fuck up.”

“I don't need the reminder.”

“And I don't need one of my Keepers coming in here telling me how to run my organization.” I flinch, a little hurt, but our mutual respect and friendship take most of the sting out of the altercation. Still, I'm worried, and I'm not the type to keep my mouth shut. Not anymore. “You take care of me, and I take care of you. Same as always. Understood?”

“Of course. You know I never question you. This just feels so different. It feels off.”

“That's because it is. Trust me on that, Kaci.”

“I do trust you. I just don't understand right now.”

“You will soon enough.”

And there it is. The door slamming in my face to whatever plagues Raven. I wish with all that's in me it could vanish forever. Some scars don't. They remain a gaping wound that festers and rots.

“I'm sorry if I've upset you.”

“You didn't. This job has. It's one of the most challenging I've investigated. It's not a one-person job either.”

I smile. It's not genuine, I haven't let a real one split my face in five years.

Since I've been with The Oath, Raven's only asked me to go out with another on two assignments, and both were with Ezra. If there's only one consolation for this rapid turn of events, I'm grateful it will be seeing him. We seldom go in teams. It's just not what we do. It's risky and like me,

everyone has their own way of taking someone out. Putting two of us together could leave someone playing follow the leader. It causes friction that could cost one or both of us to be compromised. With me and Ezra, we take each other's ways and work together.

It's been too long since I've seen him, and I'm already looking forward to catching up.

"Ezra and I are both ready for wherever this takes us. Is he on his way?"

The look Raven gives me isn't what I expect.

It's unnerving, and slinks under my skin. An itch that makes me uncomfortable.

"That's the other reason why I asked you here." My head angles to the side as I curiously wait for more. "As you know, Lily is two weeks away from her due date, and from what Ezra's told me, there's a good chance it may not be that long."

"Two weeks?" I can't believe how fast those nine months went. I kick myself internally for not calling them lately, though I know they understand.

"Ezra and I discussed him taking a few months off after the baby is born, and it just doesn't make sense for me to get him started on such a huge undertaking when she's this close." Of course, it doesn't. He's right where he's meant to be. Where he should be. "So, I'll be partnering you with another Oath Keeper. As soon as your associate arrives, you'll both be briefed. One of my men are collecting your things out of your rental so the two of you can leave from here."

“Understood,” I say, wondering who I’ll be paired up with as Raven pushes a mile thick file toward me. I’m anxious to skim through its contents, and I will as soon as I can. “I’ll need to see Tara.”

“Of course, you do.”

“Thank you,” I pick up the file and stuff it into my bag, my heart swimming in gratitude. “So, who will I be working with? Is it anyone I know?”

“Someone extremely skilled. Someone who knows the area, and someone who’s worked for me longer than you.” Raven’s eyes shift to the doorway. “As for the rest?”

“I’d say we know one another very well. At least, we did once.”

That deep voice coming from behind me scrapes across my skin in disbelief, and the entire world around me stops. That itch making sense now as my heart crashes to the floor, and my body instantly buzzes to life as I gather the strength to twist gently in my seat.

Onyx eyes that have starred in my dreams stare right at me.

Sweet baby Jesus. He’s even more beautiful than I remember. Five long and lonely years have aged him well. That thick dark hair is unruly, and the tight black t-shirt clings to his muscular abs and bulging biceps. Both arms covered in colorful tattoos, and his jeans are tightly wrapped around his powerful thick thighs.

This can’t be happening.

My mind is spinning with questions. I’m sure his is, too.

“Blaze?” I stammer, rising from the seat, my eyes widening with this surprise. *I never thought I’d see him again, and now that I have, I’m thrown for a loop.* “What the hell are you doing here?”

He cannot be one of us, yet he must be.

Otherwise, he wouldn’t be standing here.

He wouldn’t even know this place existed.

This is unbelievable.

His tongue swipes his full lips as his eyes hold me captive, still owning me as they always had. A low, deep rumble of astonishment leaves the wide expanse of his chest as he steps closer. The second he takes hold of my hand, presses my knuckles to his lips, the spark that was there when we met jumps to life between us.

“Nice to see you again, Kaci.” His words are filled with so much politeness, it’s impossible to tell if he’s lying until I catch the slight tick in his jaw. *Just as I’d expect,* I think to myself. *It isn’t nice to see me at all.* “It’s been a long time.”

That’s the understatement of the century.

Unfortunately, I’m not any more thrilled about it than he is.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Blaze*

A vicious rampage runs through my skull.

A stampede that leaves me dizzy and numb.

It feels like I've been kicked in the gut.

A slash to my heart.

That's exactly how I'd describe seeing Kaci.

One touch, one look has set off the emotions I still have for her. A slew of them already fucking up my mind.

My teeth grit hard enough to grind them to dust, and my eyes want to devour every inch of her. I'd indulge in the sensation igniting flames of desire shooting through my veins, the look of shock covering her gorgeous features if the taste of what she did weren't bitter and harsh. Surfacing when I did all I could to drive them out of me.

I suppose that's exactly what I need to remember to get through this unforeseen partnership with her by my side. The way she just fucking ran and left me in the dust, like my feelings didn't matter.

Well, they fucking did, but shit. This revelation has punched the air from my lungs. Never in a million years would I have thought it would be her Raven was teaming me up with.

The strong woman, plagued by a past that still boils my blood. The same woman who wouldn't take a dime from me to help her and her sister, is a hitwoman—part of the team.

No fucking wonder I couldn't find her.

She's so beautiful I want to haul her into my arms, at the same time tell her to fuck off. Of course, I do neither. Instead, I slowly pull away, take a seat and force myself to ignore the sting in my chest over what she did.

That all aside, for the time being, it makes the killer in me curious as to how she takes people out as she grew up a victim of violence. I suppose I'll find out soon enough.

Christ Almighty this is going to be hard. *That won't be the only thing hard, either.* My fingers are already twitching to fist that thick blonde hair, yank her head back to kiss up that elegant neck, and my cock isn't paying attention to the pain she put me through. Bastard is already pulsing with thoughts of driving into her slick wet heat.

I need to cool my jets and simmer down before my mind and cock get the best of me. I need to remember that Kaci might be deadly to others, but she may be even more dangerous to me.

While I can't deny I'm stunned at learning she's one of us, I also won't make the argument that she doesn't fit right in with the rest of us.

After all, she killed me in a whole other way.

Left a hole in my chest the size of a crater.

It's still empty.

Only Kaci could ever be capable of slaying a man like me the way she did.

“We were hired by Ryan Page,” Raven begins, completely ignoring her as she swings her head back and forth between the two of us. She's likely wondering how we both ended up here, same as me. I'll tell her whatever she wants to know about me because now I have nothing to hide, but Raven has put me between a rock and a hard place over our connection. That does not rest well with me. Let's just hope Kaci sits there like a good girl and keeps her mouth shut or someone will have a hell of a lot more explaining to do about why she's fucking here in the first place.

In my mind, Raven has betrayed me, and it pisses me the hell off. I'll be calling as soon as I'm able to discuss this blindsided setup. My dear old friend better have a very good explanation, or we'll have a big fucking problem.

“Since when do you divulge client information?” I ask, as much intrigued as I am intent to steer Kaci away from her thoughts. There's a legion of things that Raven covers meticulously with every fiber of The Oath, but outside of our army, nothing is more protected than those who come to us for help. We may kill people for a living, but even in this organization, some things are sacred.

“Since now,” Raven exhales. Looking about as flustered as I've ever seen. “Ryan's daughter Allison is a sophomore at Detroit University, or at least she was until four months ago

when she vanished. Finding a missing person isn't what we do, but after listening to Ryan's story, I decided to take it on."

"Shit, I heard about this on the news one morning at the airport in Detroit while waiting to board a plane." I fill them in on how I only caught the tail end of the story while keeping my eyes trained on Raven and not the woman so damn close to me that her sweet familiar scent of vanilla and jasmine has my cock twitching.

"The girl was last seen at Omnia, one of the trendier nightclubs in downtown Detroit. She'd gone there to meet a few friends after returning from Christmas break. She never returned to the table after going to the bathroom. Allison isn't the only girl this has happened to in the city. In the last eight months, seven women have come up missing, the one before her was taken from her car two blocks north. This went from a single incident to a city-wide catastrophe."

No need to go further with me. This might be Detroit, but I knew when I first heard there was some shady shit going on.

"Similar stories?" Kaci asks, her voice shooting a plethora of emotions through me, both good and bad.

"No. They've come up missing from various places. It could be a sex ring or trafficking. A serial kidnapper, rapist, or murderer. I went to Detroit, hit every scene where the women were taken. Snooped around using my instincts, and they tell me it starts and ends with Omnia. There's just something about the place that gnawed at my gut."

"Then that's where we'll start." I cut a glance to Kaci, her head snapping my way and nods in agreement. She won't be

agreeing when I tell her she won't be going with me, but I'll deal with that later.

“With very little to go on, the cops are scratching their heads. A few search teams were formed, they swept the Detroit River and investigated things with customs at the border without any luck,” Raven continues. “Some vigils were held for a couple of the girls, but whoever is fronting this has things locked tighter than Fort Knox.”

“I take it none of them have been found?” I probe, sharing a quick knowing look with Raven. This is hitting close to the reason behind starting The Oath. The reason Kaci needs to deal with me about the connection. That only fuels my anger more. Here I am covering Raven's ass when I'm the one who's been fucked over.

“No. I wish I could tell you otherwise. I apologize for this. For not having physical evidence to go on. Kaci has a file containing everything I've told you, plus things I'm hoping will help you. That all said, I'm positive the two of you will blow this wide open. Like always, you'll have the support on my end. Since Blaze knows Detroit like the back of his hand, I want you riding together. There's no telling how long this will take either.”

Fucking shit. I have to travel in the same vehicle with Kaci for six fucking hours. Damn Raven all to hell.

“Fine,” I snip, intentionally. My nerves are fraying, and I don't even have to look at Kaci to know her eyes are widening. She probably thinks my demeanor is the way it is because I'm being forced to spend time with her. That's partly true, but my rage is mainly directed at Raven.

“Be safe out there and keep me posted.”

We say our goodbyes, and I lead Kaci out of the office, tossing Raven a look that could kill over my shoulder.

Although I’ve got more than a couple of hang-ups with my current company, I can’t deny how happy I am that Kaci found a place to call home. Raven treats those that work for The Oath like family, because that’s what we are.

The only family Kaci had was Tara, until me.

I’d tried to give her everything she needed, all the things her childhood had failed to provide, but she wasn’t ready, and I understood. None of those things are what pricks my heart as our eyes meet at the landing just outside of the main entrance.

She should have talked to me.

She should never have just disappeared.

She shouldn’t have broken my heart the way she did.

I shake the thoughts away and move toward my Suburban. Her face pinches slightly with hesitation, and her steps suddenly slow as she approaches.

“Come on. We need to get on the road.”

“Are you serious right now?” She presses, eyes narrowing, hands going to her hips. She’s going to go right for my throat with her questions.

“Yeah, I fucking am. Unless you want to stand out here and hash things out?” I reply. When she doesn’t move, I lean casually against the door, and stuff my hands in my pockets, shrugging, and smirking like I don’t care if our dirty laundry

airs out right here. “Otherwise, I suggest you get in the vehicle right now.”

Her nostrils flare and I wait not so patiently for her to continue while trying to come up with a believable explanation.

“How do you know Raven?”

“The same as you. I’m an Oath Keeper.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” she shakes her head. “How are the three of us connected? It makes no sense.” She’s got that right. At least when it comes to her.

I shrug again. “Coincidence.” The lie slips easily off my tongue. Thanks to Raven, there will be a pile of those fuckers by the time were done.

“Yeah,” she snorts. “Coincidence my ass. I’m calling bullshit.”

“Call it what you’d like, I really don’t care, but trust me, Kaci. I was just as dumbfounded at seeing you as you were me. I’m not one bit happy about it.”

Her body sways at my words, eyes oozing with hurt. Beneath it, though, I see her belief.

Thank fuck for that. If she has more questions, she can direct them to Raven.

Gripping the handle, I yank open the door, and sweep my hand for her to get in. I might be raging inside, but I’m still a gentleman when the time calls for it.

“Just get in the car, Kaci. We have a lot of ground to cover.” My tone comes off a hell of a lot calmer than I am.

Reluctantly, she concedes, shooting a fistful of daggers at me as she climbs in.

I do my best to shake it off before I round the hood and climb in behind the wheel, glancing over to find her fuming.

“Do you have anything else to ask me?”

“Nope,” she snips, tugging the file out of her bag and placing it on her lap. My jaw tenses with immediate annoyance, the natural dominance swimming in my veins tempting me to take her over my knee and give that attitude an adjustment by reddening her ass. I crank the ignition and start out of the long driveway. “What?” she mumbles, making me glance her way, and I lift a brow at the fury written on her expression.

My own sinks talons into me deep.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I know that, but the look on your face says something.”

“Well, if there’s a strange look on my face, it’s because I find it convenient that out of the two of us, you’ve got the audacity to be pissed off about this arrangement.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it implies. For shit’s sake, Kaci, are you really going to sit there and play dumb? You left me. Not the other way around,” I grip the wheel tighter, turn onto the main road that leads to the interstate. “And I’ve moved on,” I lie because truth be told, I need to swallow the fact she’s this close to me. Until I do, she needs to stop running that mouth of hers. “But it looks like we’re going to be working together for a while, so whatever problems you’ve got with me, it would



probably be in your best interest to squash them until we've done our job. The last thing either of us need is-

“Hey,” she cuts me off. “Don't worry about me doing what's needed of me. Alright? If I weren't good at doing what's expected of me, Raven would have never put me in this car with you in the first place. And you know what? I do have a problem with you. It's called you being a liar. In fact, you probably just lied to me about your history with Raven. I wouldn't be shocked since you obviously spent the entirety of our relationship lying about what you did for a living, but just know this, I'm perfectly capable of detaching myself when I have to. Trust me.”

I toss my head back and laugh. Neither of us will be able to separate the here and now from the back then. The proof was right there in her words. The little vixen is going to continue to come right out with guns blazing.

Let her, because mine are bigger.

“Well, *that* I believe,” I toss out a dig, ignoring the way her breath hitches. After all, she just up and detached herself for five fucking years from me. “I told you the truth about Raven. Whether you choose to believe me or not is your problem. If you're referring to my parents, they are dead, Kaci. Murdered just like I told you. If you'd pull the stick out of your ass and recall how they were killed, you'd understand why when Raven approached me, I took the offer. The only thing I've kept from you was about being an assassin. It's obvious now that you're one, you know why I couldn't tell you.”

I get she's angry that I lied and told her I worked for my father's business. In a way I do, just like I'd imagine she does

for herself and Tara. That road, as well as thoughts on how my parents died, is one I have no intention of traveling with Kaci or anyone else when I'm about to head into Chicago traffic.

“What?” The single worded question coming from her a second time could mean a lot of things. All of which, I'm nipping in the bud to get her to shut her mouth.

“You heard everything I said, Kaci. I won't repeat myself.” I give her a warning look and focus on the road ahead.

Her eyes remain on me for the longest time, I can practically hear the anger percolating inside of her. A couple minutes later when her gaze shifts, I glimpse over, surprised to find her chewing on her thumbnail, reading through the file while she continues to seethe.

I slowly make my way through the heavy traffic, trying my best not to focus on everything stirring inside me but failing miserably. When movement slows to an all-out stop, it becomes impossible to stave off the final days of us.

As much as I hate to admit it, even to myself, there haven't been many moments where my thoughts were clear of Kaci Thornton. In the first months following that night, she was all I could think about. I thought eventually, what made her run and the days that followed would fade into the background, and I could move on, but I never did.

I worried about her.

Wondered.

Feared.

I straight up fucking missed her.

I'd replayed that week so many times until I was completely losing my mind. I wanted to make sense of things. I tried to understand where it'd gone wrong and what made her take off the way she did.

I needed answers, but I knew, even back then, she was the only person who'd ever be able to give them to me.

*“Red ...” she manages, her voice quivering, broken. “Red, Blaze. Red!”*

*My movement stops immediately.*

*We'd gone over this time and time again. I knew she had reservations, nerves about giving me her submission and it made sense after her troubled past. I did my best to be clear on all fronts. I didn't want her to feel unsafe, caught off-guard. If we were to do this, we'd do it my way, but when it came to Kaci, my way was always going to be what was best for her.*

*She knew that. Hell, she knows that. Despite the anxiety, I don't see a lick of fear for her safety or well-being. I try my best to take comfort in that as I do what I can to ease her rapid breaths.*

*“Shh, it's okay, kitten. I hear you,” I soothe, carefully removing her blindfold and joining her on the bed. “Look at me,” I order gently. “Kaci? Baby, are you okay?” She nods without hesitation, but then her face scrunches up slightly, contorting in pain before she slowly begins to shake her head. “Come here,” I whisper, my palm resting gently over the crook between her shoulder and her neck. Her heart is pounding. “You're fine. Everything is fine. I've got you, Kaci. Do you hear me?”*

*“Yes,” she says. The word I wanted to hear rolling easily from her tongue. I’m not the least bit upset about it. Taking care of her is my number one priority. It has been since I fell in love with her.*

*She’s mine and I take care of what belongs to me.*

*Moving my hands to rest gently on her shoulders, I begin to breathe deep, encouraging her to join me. She does, her breaths coming shaky at first before they slowly start to calm.*

*“That’s it. Good girl. Just keep taking deep breaths and let it out,” I assure her. The tears she’d held back begin to pool in her blue eyes, and I raise my hand, using the pad of my thumb to wipe them from her cheeks. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, kitten. You’re safe, and you’ll always be safe with me. You have my word.”*

*The words I’d intended to help reassure her have the opposite effect, and my heart begins to crumble when I see her face shifting into heartache. I pull her close to my chest, praying my embrace is enough to help chase away whatever demons are preying on her soft heart.*

*“I’m sorry, Blaze,” she cries, making my chest ache. “I know how badly you wanted this, but I just can’t.”*

*“No,” I pull away from her a half-inch and lower myself just enough that I can hold her eyes. “Don’t do that. You didn’t do anything wrong.”*

*“I let you down. I knew this was a huge part of you, and I wanted to try and give it to you. I just couldn’t. I can’t. I’m sorry.”*

*“I want you,” I tell her. It’s the God’s honest truth. She doesn’t need to break her own heart any further over this. My desire for her submission comes second to my love for her. I enjoy it, crave it, and desire the pleasure it brings, but I love her more. I told her that when I made it known. “Kaci, I just want you.”*

*She climbs into my lap, wrapping herself around me, and we stay like that for close to an hour. I let her cry, whispering that she’s safe, that she’s loved. When she grows quiet, I’m sure she’s cried herself to sleep, but when I shift to lay her across the length of my bed, she holds me tighter, refusing to let me go for a moment before she slowly pulls away.*

*“You should try and get some sleep,” I whisper, pressing my lips to her forehead, her bloodshot eyes holding mine as I lie down beside her. “I’m going to get a drink. Do you want me to bring you anything?”*

*“No, thank you,” she rasps, hoarse from crying.*

*“Okay. I’ll be right back.”*

*I kiss her cheek and lift myself from the mattress, giving her petite frame another once over as I pull the bedroom door shut behind me. I’m only gone for a minute, long enough to take a shot of whiskey and grab each of us a bottle of water from the fridge. I expect her to be drifting off when I push the door to my bedroom back open, but she’s far from it. Instead, she’s pulling her top over her head and reaching for the purse she’d left on the nightstand when she’d arrived.*

*“What are you doing?” I ask, coming to a slow stop. “You okay?”*

*“I will be,” she promises, her movements slightly awkward as she turns to face me. “I think I’m going to go back to my apartment tonight.”*

*“Are you sure?” I set the bottles down on the edge of the bed and sweep her hair away from her face. “You don’t have to go, Kaci.”*

*“I know,” she admits, chewing the inside of her cheek nervously. “I think it would be best if I had a little space right now.”*

*I swallow hard, forcing myself not to demand she stay. “Okay. If that’s what you need. Let me get dressed and I’ll drive you.”*

*“You don’t have to,” she argues. “I can call an uber or something. It’s really not a big deal.”*

*“Baby, I’m not putting you in an uber. Just give me a second, and I’ll take you home.”*

*“Blaze, please? I know you’ll take me, and I love you, but I need to be alone for a while.” She wraps her arms around her stomach. It should be me holding her. Me comforting her. Me making her see we will be alright. “Things in my head are not okay right now, and I really feel like I need to be by myself.”*

*I stare back at her, internally at war with my protective nature, my love for her, and my promise to embrace her independent heart.*

*“Listen to me,” I start, slowly closing the distance between us. “Tonight was not a big deal, okay? Not for me. I get you need to be alone, and I support that. I’ll give you whatever you need, but please let me drive you. It’s late, you’re upset, and*

*I'll feel better if I know you got there safely. I don't think that's too big of an ask."*

*Her eyes search mine, and although I see hesitance there, I'm pleased when she gives me a small smile and a quick nod.*

*"Okay."*

*"Thank you," I breathe, relieved as I press my lips to her forehead. "Let me change, and we'll go, alright?"*

*"Sure," she says, her eyes still locked on me as I make my way to the closet and pull out a shirt. "I'm just going to use the bathroom."*

*"Of course. I'll be ready in just a second."*

*"Kay," she whispers, the feel of her eyes still on me enough to have me glancing up. "Blaze, I love you."*

*"I love you, too," I lean in to give her a peck on the lips, surprised she doesn't pull away.*

*I watch her go, and it's not long before I'm ready, moving out into the main living area. It's dark and silent, and I wait for a beat for any signs of movement, but nothing comes. I glance up toward the guest bathroom she'd excused herself to and find the door ajar, the room empty. I call out to her, but I'm met with more silence and darkness.*

*By the time I make it to the front door, my heart clenches when I see the deadbolt no longer locked.*

*While the first two calls to her cell go unanswered, I'm grateful at least when she texts me back an apology, promising she's safe. She makes another promise to call me the next day,*

*but when two come and go and I hear nothing from her, I start to worry.*

*It's not until the third morning, when I call her again to find her number has been disconnected and stop at her job, to find out both her and Tara just up and quit, that I start to panic.*

*By the time I make it to her apartment, desperation has set in. When I reach the top of the stairs, knock on the door and twist the knob to find it unlocked, I feel my heart begin to crumble in my chest. With a deep breath, I steady myself for the truth I think I'd been expecting deep down, and I push it open.*

*It's empty, not that there was much inside to begin with. No clothes, no signs of life other than the few scraps of furniture she'd left behind. I half expect to find a note, an explanation, but there isn't even that.*

*She's just fucking gone.*

“Where are you going?” Her soft voice brings me back from my thoughts, my eyes remain on the traffic as I veer off the expressway and onto an exit.

“We have to make a stop on the way,” I explain, thankful when we're finally off the busy interstate and heading into a much less congested, residential area.

She looks around, and it isn't long before her eyes fall back on me.

“Blaze, where are we going?” Her voice is adamant now, more demanding. She knows exactly where we're going. She'll certainly have questions about this, too. Seems all we have are questions without answers dangling over our heads.



Loads of tension trying to weave our way out of the web of our past while doing this job on top of it.

“We don’t know how long this is going to take. I thought you’d like to see Tara before we left.”

Slowing as we approach the building, I swing into the lot, and shift the car into park.

“How...” Her eyes sharpen suspiciously. She’s nervous, though we both know she has no reason to be. Not over something like this. Despite our complicated past, I would never lay a finger on Tara, and she knows that. “Blaze, how did you know where she lived?”

“Raven’s not the only one who can find people, Kaci.” Nope. Raven just snatches people you searched your ass off to find and doesn’t bother telling you they were under your nose the entire time they were watching you spiral. “The reason should be obvious since I’m looking at the cause. I searched everywhere for you after you took off. Now that I know you are part of The Oath, likely changed your last name, it makes sense, but I knew if I could find Tara, I would find you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I sat in this parking lot three times contemplating on talking to her, but I couldn’t follow through. Felt like it would be crossing a line you didn’t want me to. Now, go visit with your sister. I’ll be out here when you’re ready.”

## CHAPTER THREE

*Kaci*

Between Blaze, the disturbance of the job leaving me lightheaded and everything inside of me being strung so tight, making me feel like I'm suffocating, I'm more than grateful to see my sister.

Once I calmed a little, and pretended to concentrate on the file, disappointment set in that I wouldn't have the opportunity to visit.

I'm sure this devastating weight will anchor me down even more the further Blaze and I dig into the job and seeing her takes the edge off just a little. I'm here now and that's really all that matters, but I can't stop thinking about Blaze finding Tara. Or what would have happened if we ran into one another here.

I shouldn't dwell on it when it never happened. Yet, it's difficult not to after his confession dug up loss and regret, both now flaying my nerves.

Short circuiting them.

To further scatter my emotions, making them stampede through my brain, he gave me that bullshit *coincidence* excuse when I asked about Raven. Amid my already confused mind, I was far too eager to believe his explanation. I just wanted to make sense of things, but by the time he claimed he could never tell me about his role in The Oath, he just shut down.

Now, I'm even more confused than ever.

I understand he couldn't tell me he was an assassin back then, but that doesn't mean I don't feel deceived. Especially when he wanted my complete trust and total transparency yet knew he couldn't give me his in return.

The situation isn't any different than me not telling Tara. All she knows, all she'll ever know, is that I'm into something illegal. An opportunity landed in my lap the night I broke things off with Blaze.

Even if it weren't forbidden, I would never risk her safety. And I know Blaze wouldn't have risked mine, but that knowledge doesn't lessen the sting.

I might not be able to tell Tara about my job, but my sister knows me. After everything that's happened today, I can't help but wonder if I ever truly knew Blaze at all.

Now that the thought crosses my mind, it makes me think of all the times Tara and I have traveled down the road of what I do.

To this day, it's the single secret between us. Sure, there were times the guilt in keeping it from her was nearly more than I could bear. Sometimes it still gets the best of me. Yet,

when I look back at who we were, where our lives were headed, it doesn't feel so wrong.

That phone call to Raven helped me get those two scared girls out of the hell that life's shit hand dealt us. It made it possible for me to move her into the best facility this side of the Mississippi. It helped me ensure that we'd never need or want for anything ever again. I'd never go back to that hell and now, neither will Tara.

As long as there's a breath in my body, she'll always have plenty.

At first, she fought me on it. Begged and pleaded that if I went to prison then she'd be all alone because we were all each other had. I might spend one night in jail before Raven would have me out, giving me a whole new identity again.

Every time she brings it up, I simply tell her she needs to trust me, and she does, but that doesn't stop her from worrying. She doesn't try prying it out of me the way she did in the beginning, but I know her fear of me getting caught still eats at her.

If I allow myself guilt for anything with Tara, it'll be that.

In the eyes of the world, Kaci Thornton no longer exists. I'm Kaci Isaacson now. Born and raised in Albany, New York.

But I took an oath long before I ever met Raven. One that trumps everything else, and it was to always protect my sister.

Risking someone finding out and coming after her would put me in my grave. It's why I asked Raven to hide her, and why I'm so angered that Blaze was able to find out where she was.

If he could find her, anyone can.

Now worry is streaking through me, and I don't need the stress over it while on the road with Blaze.

God, this is a mess. I feel unstable, off-kilter.

My life uprooted.

I need to get this job done and over with so I feel grounded again.

“Earth to Kaci?” Tara nudges me in the stomach with her elbow, a frown taking up the entirety of her forehead. “I’ve been talking to you about Liam and you’re a million miles away. You look like shit, too. I wasn’t going to say anything, but now you’re acting strange. Is something wrong?”

Momentarily everything in my fucked-up life no longer matters as I catch the contentment, the peacefulness in Tara’s eyes as I meet her gaze in the mirror, despite her concern. Her light green eyes are sparkling, and her smile would be contagious if only I’d grasp onto it.

For me, I won’t. For her, I will hold it close to my chest.

Just like I do everything else.

Because my sister has found someone, and I need to know more about him to make sure he’s good enough for her.

“Wow. And here I thought you were the nice one,” I tease. “I’m fine, just tired,” I lie, aware she won’t catch on due to how much of an expert at deception I’d become. “Sorry. Tell me again what you said?”

“I’m in love with Liam.”

*Love.*

She's never said that about a man before. About anyone except me, really. And as much as that fills me with immense happiness, I can't deny the jealousy I'm feeling of my sister for the first time since she'd come into my life. I instantly hate it. I'm green with envy when I shouldn't be. It makes me that much more of a horrible person, and I hate myself for thinking that way.

“It feels so good to finally tell you about him. I'm so glad you got to meet him. Once he finishes training on what to do if I have a seizure, we're going to get a place together. He only has two classes left, so we've started looking for a house. I can plant a garden and do all the things I've always wanted to do.”

My aching heart shudders and screams as she just carries on—the organ flailing around in my chest.

It feels like I'm being carved out and left to bleed.

Empty.

“I'm so happy for you, Tara. That's the best news I've heard in a long time.”

For Liam's sake, it had better stay that way.

He was pleasant and polite when Tara introduced us after she swung open the door and squealed when she saw me. She always reacts that way since my visits tend to be sporadic.

I walked in on them finishing breakfast. It was sweet of him to stop on his way to work just so they could spend a few minutes together. Even though the brief time I spent with him showed his feelings for Tara seemed genuine, I'll still ask Raven to do a thorough background check.

My sister might be in her right state of mind. She can do whatever she wants, but no one will take responsibility for her from me unless they are solid and capable.

They have to be in it for life.

If he hurts her, I'll make sure his life is a whole lot shorter.

Choking down the upsurge of emotions that have no business erupting when it comes to Tara, she deserves someone to love her sweet soul, I listen to her continue about Liam as I resume curling her hair into loose waves. I silently admonish myself when I catch my thoughts wandering away, instead agonizing over how I'm going to get through this job with Blaze. It's undoubtedly going to gut me from the inside out.

"Now, whatever illegal shit you got yourself in to take care of me, you can stop."

*Here we go*, I sigh. She means well, but I don't want to talk about me. Today should be about her. She has to be at work soon, cutting our already limited time together even shorter.

"You don't need to worry about me, Tara. I'm the big sister. Worrying is my job, not yours," I remind her. "Liam seems like a nice guy. Tell me more about him."

"He's a financial advisor in the city. His grandmother lives a few blocks over and he stops in at the store a few times a week to get things for her." She lists off a few of his most admirable traits quickly, her eyes once again narrowing at me. I brace myself for what I know is coming. She isn't going to let up. I can almost pluck her words out of her brain and recite them by heart because they are the same ones her guilty

conscience has spilled more times than I can count. “Now, stop changing the subject. You’ve been protecting me since we were ten. After my accident, it’s all you’ve done, and you aren’t that much older than me. We’re both thirty.” Silence stretches for minutes. Those ugly memories of our past crackling and snapping in the air, digging up those old wounds. “I don’t want to spend our time together rehashing the sacrifices you made, and we won’t. My point is, you deserve to be happy, too. Our disaster of a childhood has scarred you long enough.”

Well, that wasn’t what I expected her to say. We rarely talk about what happened to me anymore, and like her, I don’t want to do it now.

But my mind spins backward. Those ugly demons begin to seethe and spit, doing all they can to slice me wide open.

Their hands.

Their filthy hands balling into fists as I cowered in the corner. I can feel the agony of them connecting with my flesh.

The bruises and the pain as I crawled into the bedroom to find Tara sitting on her bed, rocking back and forth with her hands covering her ears and crying.

And their voices blare in my ears. Unceasing and unrelenting as they splinter my thoughts and grab hold of my senses.

*Where the fuck is she? Where’s your whore of a mother? Answer me, you little bitch, before I blacken your other eye. Or should I go get your sister? Maybe she knows where I can*



*find the cunt. How about the closet, huh? Tell me where she went or choose your punishment?*

“Stop it,” I manage, my tone clipped just enough to put an end to her worry as well as the barrage of painful memories threatening to take me over. I swallow hard past the lump in my throat and shake the thoughts away. “You know why I protected you. I love you so much I had to. I’d do it all over again to make sure I kept you safe.”

I’d have died if Suzanne or any of her disgusting lovers would have condemned Tara to hell like they did me.

“I know, but you’ve clung to what’s happened for so long. You were happy once with Blaze. You can be happy again.”

Oh, if she only knew he was waiting outside for me. She’d be off the chair, running out the door and begging him to take me back.

I lied to her about why we broke up. I told her it was because my new job required me to travel.

“What makes you think I’m not happy? I’m simply not the type to settle down. You know this about me, Tara.”

Despair and anguish wind with my admission. The dreams so similar to Tara’s I used to have long faded.

Like love and stability.

Being cherished and adored.

Someone’s priority.

Becoming a mother.

Having a place I could come back to every night and rest my head on the same pillow, in the same arms, the same bed.

A place to call home besides the remote cabin I'd bought a few years back to give myself somewhere to run away and hide. I thought I'd have all of that with Blaze someday, but the scars that were just too deep threatened to split me in half, so I ran.

I've been running ever since.

Saying I wish things could have been different between us is like wishing for rain in the desert.

Of course, I do.

I loved him, and to this day, I've kept the vow that I always will. That no one else would take my heart because it belonged to him.

It was Blaze who showed me what a healthy relationship was supposed to look like. How it should feel to be touched by strong, masculine hands without tremors of fear being plunged into my veins. It was him who taught me I was worthy of adoration. More than the sacrificial lamb my foster mother forced me to be for far too long.

It was Blaze who taught me how a man should treat a woman.

Memories of the good times Blaze and I had gnaw at my insides and I shove them away. I don't even know why I'm thinking about the man when he said he's moved on.

Maybe because that part of me never has.

Tara is right about me being scarred. I always will be to a certain point, but I'm so much better than I was. Stronger than I ever thought I could be. Thinking about my past a minute ago, was the first time in quite a while. I don't have

nightmares anymore. I'm not afraid of anything and I speak my mind.

I found myself, and once I started making money, Tara tried convincing me to seek help alongside her. There was no way I was going to see someone. Therapy just wasn't for me, particularly once I joined The Oath and it became an option. Instead, I locked it up and told almost no one. Blaze was the first person I opened up to, Raven the second, and I never told Ezra.

I'd always known deep down this day would come. I knew that someday, Tara would find someone who she could give her heart to freely. She'd take all the dreams I'd ever had for her and seize them, make them her reality.

After Blaze, I knew that wasn't something I'd likely ever have again. Despite its mighty fall from grace, our relationship had been exactly what I needed, save for one thing. As badly as I wanted to give it to him, I just couldn't. Not then. But Tara? I've never wanted anything but the moon and stars for her. I'd give up every good thing in my life if it meant she could be happy.

Untainted.

Free.

As long as she was okay, as long as she could have the love I knew just wasn't meant for me, I knew we'd both be okay.

Granted, despite my somewhat teasing reminders of being the eldest sister, I can't deny how many lessons Tara had unwittingly taught me. Our childhoods were riddled with pain, uncertainty and there were many times I was scrounging

through other people's trash just so we could eat. I stole clothes, toiletries. You name it, I did it. Yet, the early bonds we'd made with each other had helped us to push through the darkest days, helped us to find something to live for.

Each other.

From the outside looking in, I'd done the saving. I'd stepped in after Tara's accident and made sure she was safe, had the things that she needed, but the reality of it had always been that Tara saved me.

She'd given me the fuel I needed to not curl up into a ball and cease to exist, no matter how many times it would have been easier to do exactly that.

She'd given me the love, the unconditional acceptance I'd always needed, but never received until she came into my life.

She was the one thing that helped give me the strength to get us outside of that godforsaken house, away from the woman and those nasty men who kept us trapped.

And it was Tara who I thought of the moment I watched life leave their eyes. It took some time, but once I rid the world of Suzanne, I wanted to find every dirtbag who ever took his fists to me, until the earth was clean again.

Raven helped me hunt them down so I could watch them die. I killed every man whose name I could remember. After the last one burned was when I could finally let go of the old Kaci.

"Just promise me you'll think about it," she says, the feel of her palm giving my hand a squeeze of affection pulling me back from my darkened thoughts. "You told me you'd never

fall in love again after Blaze.” Her words pull my eyes back to the mirror, our gazes meeting in the reflection. “But I just think it would be nice for you to be open to the idea of someone giving you the love you deserve. You may not agree with me, Kaci, but you need it just as much as I do. Probably more.”

Her words surprise me. Neither of us have ever been overly emotional. We didn’t have the luxury as children so that quality never manifested itself into either of us as adults. Particularly me. Yet, as my eyes hold hers, I see the authenticity staring back, and I simply don’t have it in me to brush her words off quite as easily this time.

“Tara ...” I trail off, my eyes flitting to where she’s still holding her hand over mine with affection. I shake my head, swallowing hard. “I’m not against it.”

“Really?” she quips, bringing my eyes back to the reflection to find her gazing at me in disbelief.

My features go deadpan.

“No!” I argue, the volume in the single word is enough to make her jump, then giggle wildly at the surprise written on my face. “Am I out there in the streets every night looking for it? Absolutely not, but...”

“I should hope not,” she snorts, making me think on my words before I join in her laughter as I shake my head and move my attention back to curling her hair.

“You know what I mean, Tara,” I smirk, giving her shoulder a playful smack with the back of the brush. “You’re rotten. Do you know that?”

“I do,” she nods, standing to take a quick look at my handiwork before turning to face me with approval. “Thank you for visiting me, Kaci. And for making me beautiful.”

“I’ll always come to visit you,” I promise, pulling her close for a tight hug, sad when our dwindling time together forces me to pull away. “And you never need my help being beautiful.”

She smiles wide before releasing a short, saddened breath as her eyes make their way to the clock in the corner of her bedroom.

“I wish I didn’t have to work today. I feel like you just got here.”

“I know,” I agree, giving her arms another quick squeeze. “I wish we had more time, too. Soon, though. We’ll take a holiday once this job is over. We’ll be able to have some real time together.”

Her smile stays planted, though now, it seems careful. Guarded.

“Kaci?”

“I’ll be very careful.” I cut her words short. I already know what she’s going to say, and I don’t need to hear it any more than she needs to worry over me. “I promise. You should be careful, too.” She nods and gathers her things, both of us walking intentionally slow to extend our time together. “Do you want me to walk you to work?”

She shakes her head. “One of my housemates is on the same shift as me and she needs help getting downstairs. I’ve got to run up to get her first.” I’m about to offer to wait, to

lend a hand, but she waves me off before I can. “I know you have to go. Come here,” she says, extending her arms. I hug her tight, taking my time with this embrace, same as her. “I love you, sis.”

“I love you, too, Tara,” I whisper, swallowing hard over the knot in my throat. There’s always a bit of sadness when I leave her, but this time, there’s something more. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. Like a shift I don’t want to come. A rift in the air that makes me want to hold her a bit tighter, a bit longer than usual. “More than you know.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Blaze*

*Detroit, Michigan—also known as Motor City.*

Despite being the heart of the automotive industry, it's a place people hate to visit due to its continuous ranking as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. They don't bother to look beyond the husks of homes and buildings set in its neglected neighborhoods the news shows to the world. They just let the bad reputation stick with them.

The majority born and raised here despise calling it home, embarrassed to tell people where they are from. There's no doubt I'm in the minority when it comes to loving the city long forgotten, but I don't give a rat's ass.

There's beauty in Detroit, you just have to open your eyes and take a look around. Although I grew up in one of the nicer suburbs, the city is still my stomping ground.

If you love art, you'll find it here. It's minutes away from Canada, and Belle Isle is a one-of-a-kind gem. There's an endless list of reasons I'll never be ashamed to call it home



and why it's so much more than the people and the media make it out to be.

The crimes are just as violent as in most metropolitans, and on the daily, there's everything from assault to rape to murder to thieves. Half the time, the good cops are tied up responding to emergency response calls making them too busy to patrol the streets. The dirty ones don't give a shit that a seventy-year-old woman had a break-in and was beaten to death. They'd rather pad their pockets with a stack of greenbacks than run after a murdering thief. The bottom line is there are not enough cops willing to work in Detroit, and since the city can't fix that, the criminals use the dark corners as their playground.

That's exactly what they were doing the night my parents were murdered.

Of course, I didn't know that at the time.

I had no idea why anyone would ever want to hurt my parents. To take their lives so brutally in the middle of the streets they loved so much.

Slaughtered like they were a couple of people who deserved what they had coming.

They didn't.

Regardless of the promise I'd made to find justice for their killers, when I stood over their dead bodies in the morgue after identifying their bodies, I'd lived here long enough to know how often cases go cold. With no immediate leads, it was a real possibility. Almost a fucking guarantee that their killers would run free. That reality made me sick, my stomach

turning, my insides boiling with hatred and straight-up fucking anger.

It wasn't until I stood alone in front of their graves grieving the day of their funeral that Raven approached me, offering me answers, handing me a solution on a silver platter.

To take out anyone involved in murdering them.

For the longest time I didn't answer. I just stood there staring at the two piles of dirt remembering how they were murdered until something dark inside took over, slithering through my veins, wrapping around my neck like a noose.

Two men had killed my parents after a struggling economy forced my father into layoffs at his company. At the time, tightening purse strings throughout the country was reality for everyone, and it broke my father's heart having to let go of good people.

Those were the words he used. *Good people*. I can still hear it echoing in my mind when I recall back to how distraught he was. How I'd catch him in his office with a bottle in his hand, his shoulders slumped. The man hating himself over it.

I tried telling him it wasn't his fault the economy took a nosedive. That he was a hell of a great employer. How he treated those who worked for him like royalty because they were the backbone that made his business a success. I praised him for caring because some who make millions plain and simply don't.

My father appreciated me trying to pick his heart off the ground, and knowing that, helped me through my grief,

knowing one of my last conversations with him involved letting him know he was a decent human being.

Sad thing was a handful of those good people were the same ones who paid two thugs to slit both their throats.

*Good people.*

He was wrong.

Dead fucking wrong.

The men who actually committed the crime weren't the masterminds behind it. Several men on the board of directors were. Men who were close to my father. Men who knew how it gutted him when they made the decision to let workers go. Since I was destined to run the company, I was the next victim on their list.

My father trusted his board, and those fuckers turned greedy.

Money meant more to them than the lives of *my* parents.

Little did I know at the time Raven had already started searching for the killers, and between the two of us, it took less than a week to find answers the cops may have never been able to get their hands on.

The minute I knew the truth and Raven offered me my chance at revenge on the men who destroyed everything in my life, committing myself to the organization wasn't even a question.

To become a mercenary for hire. A sinner with a seat reserved in hell.

Raven and I are a lot alike, with more similarities than a taste for revenge. We both expect loyalty and carry a voracious thirst to take down the scum of the earth, and no one knows about our long history. We've just always kept it under our belts. More because of who Raven is and why The Oath exists in the first place. I'd dare to say I'm the only one who does know how it all began.

They also don't know we grew up a stone's throw from each other, that we both came from privilege. That our families ran in the same circles or that we served together in the Marines alongside the bravest men and women we'd ever meet, including one of The Oaths' most ruthless, Ezra Stone.

The three of us became thick as thieves. Formed an unbreakable bond built off trust and loyalty, and it was less than a month after I sold the business right under the noses of those fuckers who killed my parents that Raven, Ezra, and I murdered them all.

An eye for an eye.

I put several million into the city in honor of my parents. Invested some into The Oath to help Raven expand, and some in the stock market. The rest paid for a five thousand square foot home on just under five acres hidden amongst the trees with a panoramic view of the biggest lake in Detroit.

It's home.

Fucking heaven.

Home used to be the blue-eyed woman who huffed her way back into my Suburban and turned her back to me when we left Tara's. Before that, though, I saw the emotion swimming

in her eyes and how deep down she still cares about me. Saw the wheels in her head spinning as to why I'd tracked down her sister, and that anger toward me still bleeding from her, though she never spoke a word. However, the quickness in which she fell asleep and left me to drive alone reminded me of how things have been left unsettled between us.

It was also enough to piss me the hell off all over again.

Kaci's silence continues as we enter the suite, and she's just about to swing into the bedroom she's chosen when I break our silence.

"We need to talk, Kaci."

"I've still got nothing to say to you," she quips, venom dripping from her voice. I want to march up to her, take her by the shoulders and shake that misplaced hostility right out of her. Demand to know why she is acting the way she is. Why she did what she did to us.

"Yeah, well, the oath you took says otherwise," I kick back, throwing my bags onto the couch, holding her eyes when she spins around to face me. They're furious, lit with a roaring circle of fire. I'm not sure if it's directed at herself or me. I imagine both, and therein lies the biggest issue I have with her now. She has no goddamn reason to be mad at me. "Deal with it however you need to, Kaci, but I'm your partner on this, and we have to talk things out. Listen to what each other's thoughts are. Then set some plans in motion."

She glares at me—eyes set to feral and fierce.

A wild kitten who grew vicious claws to make sure she isn't about to get backed into a corner by the big bad wolf.

A smile plays at the edge of my mouth. She keeps it up, and she won't be able to outrun, outwit, or outplay this predator.

“Your right, we do,” she agrees as she arches one brow and rolls her suitcases into the room. She immediately saunters right back out with her hands on those lush curvy hips I used to grab hold of when I pounded into her. “And there's really no need for the constant reminders about the fact we're partners on this job, Blaze. I told you I'm a professional. I know what I've got to do.”

I've no doubt she is, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. It hasn't quite sunk in, but at the moment, Kaci's entitled behavior is grating on my last nerve.

Fraying it.

Making me want to adjust that attitude of hers my way.

Either by fucking it out of her or taking her over my knee, I haven't decided which yet.

“Great.” My smile is sarcastic as I pull out two chairs from the long dining room table, and start sorting the contents of the file, spreading out the pages to make it easier on us to find what we need when we need it.

She remains stuck in her place for long agonizing minutes before finally moving forward and helping. Her scent floods me the way it did in the confines of my Suburban, and I shove that shit down knowing it'll be everywhere in this suite, so I'd better get used to it.

Once she takes her seat, I slide into mine, and nab the pile containing everything regarding the club.

“Did you have time to read through all of this?” she asks, spreading the photos of the women in front of her, and blinking back tears as she examines each one for a few seconds. I nearly did the same when I saw them. We might be killers, but we have hearts that bleed for the innocent. “It’s trafficking, or some form of it, isn’t it?”

Some form is right. I have a feeling it’s more for the sick gratification of the people behind it than the sale of a human. It wouldn’t matter if they were sold or not, by the time a monster steals their soul, they wish for death.

Standing to move toward the bar, needing a drink, I release a worried breath quiet enough for Kaci not to hear. When I notice the full bottle of bourbon, I twist off the cap, grab a couple of glasses, and head back to the table. I fill them both halfway and set one in front of her before retaking my seat.

“I’m not one hundred percent convinced that it is. On the surface, that’s exactly what it looks like, but like Raven’s gut instinct, I have one of my own.” I can’t pinpoint yet what’s causing me to think this way. Something is, though, and I won’t rest tonight until I have more to base this feeling on.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve worked on trafficking rings before and there are some similarities here. Raven wasn’t wrong about that, but my intuition tells me differently.”

She releases a heavy sigh, takes a sip of her drink and that sharp little tongue comes out to lick her lips, causing my dick to jerk at the thought of how stunning they used to look stretched around him.

“Kentucky Owl?” she swallows, that throat my hand would wrap around trembling, those eyes glistening with approval. In them, I see a glimpse of the young woman I fell for. “It’s my favorite.”

“I remember.”

A part of me hates that I do. Hates that I recall so many touches, kisses, talks that should be dead and buried. Mostly, I hate that she knew she was walking out on me the moment she left my side that night.

Breaking her word.

Lying right to my face.

That thought alone has me downing my drink and dropping my head to study the images again. Except for one girl whose picture is a mugshot from juvie for shoplifting at fourteen, they’re all cropped, professional photographs.

*What a nightmare for these parents. The thought of having to choose from some of their best memories to find the right picture to ID their potentially dead child is unfathomable.*

Air punches from my lungs, and I scrub a palm over my face—sickness crawling across my flesh.

“Tell me what you’re thinking so we can be on the same page. Maybe if I can understand where your head’s at on this, something will stand out for me, and we can try to make sense of all this.”

Her desperate voice breaks through the air, and I lean back, studying her to make sure what I’m about to tell her is something she can handle.



Showing only signs of a woman struggling to understand how another human could be so cruel, and not one with a painful past, I smile on the inside, proud that she seems to have beaten her demons down. She might still have her moments, then again, she might not, and it bothers me I wasn't the one to keep on helping her heal. The bottom line is she did.

Still, I battle internally with the war to protect her, to shield her from any more heartache.

“A couple of years back, I took out a sex trafficker. He was more into young girls.” We share a shudder of disgust, her face turning ashen, expression shifting right into what I wanted to avoid.

Heartbreak.

“What happened to the girls? Did you save them?” Kaci asks, biting her bottom lip, eyes full of hope.

My mind wanders back to the sexually deviant crimes. The girls screaming, their fear, the way they shivered and shook with this haunting dead eye as they were violated in a way no person should be, let alone a child.

Kaci doesn't need to know all of that, though. She might be a Keeper, and who knows the kind she takes out, or the shit that's revealed to her, but as far as I'm concerned, she's still the woman I fell in love with.

Separating the woman she was back then from the one now is going to take some time.

“Most of them. They were beaten, malnourished. A few were just barely hanging on. The sick fuck had been using them to shoot garage pornography.”

Years later, it's still enough to make my skin crawl, my stomach lurch, and my vision turn red with fucking repulsion. We don't know what's happened to the girls in these photographs yet but based on the familiar feeling of furious dread swimming in my veins right now, I'd bet top dollar whoever is behind this is just as fucked as the guy I happily shot between the eyes while he sat smugly in his office back then.

The chances these girls are still alive is slim, and the ones who might be? There's no telling what shape they'll be in once we find them.

Kaci and I might be at odds on nearly everything else these days, but there's one thing we can still agree on wholeheartedly.

The motherfuckers responsible for this have to fucking die.

She reaches for the bottle to refill her glass while I opt for a bottle of water when she asks if I want another.

"I'm going to check out the club. Plant a few bugs and cameras around, let my feelers tune in to the employees to see if anyone sticks out suspiciously."

Raven had noted the club's surveillance cameras had not provided any clues, and the cops questioned every employee. They all came back with either a solid alibi or they were working. That doesn't mean shit, though if someone has lying perfected. If Raven felt vibes in that place, then someone working there is in on this, and the cops believed whatever bullshit story they were fed. Funny too that since the investigation into Allison started, no one has come up missing. That's a good thing. We need to keep it that way.

“Okay,” she nods, lifting from her seat and heading toward her room. Can’t help but let my eyes rove to her tight ass. My mouth waters just begging to have me sink my teeth into it. “Give me a few minutes to change, and we can leave.”

*Here we go with her claws about to come out,* I mumble under my breath.

“No,” I pull out my laptop, and begin setting things up for when I return, observing my remark out of the corner of my eye as it angrily travels across her features. “I want you to stay here.”

“Why?” Her face reddens, her fury barely contained.

“Depending on what, if anything, I can find out, you might have to go in at some point. Possibly rub elbows with someone. Us showing up together isn’t a good idea.”

That’s the God’s honest truth. Didn’t take but a second for that to flit through my mind while strumming up with how I’d handle her sass once I brought up going on my own.

Although, my gut is curling in hatred over her strolling into that place without me. Probably a good thing I won’t, because I sure as shit would kill someone if I so much as caught one man eyeballing Kaci with lust.

The woman is a head turner.

Gorgeous.

Temptation.

My ruin.

“Fine, but if you think you’re going to call all the fucking shots because you like control, then you have another thing

coming,” she retorts, the low blow hitting me harder than she’ll ever know. She returns to grab the bottle and pauses with her back facing me several feet away. “Typical of a dominant, I suppose,” she goads, and I have to grip hold onto the arms of the chair to keep from launching myself across the room and pinning her against the wall to remind her who she’s dealing with.

She better turn her sass down about ten notches, otherwise things won’t end well before I leave.

“Right, and you turning your back on me, running away to avoid something when the going gets rough, or in this case when things don’t go your way, appears to be pretty fucking typical, too.” Her back goes ramrod straight, body flinching, and I rub my palm over my jaw, doing my best to slow the tick of anger. “If that isn’t the fucking pot calling the kettle black, I don’t know what is.”

She spins to face me then, her chest heaving. Regret and sadness and pain flash from her eyes, but they harden so fast they burn right through me.

Scorching my insides.

A clusterfuck of my own emotions constrict my throat. My lungs feel like they are seconds away from collapsing.

I can’t fucking breathe.

I need to get the fuck out of here, need to think, need away from this bickering that’s bound to spiral out of control.

Taking a deep breath, I grab the bag I need, walk right past her, and my hand hits the handle on the door when she calls my name.

“What now, Kaci?” From over my shoulder, I look back at her, the fading sun catching the blonde in her hair just right. She looks like an angel standing there with her glass held close to her chest, the bottle dangling from her hand.

A dark angel is what she is.

The slayer of my soul.

“Please be careful.” I nearly scoff at the worry bleeding out in her words. I know what she means, but what I really need is to be careful with her. The way I’m still attracted to the little vixen, along with a whole slew of things when it comes to her, makes this job more dangerous than, more grueling than it is, and it’s not even started.

I’d already risked losing myself to this woman once.

I’m not sure I could survive it a second time.

“Always am.”

Opening the door, I storm to the stairwell at the end of the hall, like there’s a fire in the building, and I have only seconds to get the hell out before I’m burned alive.

As I descend the several flights of stairs, I repeatedly tell myself that if I’m going to survive being around her, I’ve got to keep my head where it should be, and clear of her because losing focus could lead to a mistake. One that could be fatal.

A couple of minutes later, the valet is opening the door to my Suburban, and I’ve not even pulled out of the lot before calling Raven who answers on the first ring. “That took longer than I thought. I’ve been expecting your call.”

“Yeah well, the way I see it, I shouldn’t have to be making it at all. You’re lucky I didn’t stab you in the back the way you did me. Lucky I didn’t open the can of worms you keep hidden from everyone but me.” I clench my jaw, grind my molars, and press down on the gas. “I’m a man of my word, so your secret is safe with me.”

“I know that. The thought of you exposing me never crossed my mind. Now do us both a favor and calm down so I can explain.”

Calm down? Not a chance in hell. It’s obvious to me based on how this assignment has started that there’s something going on with Raven I don’t know about. We’ve known each other for a long time, become each other’s family over the years. We’ve faced each other’s demons and would take a bullet for the other without hesitation. It would be impossible for me not to see it right off the jump, but I’ve been wound tight all day, emotionally drained.

I’ll be put through the wringer before all is said and done. Especially having to harbor secrets that Kaci will bring up because she isn’t stupid. She caught on just as quickly as I did.

“Explain what exactly? That you didn’t tell me I was coming there to meet Kaci? How the fuck could you even think about pulling her into The Oath without telling me? I thought we were closer than that.”

“Pulling her in didn’t have anything to do with you and me. It didn’t have anything to do with the past you two had. It had everything to do with her.”

“Are you kidding right now? It has *everything* to do with me,” I trail off, unable to keep the furious chuckle from

leaving my lips. “She and I have a past huh? Is that what you’d call it? I drank myself into numbness for weeks after she disappeared. I spilled my guts out to you.”

A heavy breath comes from Raven, filling my cab. I can tell it’s weighed down with more than this situation. That doesn’t sit well with me any more than this conversation does.

“Well, what would you call it?”

“We don’t have a fucking past, Raven. I was in love with her!” My fingers twitch slightly against the steering wheel. Tremors of rage make their way up my spine, and as much as I deserve to feel the way I do, I should probably calm the fuck down before I go walking into that club with a chip on my shoulder. It’s damn hard when it comes to this, when it comes to her. “You knew how I felt about her, and instead of walking away, doing the right thing, you fucking recruited her? You put whatever spin on it you want to, Raven, but that’s fucking betrayal.”

“I understand you seeing it that way, but I don’t. I took a broken woman and turned her into someone much stronger than she would have ever been if left to her own devices.”

“That wasn’t yours to give,” I spew. “And she wasn’t alone. She was with me. She was mine, Raven. It was my job to take care of her, to help her find the strength she needed.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you?” That remark jerks my head back, bounding the air with enough tension to make me wonder what in the fuck has crawled up Raven’s ass. I don’t get spoken to this way. Not with our history, not when the person tossing out insults knows fucking better.

“That was low, and you fucking know it, Raven. Maybe I would have been able to finish if you hadn’t chased her off. Maybe if you’d left her the fuck alone, she’d have come back, and I could have talked to her, we could have worked things out. I wasn’t given that option because it was taken from me the minute she met you.”

“And what do you think that means, Blaze? Think about it. Really think. Look past your hurt, your bitterness toward me and her, and tell me Kaci didn’t need to disappear to find herself.” This time, Raven’s rage comes through the line just as clearly as mine has. “You didn’t see her that night. You weren’t there when she walked into that bar. That woman was broken on the inside. I did. I *saw* her.” The thought of Kaci going through such anguish has me pushing out a deep breath, recentering myself, and calming instantly. That doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven Raven. “Her light was almost gone, Blaze. One look at that woman, and it was obvious that if I didn’t pull her out of the hell she was going through, she wouldn’t have survived with or without you.”

I let those words sit for a second. That’s all the time they need to start eating away at me, to show their truth.

“You don’t know that,” I reply. “There’s no way you could.”

This time, my voice is softer, more composed. The anger starting to dissipate and morph into the same defeated heartache I’d felt in the days after she left me. Much as I fucking hate to admit it, even just to myself, Raven’s right. No matter how much I loved Kaci, how much I wanted to save her, what she really needed was to save herself.



It was the one thing I couldn't give her.

"Of course, I could," Raven counters. "You know why I started The Oath, Blaze. You know where I was in my life when all this began. Kaci was drowning."

"I know she was, but fuck."

Memories from another life bombard my thoughts.

"Then you know I didn't have a choice to give that woman the revival she needed. I made that happen. I did what I had to do. As for being your friend, don't insult nearly twenty years of friendship. Like it or not, she's one of us, Blaze."

There's a long moment of silence as I consider the words. Yet, I can't stop the roll of nausea moving through me at the thought of something happening to Kaci. If anything did, despite our history, it would be my light dimming into darkness.

If I have to take a detour to guarantee her safety, then that's exactly what I'll do.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Blaze*

There's a shift in the air when I step through the doors of Omnia.

Sordid and foul.

Raven was right, and even though I never doubted it, even though Kaci is a Keeper, I'm thankful not much more was exposed in her presence.

This club is crawling with depravity, a sinister sickness a person with a nose that's trained to sniff that shit out can smell a mile away. She'll grab onto those vibes just as quickly if she has to walk through these doors.

I've got to do everything I can to prevent that.

The deeper I step into the bowels, the more I sense the secrets the walls keep. Those vile things want to seep out and slither across the floor, through the foundation and drop straight to hell where they belong.

Maliciousness that's making me want to torch the building to the ground. How in the hell the cops couldn't smell the ugly

in here beats the hell out of me.

My teeth clench and disgust and anger blow through me like a vicious storm. Adrenaline pumps hard through my veins, hitting my bloodstream and pounding in my ears.

Once I get my hands on every filthy motherfucker involved, they'll be shown exactly what it's like to lay at death's door. They'll be begging me to grant them entry just to stop the torture I plan to inflict.

The answers are within this place. That means the owner, Travis, must be involved. Raven knew that which is why there was a boatload of information on the guy in the file. It also confirms my suspicion that this hits close to home with Raven. Why Kaci and I are here doing the groundwork. It isn't because Raven is weak. It's from the deserving hatred, contempt, and the heart shattering loss over an act that's as much fucked up as it is repulsive.

I might be pissed off, but I don't blame Raven one bit for being shaken up.

Lights strobe over the small crowd on the dance floor, the thump of the music vibrating under my feet as I wind my way toward the bar, my attention discreetly sweeping the front half.

Give or take an hour and this place will be packed with wall-to-wall people out looking for a good time.

To free their minds.

Slackening the chains of everyday life.

Lust dancing through the atmosphere right along with that debauchery. They won't have any idea they are living it up at a

club owned by the same piece of shit responsible for the nightmares they've been scrolling past on the news.

By the time I fall onto the leather stool, I've already located five security cameras. No doubt the same ones the police department had access to.

Tapes hacked and tampered with.

A smoke and mirrors trick to obscure the truth.

I pull my phone from my pocket, setting it on the bar in front of me next to one of the fake black credit cards I carry, and lift my chin at the bartender when he glances my way. He nods and continues mixing drinks for who I assume are the two middle-aged women in front of him. The fresh-faced little fucker all smooth with his bullshit arrogance as he flirts.

Brian Sinclair. The bar manager that conveniently happened to not be working the night Allison disappeared. The pretty boy is one that had a solid alibi that held through to the next morning.

He was at his parent's house on the other side of the state.

He's a burly motherfucker with arms the size of tree trunks. I'm sure his looks get him a double take from many women.

He has the kind of job that gives his eyes and ears access to his surroundings at every angle. His position is perfect to scan a crowd to pick out a girl to snatch amongst the throngs of people no matter where he's at and throw them into a ring of destruction.

For his own good, he better hope he isn't involved, or I'll snap his thick fucking neck like a twig.

I briefly study his eyes for signs of wickedness once he's finished and heads in my direction. I find nothing but a bartender eager to please his customers. Yet, there's something about him that sets me on edge.

Something rolling off his skin.

Something hidden within.

He could be the fucking liar I'm looking for, and knee deep into this shit. I'll soon find out if he's as seamless as I am at hiding who he really is underneath.

A fucking monster. Only I let mine out to break his kind in two.

Shred them to pieces.

"Hey man. What can I get for you?" Brian approaches, his tone casual, laid back as he places a napkin in front of me. I feign interest in the rows of liquor behind him, nonchalantly sweeping the labels as I search for more cameras and find two before I allow my gaze to swing to him.

"Deringer. Make it a double and neat."

"Excellent choice," he taps the bar, all smug with his smile as he pours my drink with expertise and sets it on the napkin.

"Thank you," I blow out a strained sigh as if I'm letting the weight of the world out of my lungs. My hands rough down my face before throwing back the shot when he sets it in front of me, letting it calm the disturbance inside and I immediately gesture for another.

"By the way you chugged that like water, you must have had a rough day." I allow myself to think about the woman I'd

spent the better part of the day arguing with, and the friend who has me so spun up I don't know if I'm coming or going.

"Something like that," I chuckle, sliding the glass back his way.

"Would you like to start a tab?"

"Absolutely." I hand him my card, and as he turns away, I adjust the placement of my phone a half inch to be certain the indiscernible recording app can pick up our conversation. He'll give nothing away if he's the front man, the one scouring out potential victims, especially to a stranger, but I'm leaving no stone unturned when it comes to this case.

"I haven't seen you here before. Are you new to the city, or just passing through?" he asks, eyes following someone behind me for a few seconds before placing my fresh drink in front of me.

"Neither. I grew up here and recently moved back. My divorce was settled today. It took two years, but I finally got sick and tired of that bitch nagging the shit out of me, so here I am." I lift my glass toward him in salute. "To an ex-wife who isn't all that happy she didn't come out as rich as she'd hoped. Guess you can call this a celebratory evening."

My mind drifts to Kaci again and that mouth of hers. Every time I'm around her and she smarts off, it's hard to contain myself. She wasn't like that before, and if I'm honest with myself, the dominant in me loves her strong-willed disobedience as much as it craves the sweet side she showed she still has when telling me to be careful.

Raven was right about her needing to be revived, but she isn't all the way. Not yet. There's a part of her still dead inside just like me. The part the two of us gave one another and never returned.

Our hearts.

"Well, good for you," he nods, playing along.

"Damn straight it is," I agree, tipping back the drink, and twisting slightly to my left as a young waitress with red hair makes her way to the service bar.

My guess is she's who Brian was looking at a few minutes ago.

Her gaze moves over me, tracing the ink on my exposed forearms. When my eyes roam to her cleavage, I watch her cheeks begin to heat with a blush, her breathing becomes unsteady as I tilt the corners of my mouth.

*Marley*, according to her name tag. I scour my memory, vaguely recalling her being included in the interviews, claiming to know nothing. By the vibes I'm getting off her, she was telling the truth. Oblivious to working with - and for - monsters like most of the employees here almost certainly are.

I'm about to greet her when Brian blocks my view and makes quick work of Marley's order after she rattles it off. The dude obviously is not liking our silent exchange.

I make a mental note for when I call Raven to have someone one of his Keepers who are working in the shadows on this girl at all times just in case. No way in hell will I have another come up missing on mine and Kaci's watch.

Once she gathers her tray and heads back onto the floor, I grab my card, and excuse myself to the men's room, leaving my jacket and phone in hopes of catching Brian slipping up somehow to make my night a hell of a lot easier and quicker. By the time I return approximately three minutes later, four of my bugs have been scattered around. They might not give me shit either, but I'm still not taking any chances.

With no women coming up missing since Allison, I'm sure p's and q's are being minded.

"Hope you don't mind," Brian says, pointing at my fresh drink as I retake my seat. "Figured you were ready for another."

"You figured right."

"I'm glad you were able to make it in to celebrate tonight then." He thinks that now. He'll wish I didn't later if I find out he's involved. My fingers are twitching already to just grip him by the back of his neck and smash his head into the bar. Demand answers while I drag his ass out of here and kill him.

"That makes two of us," I pick up the glass, this time taking a sip, and roam the club through the bar mirror in search of Travis, the owner, careful not to make much eye contact with anyone in particular. The last thing I need is catching the eye of a woman looking for a good time. I want to get in and out of this shithole as fast as possible. "I was just hoping things would be a little busier tonight than they are."

"You don't need to worry about that," he laughs, nibbling on my bait. "There's not much going on yet, but in about a half hour, it'll be a different story."



“That’s what I was hoping you’d say. I’m looking forward to finding a nice warm body to get lost in for the night.”

“You’ve come to the right place then, my friend. We’re about to be crawling with professional women looking for the same thing.”

“That’s not exactly the type I had in mind.” He gives me an inquisitive look as I take another sip and decide on testing the waters to see just how good this punk is. “The university isn’t far from here if I remember correctly.”

His features don’t change at all. No sign of wickedness. Not a goddamn crumb of deviousness. Just this easy fucking swagger and politeness that grates on my last nerve.

“No, it’s only about ten minutes away. I’m a senior there. Getting my degree in computer engineering in the Spring.” An amusing grin stretches across his mouth, and that bit of information piques my curiosity toward the fucker even more.

Comprehension sinks into my skull.

He might just be more important to this ring than the starting point for snatching the innocent. Brian might just be the man behind the scenes as well. The one who knows how to splice clips into the security surveillance that even the cops wouldn’t suspect.

How fucking convenient.

“That’s a little closer to the kind of woman I’m looking for tonight. Just a sweet young thing who can rock my world after living with a cunt from hell.”

He deliberates for a moment and shrugs, his laughter a rumbling sound. “I don’t know, man. We get a few students

from time to time, but I don't pay much attention to them."

Fucking liar. He pays attention to every woman that walks through these doors. How he determines who his target is has me wondering, though.

Eagerness spreads through my veins. I force it down, struggling to play it cool and not yank my knife out of my boot and slit his throat.

Marley makes her way back to the edge of the bar and my eyes wander back over to her before I glance back at Brian with a mile wide grin. "Yeah, you get the idea."

"I don't..." Brian stops himself, takes care of her order, and tension rolls off him in waves the entire time he's busying himself. "That one is off limits. Marley's mine." He informs me with a forced smile, and I can hear the warning in his tone.

That was another lie. If she actually belonged to him, he wouldn't have waited until she was out of earshot to claim her. She sure as fuck wouldn't have been checking me out right in front of him, either.

I lift my hands in the air in understanding, stick around for another hour, making small talk as the club becomes busier. The extra bodies filing in gives me the opportunity to plant three more cameras, trying to catch Brian eyeing different women as they stroll in until the club is jammed in chaos.

I hate leaving this place without making sure Marley is safe. That any woman inside these walls is for that matter, but I need to get out of here and call Raven to make sure whoever is watching my back right now is notified to stick to her like

glue until the job is finished. She won't be touched once they are on her.

Picking up my phone, I pretend to shoot off a text before stuffing it back into my pocket and grabbing Brian's attention by standing, and tilt my chin toward the register for my tab.

"I think I'm out of here."

"You're taking off? We're just starting to pick up."

"Yeah, unfortunately, you don't have what I'm looking for tonight." I sign my receipt as Jake Woodley and leave a large tip that'll be sure to remember me by if I have to return.

Once I'm in my vehicle, I call Raven, and within minutes Marley is covered.

A half-hour later I'm back at the hotel, stepping into the suite and expecting to be alone or at the very least, anticipating silence coming from Kaci's room. Relief pounds through me that she didn't go out snooping on her own when I hear movement. At least she better not have or the strain between us will escalate further—if that's even possible.

I swing toward the bar, reach for the bottle of Kentucky Owl, and pour myself a couple of fingers. As soon as I press the glass to my lips, her door opens, and I clench my teeth so hard I'm surprised I don't bite through the glass when she comes to a stop in the doorway, a large plush towel wrapped around her tight body.

Fuck, she's a vision.

A tease.

Her hair is piled on top of her head, and rivulets of water run down her neck, making it impossible for my eyes not to stray to the swell of her breasts. Her nipples are hard buds pressing against the fabric. My mouth waters to rip the towel off and pull them between my teeth.

My dick goes hard as a rock, and my fingers itch to touch her.

Motherfucking shit.

The way she destroyed me leaving this gaping, festering hole doesn't matter at the moment. The part of me that wants this woman desperately, my body, my heart doesn't give a flying shit. It simply wants to fuck the living hell out of her.

To reclaim.

To admit my feelings.

“Oh, hey,” she says, surprise marring her features for a moment before her eyes move from my chest and find my eyes. The sound of her setting her gun onto the nightstand barely registers. “I just got out of the bath. Let me get dressed and I'll be right out.”

Visions flash of that naked body, of hearing her whimper while I drive into her, drown her in pleasure. The thought turns me into a raging ball of lust.

Pure fucking stone.

Clamping down a groan, I do my best to will my cock into submission. Fucking impossible when he wants that from the woman himself.

“Take your time. I’m calling room service. Would you like something?” I ask as I spin around to pick up the menu and read the goddamn thing instead of picking her up by the cheeks of her ass and fucking her against the wall.

“No, thanks,” she answers and steps back out into her room. Not bothering to close the door as she rustles around. “I wasn’t sure how late you’d be, so I already had dinner. I figured we would regroup and catch up in the morning. You must not have gotten much if you’re already back.”

“Time will tell,” I reply, order my food, and pull my equipment out of my bag as I begin hooking things up to my computer, and bring up the different angles of the club. It isn’t long before Kaci takes a seat next to me, wearing a silk robe and likely bare underneath.

Her eyes drift to my laptop and I force myself to focus on her stunning face instead of the memory of her taste. Of how I’d love to take those legs, flip them over my shoulder and bury my face in her pussy.

My chest tightens when our attraction towards one another pulses around us. Know damn well she notices because it ripples through the air.

I fill her in on the night’s events. Telling her everything, and it’s all I can do to keep track of my thoughts while I sit here with a hard on that is painful as fuck.

I’m certain she’s having a hard time controlling her desire by the way she shifts in her spot and places her hands to the top of her thighs. “If we don’t get anything from these camera’s, I might have to take matters into my own hands.”

She has no idea that last statement, at the moment anyway, I was talking more about my dick than Omnia.

“That’s great, Blaze. All the news is great.” Impressiveness flashes in her expression before she offers the slightest nod. She should be. I’m damned good at what I do. I’m sure the same can be said for Kaci, too, though I’ve yet to see her in action. “I went over the file again and again until I was blue in the face. Tomorrow, I’m planning to go to check out the campus. Nose around, talk to Allison’s friends, see what information I can get with the girls she was with that night and her roommate.”

My initial instincts are to tell her no, but it’s been a long day, and I’m not in the mood to argue with her about how uncomfortable I am with her doing that. Not sure if it’s a good idea to show her face in case Brian happens to see her snooping around the dorms. Especially since Kaci might have to go to the club. The last thing we need is for her to get herself noticed before then.

The aroma of her sweet scent swarms around me, and I feel my cock begin to jolt in want.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I say, thinking that the space between us, that stroking my cock with one of the hands that wants to touch her skin is going to cure the need to fuck her. “Do me a favor and answer the door if room service shows up. We’ll talk more about your plan when I get out.”

“Okay.” I don’t even bother to take in her reaction as I push off the couch. If I look at her one more time ahead of stroking my dick, I’ll be doing something we’ll likely both regret come morning.

Closing the bathroom door, I turn on the shower, quickly undress and slip under the spray, gripping my cock as I angle my head back and close my eyes. Long strokes along my shaft leave me wanting to be buried inside of Kaci, with her ass high, screams muffled into the pillow.

I lean my forehead against the tiles, memories taking me back to how she fulfilled every fucking fantasy of what I'd imagined sex with her might be like the first time I sunk into her tight body.

Rough and wild and as perfect as her cunt felt. How watching her come always had me reveling in the high of her orgasm.

My balls tighten then, cum shooting through my shaft and spurting out of the tip.

By the time I've cleaned up, and shut off the water, I've done all I can to convince myself I'm a fool for wanting Kaci. That my heart can't afford allowing me to lose control again.

As I step back out into the suite and that spark crackles when our eyes lock, I know that's complete and utter bullshit.

I'm not sure how long I can keep my hands off her now. Nor do I have it in me to block out the fact that I'm still just as in love with her as I had been back then.

That knowledge hits me in the chest like a ton of bricks.

When it comes to Kaci, that's the scariest thing of all.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Kaci*

Gray storm clouds streak across the sky as I step onto the campus, thunder a low rumble in the distance. By the way the breeze is picking up, and the thunder is starting to growl overhead, it won't be long before a storm is rolling in.

I glance around, taking in the beauty of the college. With the season changing from winter to spring, the lawn is turning into a lush green. The leaves on the tall trees and the flowers planted all around are just starting to bud.

I've always loved this time of year where everything is awakening from the hibernated freezing Winter this neck of the world brings. I love all the changing seasons, really. Besides Tara, the weather is the only other thing I miss about the Midwest.

Students and faculty members, presumably making their way to class, are rushing in every direction. Some run up the steps to the newly modern buildings, while others dart into old architectural structures that are woven in the heart of Detroit.



There's a part of me that envies those experiencing college life, living the best of both worlds. While Tara and I received good grades and could have attended with financial aid and student loans if we wanted, my main priority was making enough money for us to live on when she became of age. I'd have made sure my sister received a higher education if she'd shown any interest, but she didn't. She wanted to pull her weight.

However, I briefly wonder if things would have been different if we'd been placed with foster parents who truly wanted to give us a better life. If we'd been given a mother who genuinely wanted what was best for us, would we have somehow ended up in a place like this together? Would we still be right where we are now or living a life as some suburban housewife with careers and husbands we hated?

Looking at our lives now, I can't imagine living unhappily. For the most part I'm very content with where I've ended up, and Tara most definitely is now that she has Liam.

Letting those thoughts go as I've given them plenty of real estate in my mind for long enough, I follow the sidewalk toward the residential halls. After what seems like forever, I locate Henley House, the residential dorm Allison had been living in up until her disappearance.

My scattered nerves have me shifting on my feet as I approach, pulling my ponytail tighter through the hole at the back of my ball cap, and wiping my clammy palms on my jean clad thighs before stuffing them into the pockets of my hooded sweatshirt. I'd intentionally dressed down to keep suspicion

off me, but I can't say I'm comfortable in these clothes by a long shot.

I feel naked, so far out of my element with the way I'm dressed in public, even though no one is paying me a lick of attention. The thought of grilling someone without making them wary seems harder than it would be if I were in a dress and heels.

I'm an excellent liar when it comes to seducing a man, but not so much when it comes to digging around. I might not be in my comfort zone, but after all, taking out the predators of this earth is why I became an Oath Keeper.

Even if the police have already spoken to Allison's roommate and friend's multiple times, I'm hoping by questioning them, they'll give me something to go on. Maybe something they didn't feel comfortable sharing with authorities.

After hearing Blaze's heart wrenching story, I'm more determined than ever to find any bit of evidence I can to help.

The door to the hall swings open and I slip inside unnoticed, passing more students hurrying as I travel down the hall until I find the common area in the center of the building.

I take a seat on the small couch beneath a window that's directly across from Allison's dorm room. As I set my bag to the side, I take quick stock of the area before pulling out my phone to shoot Blaze a quick text, letting him know I've arrived.

He was still sleeping when I left, which was for the best. After arguing before he left last night, both of us throwing out

hurtful words, it was nice to have somewhat of a civil conversation with him before he excused himself to shower. Afterwards, we stood staring at one another with our connection so fierce, my legs were having a hard time keeping me upright. He cleared his throat and didn't speak much until I mentioned coming here again.

He became noticeably agitated and disturbed when he couldn't hack into Omnia's system. Even though that was part of his problem, I knew full well he was bent out of shape that he wasn't pulling my strings when it came to telling me what to do.

That is exactly what I meant about putting two assassins on a case together. It's always complicated, with or without a history. I'd like to think Blaze's concern is more out of safety for me than his dominating nature, but with the way he's been behaving, it's hard to make that argument on his behalf.

Not that I've been behaving much better.

As I lay against my mattress last night, tossing and turning, trying to fall asleep, it was impossible to get him off my mind. The short and friendly interaction we'd shared was a reminder of how much I missed having someone to talk to. More accurately, how much I missed talking with him.

I'd been so caught up in my own temper tantrum, I'd made it too easy to forget that at the same time we were falling in love, Blaze was my friend.

The best friend I'd ever had, really, outside of Tara. It sounds cheesy, I know, but that doesn't make it any less true. Up until that fateful night, our relationship had really been the full package.

It was for me, anyway.

Our sex life was a bolt of electricity.

Chemistry that begged and brimmed.

An abundance of it.

Just the sight of him was enough to make me weak in the knees.

Flaming hot and wet.

Judging from last night, he's still got that effect on my body, but what we had was so much more.

And I went and screwed it up, drove him to find someone else, making me realize now more than ever that he and I are truly not meant to be.

My phone vibrates against my palm, and I read his clipped reply telling me to be careful. I smile sadly as a twinge of guilt pricks at my chest, along with the blood in my veins thickening with regret over the way I ended things, the way I've treated him.

Less than a minute later the door to room 311H swings open, and Allison's dark-haired roommate walks out and by the paleness of her face, the bags under her eyes, she's either been studying all night or hungover.

She fumbles with her keys for a moment before she finally gets the lock secured. As she turns around, hikes her backpack onto her shoulders, she stops and glances over in my direction.

"Hi, I'm Allison Ryan's cousin, Delaney. Are you Becca by chance?" I lift my bag and rise. "I'm sorry to just show up. I

tried getting your number from my uncle, but he wasn't able to find it."

"Oh, hello. It's nice to meet you." Excitement flickers in her eyes as she takes hold of my hand, giving it a little squeeze. "Has there been any word on Allison? Did they find out what happened to her? Is she okay?"

"No. Nothing yet." I gulp down the clawing guilt and uneasiness of my lies, beating back how I've just squashed this girl thinking I was here with good news. "We're trying to find out if anyone remembered something they might not have told the police when they were here before. Anything new for us to go on. That's why I'm here."

Her eyes well with tears, and so do mine. I allow them to sting and blur my vision for a moment, wanting to let them fall free, but I'm afraid if I do, I won't stop. That's why I couldn't shed them last night in front of Blaze. Not because he'll take them as a weakness, but because I feel for the families of these girls. I feel for those who know Allison and the rest of these women. If it's breaking my heart, it's got to be crushing theirs.

"I'm sorry. I don't know anything more than what I've already told them. Have you talked to Savannah Montgomery yet? She might know more."

I bite down on my tongue to keep from asking who in the hell Savannah is. Blaze and I scoured every name given, everything in that file with a fine-toothed comb. There was no Savannah anywhere, not even on the list of names questioned by the police.

And Raven? There might be something going on emotionally there, but there's not a chance in hell a name

would be missed.

It could lead to nothing, but I need to give Blaze this girl's name so he can track her down.

If she somehow slipped under the radar, there has to be a reason for it.

My instincts tell me it's nothing good.

Anger burns through the center of me. Not so much with Becca as it isn't her job to assume the cops do their job. I'm not sure if the emotion is even directed at those investigating, though they obviously dropped the ball on this detail. No, it's for the owner of the club, it's for Brian, and it's now possibly whoever this Savannah girl is. My anger is for all the sadistic people in the world who think they have the right to take another's spirit and annihilate it.

Wilting them into desolation.

Breaking them.

They are reapers who think they have the right to snuff out someone else's light. To rob someone of their happiness and go about living their lives.

“Actually, I was heading to see Savannah next. I just wasn't sure when was a good time to talk to either of you.” I tell yet another lie. Becca's schedule, along with Kassie and Sierra, the friends Allison were with that night, was in the file. Seeing that is what gave me the idea to come here in the first place.

“Finding out what happened to Allison means more to me than anything. I know it does to Savannah as well. She's been as worried as I am. She and Allison shared a class, and they were spending a lot of time together. They became thick as

thieves after that. I'd think she would have told all she knew too." Her eyes glance down at her watch just in time to miss the tremor in my chest at her words. "I'm sorry I can't stay and talk longer, but I'm running a little behind. My first class is across campus and starts in just a couple minutes," she says apologetically. "I don't know what time her first class is, but Savannah doesn't live too far from here. Just right off campus with her brother. I'm sure she's already told the police everything she knows, though."

"I'm sure she did, I'm just so worried just like you. Every day that passes without a word gets harder. I'm tired of sitting around waiting on the phone to ring. I'm sorry if I've upset you."

"No, you didn't. This whole thing has. I just want my friend back."

"I know," I nod, letting the emotion sweep back over my features, grateful that's at least one thing I don't have to lie my way through today. "Thanks again for your time. I'll let you get to class." I pretend to follow her out as I activate the ringer on my phone, and drop it into my bag, cursing when it starts to ring. "It was nice to meet you. I wish it was under different circumstances." I say, pulling my phone right back out of my bag, and glancing at the screen. "Maybe we'll see each other again. I have to take this. It's my dad. He's probably wondering if I found out anything. Take care of yourself, Becca."

"You, too." she says sweetly as I lift the phone to my ear, turning away from her.

As she descends the stairs, I fish through my bag until I find my lock picking set. I'm already in her and Allison's room before she makes it out the door. I shoot a quick text to Blaze with the information from Becca and begin searching around.

I'm sure it's a long shot as this room had likely been turned upside down the minute Allison came up missing. Yet, something tells me there's a secret hidden in here.

Allison is a bright, young woman who was the pride and joy of her family. She'd won awards, accolades and enough scholarships to make her a shoo-in at any college, but she wanted to stay close to home, so she chose here. On paper, Allison Page was the picture-perfect poster child of American overachieving youths. She was the cardboard cutout of what every white-collar parent wanted their daughter to grow up to be so they could one day become model members of society.

That's a lot of pressure for any girl her age.

I'd almost bet money she was hiding one hell of a secret from them, and if I'm right, there's proof of that somewhere in this room.

I make quick work of going through Becca's things. The girl might be convincing to people asking questions she cares about Allie, or she could also be a liar, same as me. For all I know, she even made-up Savannah to catch me in one.

I've gone through nearly every inch of the place and come up empty handed by the time Blaze replies to my text telling me to get the hell out of there. I blow out a low breath of annoyance at both him and myself for not finding anything when a small thread in the carpet catches my eye. I take a step



closer and it's then that I see the incision, and my lips spread into a victorious smile.

There isn't much in the small, makeshift cubby beneath the carpet, but what I do find could prove to be valuable. There are a few selfies of Allison dressed in skimpy clothes I'm all too familiar with. A few ticket stubs and two fake driver's licenses with Allison's photo. I can't say I'm not impressed by the quality, either. Whoever made this definitely knew what they were doing. I tuck everything into my bag, along with my phone, and lock up the room, carefully slipping out to track down Kassie and Sierra. The two of them are dripping in worry and concern, but neither bring up Savannah.

About an hour later, I let myself into our suite. Blaze is standing at the dining table with his eyes glued to his laptop, looking like a bottle of sin in a pair of gray sweatpants, and a white tee. The lines of his tattoos bleed slightly through the material. The thing is stretched across the span of his wide chest and straining not to rip at the seams.

Heat blooms between my thighs. My heart thuds, my stomach flips, and my tongue darts out, sweeping across my suddenly dry lips.

My fingers itch with the urge to just touch him.

To bring myself the rest of the way to life.

I was a fool for letting Blaze go back then, and one now for standing here wanting him when he belongs to another.

His eyes lift to mine, and I fake a yawn, hoping he'll just go about his work to give me a few minutes to will my desire away. I hand him what I found and take a seat next to him.

Immediately, I realize that's a mistake. He smells so good that I want to stand right back up to press my nose into his neck and inhale.

He turns away from me, giving me a side glance of his strong jaw and I exhale while I watch him study everything. He snaps pictures with his phone, then starts tapping away on his laptop.

I have no idea why I find what he's doing incredibly sexy, but I do. Then again, there was nothing I didn't find attractive about him before, either.

"I'm surprised you're tired. The woman I remember preferred early mornings." My heart curls in on itself. For a moment, I recall how contained and comforted I felt when I'd stay at his apartment, waking to his arms wrapped around me.

"That's still true." My throat clogs with tears. If I didn't know before how hard being around him was going to be, I do now. It's creating a problem because I shouldn't be having thoughts about him at all, and he shouldn't be talking about recalling anything when it comes to me. He belongs to someone else. My chest tightens. I have no clue how to handle this, how to even look at him anymore without wanting him to be mine again. "Just not when I'm working."

"I take it you kill mostly men?" I nod, and his nostrils flare in silent fury I don't entirely understand, jaw clenching as he continues to tap away. Multiple windows begin to pop up, and I have no idea what I'm looking at, but I do know this is where my focus needs to remain.

"How'd you learn to work so well with computers?"

“My dad, believe it or not. He knew his way around these things like there was no tomorrow. His company dealt with a lot of software and program writing, things like that. I took an interest, so he showed me the basics and I learned quickly. Everything else I taught myself or picked up while in the service.”

He glances at me then, and I get stuck in the sadness in his gaze. My heart panging, my mind traveling back to when he told me about his parent’s death. It pains me all over again for Blaze and what he went through. He was close to his mom and dad, and even though he didn’t elaborate much on their murders because it was too painful for him, I understand why he’d turn to The Oath. I’d just like a few questions answered. Ones that will put my curious mind at ease or make it more chaotic depending on his answers.

“When did you join The Oath?”

“Eight years ago. Shortly after my parent’s death.” I begin to ask another question, but he cuts me off with one dark brow raising. “Kaci, you already know why I couldn’t tell you. The subject is closed. Understood?”

I lean back in the chair, swallowing back the urge not to stand up and slap him across his handsome face. To get right into his space and tell him to quit bossing me around.

“Of course. I’m just trying to piece things together.”

“About?” He asks, eyes going back to what he’s doing.

“Raven,” I start and it’s impossible to ignore the way Blaze’s fingers begin to tighten slightly with anxiety, an emotion I’ve rarely seen him struggle with. I can’t help but

wonder if it's due to the stress of this unusual job or the conversation, but I decide to stay the course and not push my luck. For now, anyway. "Have you noticed the job feels different this time?"

"It *is* different this time."

"Yes, but why?" I press on. His jaw squares just the slightest bit at my insubordination. It should maybe make me tread lightly. Instead, I find it only stirs up unexpected arousal. I force myself to push that away for now, too. "It's not just the job, really, that concerns me. We were given a heads-up during briefing that it would be complicated and that's being proven in spades."

"So, what is it you're so worried about?"

"Raven," I say again. "I can't put my finger on it, but there's something off there. I don't know what, but there is. I just wondered if you noticed it, too."

His fingers continue to move skillfully over the keyboard, and I remember how skillful they were as he memorized my body. I make myself blink the thought away as quickly as it comes.

"I did," Blaze admits, pausing at what he's doing, and leans back, scratching his chin in thought. "But I wouldn't look too deeply into it."

"How can we not?"

"Because as stressed out as you are, as I am - as crazy as these jobs can be and how deeply they can wreak havoc on a Keeper - imagine what it would be like to be at the core of every single one of them." He's right. Just the thought of the

things Raven finds makes me shudder. “I’ve known Raven a long time, Kaci. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen how the running The Oath can take its toll on our boss. Not everyone can be perfectly composed at every turn. Especially not in the business we’ve put ourselves in.”

His words shed a lot of light on things, admittedly giving me a better perspective. His expression tells me it should be enough, but it just isn’t. Not for me.

“That’s the other thing. You’ve said you’ve known each other for years, but how did you hook up with Raven?” A huff scrapes from his throat, and he rubs the back of his neck. When his eyes slant to mine once again, I can’t quite make out what he’s thinking or why suddenly Blaze seems so uncomfortable. “Did you tell Raven about me before we broke up?”

On the drive back, I thought about the possibility of Raven digging into my past before approaching me at that bar. I’m certain of it because I know it was something done with Lily as well as anyone else who gets involved with someone in The Oath. That doesn’t bother me. It’s protocol. Yet the more I thought about it, the more curious I became due to the odds of Blaze being a Keeper.

“Yes and no.”

“Yes and no?” I repeat, completely confused by his total non-answer. “What does that even mean?”

His answer is lost as the tension coming off his body and his eyes sharpen like a blade when leans forward and brings up a photo on his laptop putting an end to our conversation.

“I fucking knew it,” he growls.

“Did you find something?”

“I knew that little prick was a sick son of a bitch.”

“Who?”

“I enhanced one of the images you gave me. Damn good thing I did.”

I squint to try and grasp whatever he’s seeing that I’m definitely not. All I see is a larger version of Allison holding her phone for a selfie.

“Look in the background. The two people sitting at the table in the corner?” I lean in to get a better look, and a flashfire rolls up my arm when he brushes against me.

He starts tapping away again, his fingers impressively flying across the keys. A picture of Brian and a red headed young woman appear next to the photo. It’s then I see the resemblance.

“Oh shit!” I whisper. “That’s the bartender at Omnia.”

“It is,” he nods, leaning back in his chair to face me. “And the one sitting next to him is his half-sister, Savannah Montgomery.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Blaze*

I can hear the downpour of the rain, the roar of thunder blistering across the sky when the basement door creaks open, and a dead body tumbles down the stairs landing perfectly at my feet with a deep thud.

Despite the storm slowing down the drive to the house, I couldn't have asked for better weather for what I'll soon be doing. Raven owns this place, it's about an hour north of the city, and I've used it a couple times in the past when I've had a job in Detroit.

It has always served me well in the past. For tonight's purposes, it's damned near fucking perfect.

No one will hear Brian scream for the mercy he won't be getting. He's about to get a taste of his own medicine in the form of some mind-fucking torture.

Justified karma if you ask me.

My fists are usually what play judge and jury. Before I knocked him out cold, he had a little taste of the damage these two hands are capable of. I'd be surprised if he gives me the

information I need after this. If he doesn't, he'll wish to God he did with what I have planned.

My shoe taps on the wooden floor. The hatred for this sick, twisted prick burns like coals in my veins, and has me wanting to light a match to the place. How easy it would be to stand back and observe him shattering my ears with his screeching while he goes up in flames.

His festering, black soul disintegrating to ash.

“Wake up, sweetheart.”

I kick him at the base of his chin, his battered head flying back and as his eyes blink open, he releases what already sounds like a half dead groan of misery.

It's my motherfucking symphony.

“I know it's early,” I taunt him. “Christmas is still several months away, but I just couldn't wait to give you your gift any longer.”

His eyes focus immediately, memories of the abuse he'd sustained before he blacked out resurfacing and shooting tangible fear up his spine. I bend to lift Savannah's dead carcass up by the hair, the blood mixing just right with her ginger locks. The scream, the cursing, the uncontrollable tears coming from Brian even more beautiful than I'd expected.

I shot the screaming bitch in the head when she tried to claw at my face. It was an instinctive reaction I may or may not regret. Either way, she got off easy as far as I'm concerned. A hell of a lot easier than her brother will.

After hacking into the college registrars and checking Savannah's schedule, I noticed she and Allison had indeed



shared a class. The little bitch befriended her, made Allison trust her, and then Brian came along and took her the night she went to the club.

Depraved psychopaths are what the two of them are.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how the other women were kidnapped. Brian scopes them out like I thought at the bar. He checks their ID, memorizes their address, follows them, and seizes them. There's no other explanation. With the video surveillance swiped clean at Omnia, there's no proof those women were even there.

But I know. I know it to the depths of my own black soul.

"You motherfucker. I told you she knew nothing," he sobs, snot and saliva mixing in with the dried blood on his battered face. He grimaces when I let Savannah go, her body meeting the cold cement with an echoing thump. She'll be burned to a crisp, nothing left but ash by the time I make it back to the hotel.

"You did, but we both know that was a lie. Just as we both know you're not walking out of here alive, Brian. You lost all claim to that the moment you met me. That's just a fact. What you do have control over is how long we do this bullshit dance for. How hard you want your final moments to be. I might be generous and let you choose how to die if you tell me what I want to know. Or we can play all night long," I grin, taking in the binds I'd roughly placed on him after I followed him to his apartment from campus, seized him right out of his car, and threw him in the back of my Suburban. "I really don't give a fuck one way or the other."

It would have been nice if Savannah was around at the time, but she wasn't. While I was trying to get information out of Brian, Raven had a few men wait for her at their apartment. The minute they arrived, I knocked him out cold and tried questioning her, but like him, she wouldn't tell me shit.

Now, my patience has run dry.

It didn't take much digging to find out Brian and Savannah were related. Same mother, different fathers. The poor woman will suffer the rest of her days not knowing what happened to her children all because their minds are warped.

Bent and tainted so far that they make me look like a saint.

I have him tied to a wooden chair with a bomb he has no clue is fake taped under the seat. That alone usually gets people talking, but not this waste of a human. Before I knocked him out, he kept smarting off like he had the upper hand.

"After what you did to my sister, after taking us, you just sealed Allison's fate, you stupid cocksucker," he whimpers, and I glare at him. Violence claws below the layers of my skin, rage twitching my muscles and my hands ball into fists.

He isn't telling me something I haven't already considered. The second his people realize they've gone missing, there's a good chance they'll kill the girl. That's a hard pill to swallow. Something I'm going to have to live laden with guilt with for the rest of my life.

But when saving one victim means leaving these two monsters on the street to endanger countless others, I'm left with no choice but to take them out. The thought that Allison

may end up being a sacrificial lamb makes me want to torture the ever-loving fuck out of him.

My lips curl, and I fight the bile that crawls up my throat, coating my tongue as visions of what I saw on his phone boil my blood with a toxic mix of sorrow and fear.

I almost wished I hadn't seen Allison alive and violated, because that kind of debasing to a person has left my brain in spasms of dread.

I smashed the thing to smithereens after. I couldn't even watch the whole thing, so I sure as hell wasn't about to chance Kaci getting her hands on it. I'd seen more than enough to have the proof Raven's Oath requires before killing someone to know Brian and his sister are goddamn abominations. One of the many bastard children of Satan himself.

Men and women involved in the sex trade have a sickness that feasts on every cell and infects every organ.

A disease.

Soggy pieces of shit that get off on knowing the last moments of innocent lives will be corroded in fear.

Unspeakable pain.

Rage and sickness churn in my gut. Cramps of pain strike my skull as the feed on that video replays in my mind. It began with Brain walking into the room and shoving Allison to her knees in the middle of a bedroom decorated in frilly pink. She was already naked and crying, her tiny frame shivering with fear despite the fancy accommodations. Which is strange given kidnappers, traffickers, and rapists don't give a flying

fuck they are ruining a person's life, let alone give them somewhere nice to be brutalized.

Makes a man like me wonder why.

Before I could make sense of it, the frame shifted to a bare chested, pot belly man in a wolf mask coming into view, then looking directly into the camera. He quickly unzipped his pants, whipped out his dick, and placed it at Allison's trembling lips at the same time he positioned a gun to her head. Had to look away until his grunts and her sobbing were finished.

Then the man beat her while he fucked her. Coated her in blood and bruises. All she did was scream for him to stop, begging while choking on her tears. Once he was finished, he pulled out a syringe, injected her with something, and left.

The last words that fell from her lips before she passed out was a plea for her father.

The next video was the oldest of the missing women. Trudy Darboe, age twenty-seven. Her hands and feet were bound with two bricks dangling at her wrists and a couple more tied around her ankles. A blindfold covered her eyes, and her mouth was stuffed with a rag. She stood naked on the end of a dock, her skeletal bones protruding while she shook and within seconds she was shoved into the water.

I hated sending that to Raven before I busted it up, but by God, I'll beat Brian to a pulp if only to get a crumb of anything else to go on.

Hopefully, he gives up Travis, because the idea of Kaci having to go into the club makes me want to fucking gauge my

eyeballs out. I'd prefer to just nab him and place him right alongside this preppy motherfucker, but I need proof he's involved. He must be because there is no way in hell this shit is happening under his nose.

“If you think you can fuck with my head, think again. I'm a hired assassin. I brutally and callously end lives for a living and as you can see, I love what I do, Brian. Do you honestly believe I give a flying fuck if that girl dies?”

It pains me to lie, he'll never know that, though.

He laughs, the sadistic animal enjoying toying with me far too much. He's about two point five seconds away from never laughing again. “Don't really care, asshole. I'm not giving you what you want now no matter what you do to me. I should have had you taken out the other night. I knew you were evil, just like me.”

I cock my head. I might be a killer, but unlike Brian, I'm nowhere close to evil. I have a heart. It's too bad for him it's nowhere to be found right now.

The back of my hand meets his jaw. His head wrenches left, the chair wobbling, but not quite enough to topple over. He spits at my feet, and I grip him by the back of the neck, forcing him to take a look at his sister when I kick her so hard she rolls across the room. He starts yelling again, which gets him another bitch slap to the face.

“You could have tried taking me out, Brian. You'd have only ended up like Savannah a hell of a lot sooner. Now, you might want to listen the fuck up. If you don't talk, you'll be sitting here wondering when I'll decide to push the five-minute countdown button and blow you to pieces.” I tuck the

phony remote into one of the front pockets of my jeans, then get within an inch of his face. “I’ll give you one more chance to answer my questions before the real torture begins. Give me the password to Omnia’s system. I want to know who the hell you’re working for, who the fuck the man in the video is, and you’re going to tell me where the goddamn shit I saw happen is.”

I’m having one hell of a time getting into Omnia’s security feed. This motherfucker has it fucking impossible to hack into. A hell of a lot harder than it was getting into the college.

He’s a genius when it comes to computers, but a dumb fuck for getting caught by me.

I show no mercy.

“Go to hell,” he screeches.

Panic twists in my gut. The date on that video was two days ago. I can’t let Allison die. She’s young with her whole life ahead of her. With help, she can recover from this.

Bending, I yank my knife strapped to my calf free, and smirk, reveling in watching him struggle to get out of the ropes, in the sweat that’s pouring down the sides of his face when he exerts himself.

“Well then, I guess it’s time to take a couple pounds of your flesh so the rats can have a feast.” I wrap a hand around his throat and squeeze, perching the blade on his right cheek. “You’re going to wish you’d given me what I needed, Brian. I’d have made your death easier on you if you had.”

His eyes fill with fear, darting back and forth between me and the knife.

A smile spreads across my face, and a low chuckle escapes as I draw the knife slowly up his cheek, stopping just below his eye. His mouth falls open, eyes widening like saucers, and he screams so loud my ears will be ringing for days.

I draw another line downward about an inch from the first. My tight hold on his throat grows until he gasps. I release him, refusing to give him enough time to pull in the breath he's desperate for before stepping back to punch him in the temple. The chair tips over, and I grin like a cat who caught the canary at the sound of his skull cracking, the blood splattering, and the belts of pain coming out of his mouth.

Piss darkens his tan khakis, and I glance down at it, cock a brow and bust out laughing.

Brian calls me every name in the book when he tries bringing his hands up to cradle his head only to remember they are bound. He's attempting to raise slightly to face me when I crouch down beside him and grab hold of the sides of his head, knocking it back into the hard concrete floor until blood pools underneath him.

Positioning the heel of my boot against his bobbing throat, I apply pressure against his Adam's apple. Tempted to crush it, but then decide a bit more torture is needed.

"What the fuck?" He chokes out a broken sob, coughing and sputtering as I remove my boot and grab a handful of his dirty blonde hair, yanking him and the chair upright. "Who the fuck are you?"

Ignoring him again, I untie him from the chair with ease, and lift him over my shoulder, tossing him like a bag of cement onto the wooden table at the edge of the room. It takes

almost none of my strength to lift his hands over his head and loop the rope around the steel knobs positioned at the end of the table.

“Who the fuck am I?” I sneer, move back to the chair and unsnap the bomb, placing it a few inches from his head. If he doesn’t give me what I want, he can stare at the thing until I return. Pulling back my arm, I ram my fist into his jaw a few times, his lip splitting, and blood dribbling down his neck. “I’m your worst goddamn nightmare, Brian.”

“Jesus Christ,” he grumbles, fear swirling through his bloodshot glare.

“He’s not going to save you. Not after everything you’ve done.” I keep my eyes on him as I pull out a pair of pliers and a sledgehammer from the shelf under the table. The boom put into the way I slam them against the wood makes his body jolt, muscles going taut, and my insides begin to quake with another shot of adrenaline shooting through them. “Are you ready to answer me? To give me the truth? Or would you prefer more. Trust me, the rats in this place are fucking hungry.” I put him in a chokehold, resting the metal pliers against his bloodied jaw. “I think we’ve already established that there isn’t much I hate more than a liar,” I remind him, savoring the scream for help that leaves his mouth. “Except for rapists. That makes you zero for two, Brian.”

I count to five waiting on an answer I’m not going to fucking get.

The little pissant has just made my panic for Allison crawl up my spine.

*Fuck!*



He wails like a baby when I pry open his mouth, gripping hold of one of his front teeth before yanking it out of the socket. His cries echo through the space as I pop out another. Take a step back and watch him gurgle and choke on his blood in a coughing fit of tears.

Wetness pools again at his groin, and I lift the sledgehammer and crack his left kneecap.

“You can continue to torture me all you want,” he sputters. “I won’t give you anything. It wouldn’t do any good anyway. The people behind all this are all untouchable.” Untouchable? Interesting. There’s not many in this world who are, myself included, but that gives me something to go on at least.

“I’m not wasting more of my time listening to your bullshit. Since you don’t want to give me names, let’s see how much more pain you can tolerate, shall we? It gives me a thrill to watch agony spread across my victim’s face, Brian. I bet you felt the same when you picked out a woman, when your little bitch of a sister told you about Allison. Did it thrill you to watch them beg for their lives as their souls are sucked out of them, you little cocksucker?”

“I didn’t want to do it!” His words are hardly audible through the spit, the blood, the missing teeth, and most likely now a broken jaw. I heard him loud and clear, though. We’re finally getting somewhere now.

“Do us both a favor and just give me a name. Who are you working for, Brian?” I grip his jaw, and yank another tooth out, placing it on his chest, and give him a few minutes to calm himself down.

It’s more than he deserves.

“He said I had to.”

“Who?” I demand, grabbing a handful of his sweat-soaked blonde strands, and nearly yank them from the root. My free hand balls into a fist and cracks against his side, the sound of ribs cracking soon to follow. “Was it your boss, Brian?” He shakes his lying head as much as my grip will allow, as he wails and shakes. “Was it Travis?”

His cry is almost innocent, childlike. I swallow hard, immediately shaking off any hesitation when one of the images from his phone flash through my memory. I swing the pliers into his ribs several times. Once he starts to wheeze, I stop. “Are you going to answer me, or shall we get back to it? You still have plenty of bones I can break and keep you alive.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replies, his voice weakened in pain. “I’m not a snitch and I’m dead no matter what.”

“Well, I guess you’ve got a point there. You’re definitely about to fucking die no matter what you tell me.” Tossing the bloodied pliers beneath the table, I move for the sledgehammer. His swollen eyes widen as I lift it easily, resting it over my shoulder as I stare down at him. “What you really need to ask yourself is how long you want that to take, because even though you feel like you’re dying, even though you’ll want to once I crush your balls, you won’t.”

Before he can answer with another bellow of agony, I’ve slammed the end of the sledgehammer into his groin.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Kaci*

“Seriously, Kaci. Are you alright? You never call when you’re on the job.” Concern drips from Lily’s voice as we carry on our phone conversation.

I’m not okay, but I’d never tell her that. With all the muck rambling around in my head, and the dull moan coming from my heart, I needed something positive and wonderful to think about. I called to talk about the baby and check to see how she was feeling.

Outside of Tara, she’s the only woman who has ever meant something to me. Even the few friends Tara and I had in school didn’t mean as much as Lily does. Although, I wouldn’t call them friends. They were just unfortunate kids like us. The beloved misery to our company, I guess you could say.

Mine and Lily’s friendship started out a bit rocky as she thought I might feel something more than just having Ezra as a friend with benefits. Without telling her Blaze was why I’d never allowed myself to fall for a man, I set her straight, and we’ve been close ever since.

“I’m fine. Like I said when you answered, if I’m still tied up, I want to make sure I’m at the top of the list of people to call when the baby is born.”

She’s going to make an amazing mother. And though from the outside looking in, you’d never know it, Ezra is going to be a great father. The world we live in may be surrounded by darkness, but this baby will never see anything but light and love.

An abundance of it.

The thought of it all causes jealousy to rear its ugly head again.

That’s all I’ve felt since Blaze walked out the door to go after proof needed that Brian and Savannah are involved. Enough that it sent me to drink.

“You’ll be the first call Ezra makes. I promise.” Lily’s friendly voice pulls my attention back, and I shake the envious thoughts away. “If you’re sure everything is okay, I’m going to get ready for bed. I’ve been rushing all week to get the nursery just perfect and it’s catching up with me.”

“I’m positive,” I lie, glad she can’t see these damn tears forming in my eyes, the way my body is shaking, or the half-empty bottle of bourbon that’s now starting to affect my mind.

It’s making me dizzy and dredging up things I shouldn’t be thinking about. Whipping my mind around in a frenzy.

A hazardous one, at that.

“Okay, we’ll talk soon. Be safe, Kaci.”

“You know I will. Good night.”

Ending the call, I set my phone on the nightstand, plug it into the charger, and begin placing the darts back into the case alongside the gun Raven had someone set beside my things in Blaze's vehicle. I trust Raven to make sure I'm equipped with everything I need when I have to get rid of one weapon and replace it with another. I've just come into the habit of always double-checking.

The last dart slips out of my hand, landing on the plush carpet. I step to retrieve it, but movement from the doorway causes me to freeze, and all I can do is stare at the shirtless man with a mix of amusement and curiosity written all over his gorgeous face.

I didn't even hear him come back. He must have returned when I went into the bathroom to change.

His gaze shuffles from me to the dart to back at me again. Eyes dark as night pin me in place as a wicked smile pulls at the corners of his lush mouth.

God, that mouth and the things it can do.

"So, that's how you kill your mark, huh? With poison? Do you lure them in with your beauty first?"

His tone is gravelly yet smooth - sort of how bourbon would sound if it had a voice.

Sultry and seductive.

I can't blink, can't turn away. The apology for treating him poorly so many times, as well as wanting details on what he found out, park themselves on the tip of my tongue. Because, my God, even with blurry eyes from the alcohol, I can see the

man is a solid pack of muscle. Even more than he was the last time he had me pinned under him, writhing in pleasure.

I'm also very aware of the arousal streaking through my center and pooling between my legs.

Rushing with need.

The muscles in Blaze's arms flex as he raises them above the bedroom door frame, and I take in his bare inked-covered chest and the colorful tattoos that make up the sleeves on his arms.

Warmth hits the flesh on the back of my neck as I can't help but take in every exposed inch, every dip and valley of his firm, muscular stomach and shoulders.

I want to flatten my tongue against those tattoos the way I used to.

Feel him under the tips of my fingers.

Reacquaint.

That pulling attraction I felt toward Blaze when he walked into the truck stop all those years ago slides like liquid fire through my veins.

It fills my head with thoughts and memories of sweaty, earth-shattering sex. All kinds of desiring thoughts are running through my messy head.

Like how it would feel to finally give in. To let him worship, tease, hold me on the edge of ecstasy, and fall apart once he allows me to.

To finally submit and explore his world.

My eyes go right to the Raven tattoo on his left bicep. We all have one. Mine is on the inside of my wrist. When he and I were together I never gave it a second thought. With everything else happening these past few days, I'd honestly forgotten about it. Seeing it there now, my heart and mind buzz even further with how it's possible Blaze and I ended up here.

Both mercenaries, assassins.

It's ironic at best.

My breath locks in the back of my throat, and my legs nearly buckle when I see the word *ominous* flanked with two guns on either side etched right above where his black sleep pants rest low on his hips. His long, thick cock is hard to ignore, and I nearly whimper with need, with desire so overwhelming and needy it plows through my senses.

Those dark eyes follow the tremble in my throat as I glare up at him, trying to pretend I'm not shaken to my core. That the hole in my chest from losing him doesn't throb and ache.

Misery clutches my chest.

Blaze's eyes shoot to my legs and travel upward, stopping where the hem of my silk robe lands mid-way at my thighs. He holds them there briefly before roaming higher, before moving across the swell of my breasts, my neck, and my mouth.

"Yes, to both," I slur, nearly falling flat on my face from the combination of him, the booze, and my body and mind wanting something I will never have again. I bend to pick up the dart and place it back into the case, close it up, and stumble

when I attempt to walk toward my suitcase. “As long as the job is done, right?”

“I agree.” He releases his grip on the doorway and angles himself slightly until he’s leaning up against the opposite side, arms crossed over his broad chest as he continues to study me, head tilting slightly to one side. “Are you drunk?”

His voice holds an annoyed edge, and he runs a hand through his damp hair, shaking himself out of the trance between us. Right now, that’s a good thing as the sober part of my brain pushes jealousy again to the forefront, reminding me yet again that Blaze has moved on and that he’s with someone else.

*Someone who isn’t me.* Yet, the man stands feet away with his long, thick dick pointing toward the ceiling.

No matter how much I want to jab the faceless woman’s neck and watch the life drain out of her, I would never come between her and Blaze. He wouldn’t cheat either, so we need to keep our space from one another before we do something regretful, or I’ll demand Raven to book me a room of my own. The more I think about that idea, the smarter it seems.

I can’t speak for him, but I can only summon so much resistance.

“What’s it to you?” I snap, deciding to push him away with bitchiness.

I pick up the Kentucky Owl and bring it to my mouth, savoring the notes of caramel, vanilla, and toffee. I let them coat my palate before the tingles of pepper and cinnamon hit my taste buds when I swallow it down.



The first time I drank this was with Blaze. I chugged it then, too, and he laughed at me when I coughed from the burn. He then told me to leave it on my tongue for a second to enjoy the refined flavor. Now it glides down smoothly, and I need more of it to pass out and quiet my turbulent mind.

Whenever I'd meet a mark at a bar, I'd always search the top shelf for this brand. When they had it, I'd think of him and me and wonder if the woman I became could handle him dominating over me. If now, I would love the bondage and crave the submission.

I know I would.

I'd also pretend to listen to the person I was going to kill while trying to catch those delicious notes within the watered-down version. Funny how, after all this time, I realize the woman I used to be was just that. A watered-down version of who she was born to be.

Now, I've got everything I thought I wanted back then.

I'm by all accounts free and have more money than I ever thought I would. Have a lovely cabin in Northern Michigan, and yet no matter how much money I have, it doesn't give me happiness.

Not where it counts the most.

Inside my shattered, dead heart.

Blaze provided happiness for me, and despite the years of trying to deny how deep my feelings for him still flowed, here I'm still trying and failing to drink them all away.

Such a stupid woman I am.

I take another swig and wish it would drown out visions of another on her knees in front of him. Giving him everything he wants while he brings her pleasure. Hoping it can take away the wonder of what she looks like that pulses in my veins.

Those thoughts only grew in intensity the longer he was gone today.

Now that he's back, in my space, they grow like a weed gone wild, and questions are building that I have no right wanting answers to. Like is he happy? Where do they live? Do they have children?

They just continued to multiply ever since my stomach started to grumble earlier, and I gave up on Blaze returning and went to dinner in the hotel restaurant by myself. Before that, I drifted into a state of stupor, my heart twisting in shame over how I've treated him. I should have apologized when I came back from the college earlier, and I planned on it when I returned from dinner. But when he still wasn't back yet, I began to drink.

Now, it seems best I just push him away all over again.

"It means nothing to me." His words crash down on me like an avalanche that I can't dig myself out of. They rip me apart. Those tears threaten to fall, but I won't let them loose. Not in front of him. "Drink all you want, but you'll do it when we finish what we're here for. Get drunk again, and I'll let Raven know putting us together was a mistake."

My heart bangs against my ribs. I might be three sheets to the wind, but Blaze's disappointment toward me is so potent he can hardly contain it.

It's firing off like a gunshot inside of him.

“Oh, get over yourself, Blaze. My God, how arrogant can you be?” I snarl, my heart twisting when he smirks. “Don't flatter yourself thinking I'm drinking because of you. Maybe I just wanted a fucking drink.” His brow arches in a challenge, and I can't help the low purr that rolls up my chest, nearly slipping out of me.

“By the looks of that half empty bottle, you've had more than a fucking drink,” he clips, releasing the frame and making his way around me to pull back the comforter. “You don't know what you're going on about with that much booze in your system. You've had enough. Come on. Get into bed.”

The last thing I need when I'm feeling like this toward Blaze is to have him anywhere near me and a bed.

“I know exactly what I'm talking about, and I'll go to bed when I damn well feel like it.” My voice drips with sarcasm as I tip the bottle back again. “What's wrong? Did I hurt your little feelings, Blaze?” The muscles in his back twitch, and I don't need him to turn to face me to know I'm pushing him a bit too far. I'll regret it because I need to know about Brian and Savannah, but right now, I just don't care. “If you have something to say, just fucking say it. I'm not the scared little girl I was when you met me. I can handle myself.”

“Is that what you'd call this? Handling yourself? I'd call it you acting like a bitch for no damn reason. I thought maybe we'd gotten past your attitude, but you've just proven me wrong,” he snaps. His words are enough to sober me up momentarily, and I feel their venom slink into my bloodstream. I don't like it. I go to take another pull from the

bottle, but before it reaches my lips, he pulls it from my hand. “I said you’re done. I’m cutting you off and putting your mouthy little ass to bed.”

The cruelty in his voice makes me cringe as I get right up in his personal space.

I may have hurt him, but he has no right to question my ability. No right to tell me I can’t drink, and no right to continually boss me around. I’m not training to be his fucking sub. Not anymore.

“Who the hell do you think you are, Blaze?” I blurt, growing angrier when I reach to take the bottle from his hand, and he stretches his long arm above his head. A dare for me to try and take it seeping from his eyes. I ignore the way my fingers itch to press against his chest and push him back on the bed instead. “You can’t tell me what to do. I’m a grown ass woman.”

“Then you need to start acting like one,” he bites back, his gaze locked on me as he stands upright and peers down at me. I start to argue again, but he cuts my indignant words off by yanking the case from my hand. “If you can use these to take out a fucking mark, you’re more than capable of being taken over my fucking knee, Kaci. It may have been a while, but we both know you shouldn’t test me.”

My thighs tremble and my pussy throbs at the thought of him spanking me. So much actually that I have to stop myself from begging him to do it.

“You wouldn’t,” I shake my head. “You don’t have my consent.”

“Oh, I think I do. You’re just too stubborn to admit it.” he retorts, and that smirk stretches wider as his eyes shift to my thighs, taking in the way they clench together in arousal. “And try me.”

When his obsidian eyes move back to mine, hooded and dark, hell if they don’t have me wanting to drop to my knees. I have to stifle a shudder and despite my best efforts, it’s obvious he sees it.

I’ve got to put an end to this right now or I’ll never get through this fucking job.

If I’m not careful, I’ll be on my knees for Blaze Lennox before the sun comes up.

“You know what? Putting us together *was* a mistake. So, please call Raven and book me another room.” His jaw ticks, and it’s then that I know I’ve hit a nerve, but I’m not near done yet. “You are wrong if you think I can’t handle doing my job. I could do it straight or piss ass drunk, and you don’t own me, so save your bossy fucking attitude for your girlfriend, wife, or whoever the hell she is.”

My eyes narrow as I struggle to contain the rage and all the complicated emotions I don’t know what to do with.

“Ah. I see what this little tantrum is all about now. You’re jealous.”

“What?” I bite out. “Most definitely not.”

“Sure, you are,” he shrugs. A cocky grin tweaks the corners of his mouth. “I told you I’d moved on, and it’s been eating you up on the inside until you couldn’t take it anymore. It got the better of you, so you decided to have a drink to try and get

your mind off it, but that didn't work, so you had another, and another." He cocks his head to one side, waiting for a reply we both know isn't coming. "Am I getting warm, kitten?"

As spot-on as his words might be, the combination between his presumptuous tone and his use of the pet name he'd given blisters rage across my flesh as I square my shoulders.

"Couldn't be colder," I say, my heart leaping into my throat from his weighted stare.

The man can see right through me.

He knows it, and so do I.

"Well, that's good because there is no other woman. Now get into bed."

My mouth drops open in anger, in disbelief.

"What?"

"I said I lied. Now get in."

I'm instantly furious. How dare he lie to me about something like that.

I should feel relief that there's no one else, but all I feel is resentment over his mistruths and how he could have the audacity to get me so riled up just for his own entertainment.

Gently taking my elbow, Blaze leads me toward the bed, and I whirl on him, my heavy lids holding resentment.

"I said I'm not ready for bed. Spank me if you must."

His gaze holds mine, and I see the familiar flash of dominance I remember so well. The same one that would wake me up from a dream that was so real, it had my body

heated and I'd slip my hand between my legs to find my clit engorged.

I'd sweep my finger across it, rubbing as I closed my eyes, pretending it was him.

It was bliss when I came.

Torture when I was done because I knew he wasn't really there.

“As badly as you probably need one judging from that fucking mouth of yours, I think we both know it wouldn't be wise. We both talk a big game, but deep down, I think we both know you couldn't handle it.”

He'd be wrong. Finding myself helped strengthen me in every way.

“And I think you don't know what I can or can't handle anymore.”

Our chests are heaving slightly in time as I take a step closer, admittedly provoking him. His thick, delicious neck bobs as he swallows hard. Fuck if I don't want to run my tongue across his Adam's apple and sink my teeth into his skin.

I want to mark him and tell him to take back what's always been his.

Me.

“Come.” His arms lift me before I can argue with him any further. My heart swells, and tears prick the back of my eyes as he gently lays me into the bed, pulling the comforter over my legs. “We can go over what I learned tonight and make

plans for you to go to Omnia when we wake. If we talk now, you wouldn't remember anyway, and I don't like repeating myself."

"You think I won't remember that you lied to me? You know, every word that slips out of your mouth is pissing me off more and more. I'll be ready, don't you worry. Now, get out of my room."

With my words, he switches off the lamp beside the bed, but I can still feel his eyes on me as the tears begin to fall over my cheeks.

When he turns to leave, I feel the pressure building in my chest, the need to sob being choked down by nothing more than my own foolish pride. I'm nearly ready to let it rip from me when his footsteps come to a slow stop near the doorway, and I see him glance over his shoulder in the darkness.

"You want to talk to me about lying, Kaci? How about when you said you'd wait for me to take you home? How about you disappearing on me?" His tone is low, quiet. Yet, I can hear the bitter hurt there, too. "Don't you fucking dare call me a fucking liar when you're the biggest one I've ever met."



His last words bleed through my ears as I flit my eyes open. The rays of light streaking in through the sheer curtains in the bedroom blind me when I roll over. My body feels like it's being weighed down by an anchor, my heart swollen and raw. My memory after talking to Lily is as clear as day.

The argument.



Drinking while on the job.

My stupidity.

The more my brain comes into focus, the more everything aches.

My head, my body and that hole in my chest that only Blaze can fill.

Forcing myself from the covers, I rub my temples, and stumble through the doorway to the bathroom and relieve myself of the silk robe as I turn on the shower, adjust the knob until it's near scalding and steam fills the room. After using the toilet and brushing my teeth, I step under the spray, sighing as the water cascades over my body, hoping it will take away the sting still lingering just below the surface.

*Are you drunk?*

His voice reverberates throughout me, settling into my veins, and vibrating my bones.

*It means nothing to me.*

Images of his wide, tattooed chest flash into my mind, and the heat that immediately begins to build low in my stomach moves between my legs.

My chest squeezes and I flatten my palms against my face. His aura fills my senses and memories of the man, reminders of how it had felt to belong to him, invade me. How I left a part of myself back in his apartment and never retrieved it, no matter how hard I'd tried.

And I did. I tried so hard to forget him.

It was hopeless.

Countless nights I'd spent with random strangers. The lonely girl I never acknowledged, doing all she could to find some likeness of what she'd shared with Blaze. It wasn't long until I realized I'd turned my back on the only man I'd ever been destined to share that part of myself with.

And I became so jealous of that lonely girl's time with him, jealous of the women who would come after. Jealous that no matter how badly I still wanted him, someone else had already undoubtedly taken my place, and he'd rarely, if ever, think of me again.

I'd tried to make my peace with it. I told myself we were both better off, that my arrangement with Ezra was more than I needed. It worked for a little while, and there were moments, small fragments of time when I was in the throes of meaningless sex that made me forget how badly I was hurting, how irrevocably I'd broken my own heart.

*There is no one else, Kaci.*

Cleaning up, I shut the water off, and reach for the large plush towel, wrapping it around myself tight. My palm slides over the foggy mirror to reveal the puffy skin beneath my eyes, tinged with pink.

*You're the biggest liar I've ever met,* he'd said to me right before he shut the door.

"Maybe so, Blaze," I whisper, squaring my shoulders. "But we're both lying when it comes to wanting each other."

By the time I've dressed and made quick work of my makeup, I've flushed the bulk of my pity party down and have

come back around to just plain annoyed with Blaze and myself altogether.

Straightening my spine, I step out of my bedroom to find him sitting on the couch, a cup of coffee in one hand, his phone in the other, and fully dressed in a pair of jeans and a light blue button up.

Glancing at the clock, I shake my head, mad at myself. It's nearly nine and I've missed half my morning.

I refuse him my gaze, my prime focus on the coffee pot as I walk behind him to pour a mug full, inhaling the scent of arabica before opening the fridge, grateful when I find my favorite vanilla creamer.

*Raven always thinks of everything*, I consider, watching the coffee shift from black to a mouthwatering shade of creamy tan. I'm searching for the sugar when Blaze's gruff, deep voice clears the room.

"It's in the cupboard to the right of the sink." I gulp when he makes his way toward me, not giving me time to retrieve the sugar. I remain there, trapped in his presence as the need for him swells through me as he comes to a stop next to me and pulls the container from the cupboard, placing it in front of me.

This man is a disturbance to my carefully planned out life. A violent storm that has shaken my foundation.

That's exactly how I'd describe Blaze. He blew into my life like an unexpected storm — thunder and lightning, that's gone and kicked my sanity to the curb.

He's the eye of it. That's what he is.

I want to look away, but I'm not able to move a muscle. Chained to the past that has caught up to me so quickly, making me wish for all those things I didn't think I could have.

"How did you sleep?" Those eyes watch me closely when I finally look away, find a spoon, and add in the sugar, taking a long, much needed sip from the mug and swallowing it down. The burn on my tongue is nothing compared to that on my skin when he takes a half step closer, his arm brushing against mine as he reaches behind me and produces a bottle of Tylenol. "Here. I'm sure you can use these." He holds three out for me to take.

There he goes, showing his sweet side.

I don't deserve him being nice after the way I've treated him, and yet I can't seem to get an apology to come out of my mouth.

"I slept just fine," I shrug, holding myself back from looking up at his face as I take the pills, fill up a glass of water and swallow them down. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Think we should talk about last night, Kaci."

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I pick up my mug, enter the living room to put some much-needed distance between us.

"Okay," I agree. "Fill me in on what happened with Brian and Savannah. Did they give up Travis?"

Guilt that I was unprofessional leeches onto my chest as I take a seat on the gray sectional and with all the strength I

have in me, stay where I am and look at Blaze as he sits beside me.

Agony.

It weaves through his features.

It seeps into me.

“That’s not ...” he trails off, stopping himself. The man clearly holding in a riot of emotions just like me. “You know what? That’s fine. You wasted enough of our strategy time by drinking last night. I won’t warn you again about it, Kaci.”

“You don’t have to,” I answer instead of arguing. I was in the wrong by drinking as much as I did. There’s no denying that. “It won’t happen again.”

“Good,” he says, his voice softer now. He leans forward until his elbows touch his knees. “I swiped Brian’s phone and found a video.”

“Well? What was on it?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “I’ll be taking that to my grave. Just trust me on this one, okay?”

Anguish and grief thicken the air, coming out of his pores.

So absolute that I hate whatever he saw has gotten to him. At the same time, I don’t think I could stomach to see what my mind is strumming up.

“Okay.”

“I nabbed them both, but neither gave me a damn thing, so I killed Savannah, roughed Brian up and left him to suffer. I’ll go back in a few days to see if he’ll talk and then finish him off.”

He looks at me with those dark eyes that leave no question, he'd much rather lock me up so I'm unable to be a part of this any longer. That'll happen over my dead body, just like him going back to finish. I'm going with him whether he likes it or not. I'm not all that thrilled he took it upon himself to kill Savannah either, but that's a battle that'll do me no good since I can't bring her back from the dead.

“So, what next?”

“I think you should go to the club tonight and get Travis to notice you.”

## CHAPTER NINE

*Kaci*

My hands are trembling as I apply the finishing touches to go to the club. It has nothing to do with Blaze watching and listening while I'm in there, but everything to do with how I'll be cozying up to a man I want to stab in the neck while observing the dread that will slither up his throat like a slimy snake as it closes off his ability to breathe.

Suffocating him from the inside.

I'm itching to tell him I'll see him in hell. That I'll be sure to look him up when it's my turn to die, while he sucks in wheezing deep breaths in search of air during those final few seconds of his life.

Not being able to kill him has wound me so much tighter than I have been these past few days, I'm tempted to take my weapon with me and do it anyway.

I feel naked going in there without it, and for some reason the thought of Travis touching me, versus when another mark does, has my skin wanting to fall off my bones.

Between that and the tension bounding, bouncing and swirling in the suite earlier, sparks flying all over the place until flames spread, burning me up until I excused myself, and walked until I found the shopping district, I'm a mess.

When I returned, I made a stop at the hotel spa, and when I finally stepped into the suite, I expected to find Blaze here waiting with his dictatorial instructions, but he wasn't. In his place was an earpiece, and a beautiful sterling silver onyx bracelet with a GPS tracker just in case things go south and I'm compromised. The color matches Blazes eyes, and my hands shook when I lifted it from the box and secured it around my wrist. It's the first thing he's given to me, and even though it's for work, it has meaning.

It tells me he still cares.

He'd left a note alongside them with the time for me to be ready, an explanation of the bracelet, and a file I hadn't seen before with everything there is to know about Travis.

I knew what he looked like beforehand. He's a pretty boy like Brian. The kind you'd never suspect had a prowling monster lurking just below the surface, waiting to prey on his victims before going in for the kill.

The door to the suite latches shut and Blaze's heavy footsteps make their way down the hall toward my room.

"Kaci?" he calls out in a different tone than I've ever heard from him before. It's harder, strained.

"I'm in here," I gulp, my pulse pounding so hard I can feel it thumping at the side of my neck. My eyes shift toward the door when it opens, and our gazes catch in the reflection of the



mirror before his lower to the bracelet, then down to my ass, and flit back up again. His jaw clenches as he takes in the tight, midnight blue halter dress that accentuates my curves. The front is snug across my breasts, the back dips low and the hem lands at mid-thigh.

“Are you almost ready?” He grates through clenched teeth while my body stirs in hunger, every cell shaking with want as I take in what he’s wearing.

A pair of black jeans, a light gray button-down, and scuffed black boots.

The man looks rugged and rough and predatory in a whole different way than men like Travis and Brian. Like a shark who’s just tasted blood in the waters. When he finds out where it’s coming from, he’s going to attack and kill everything in his path to get what he wants.

It’s carnal and would melt my panties off if I were wearing any.

I try to remain unaffected, but it’s impossible by the way reluctance bounces off him and bangs against my chest. I have a feeling that if Travis takes this further than Blaze is comfortable with, he’ll come out of the shadows, and all hell will break loose.

“Yes. We just need to do a soundcheck before I go inside. Otherwise, I’m all set.”

“Perfect.” His gruff voice scrapes down my spine, and as I turn to face him, he swallows. My heart is thrashing against my rib cage hard enough it starts to hurt. Or maybe the sting is coming from this awkward situation we find ourselves in.

Either way, there's this palpable dark cloud full of grief and anger, want and restraint that neither of us can deny much longer.

It's about to go boom.

Combust.

If we don't leave before it does, this man will have me on my back, legs spread, and we won't be going anywhere except straight into oblivion.

Ignoring the vibrations skidding across the space, I grab my matching clutch, and notice my stilettos nearly bring me to his eye level. I didn't wear heels like these when we were together. I couldn't afford them.

“Your table is reserved. You'll be approximately twelve feet from where Travis sits when he entertains his friends. If he happens to be with anyone, try to snap pictures of them.”

Repulsion shoots across my flesh, but I remain calm, giving the hem of my dress a tug, and without saying anything more, Blaze turns, and I follow him out of the suite.

The ride is painfully quiet, the silence between us the loudest sound. Clearly, we've come to a fork in the road.

The point where one or two possibilities must be taken.

Either we give in to the pull, the gravity drawing us together like magnets or we let one another go for good.

The rest of the way, I try not to fall further into the want that burns between us, to avoid the flames that lick at my thighs and set me on fire. I try not to think of the choice we

have to make. It's so damn hard when I've never felt more alive in my entire life than when I'm with Blaze.

He's the match that lit my spark.

The man who revived my mangled heart, and it's never beaten more strongly than when I was with him.

The blood thuds through my veins dousing out my desire when we approach the club, and Blaze pulls up to the curb. My body fills with revulsion. With loathing that skids across my skin like a disease.

"Put in your earpiece before you get out," Blaze finally speaks. His hard, unsettling tone has my head whipping his way. He looks like he wants to go on a rampage. His face is stone, emotionless. I give him a tight nod, slip my earpiece in place and open the door before he changes his mind. "I'll be out of your sight, but my eyes will be always on you. Another Keeper might be tailing Travis, and you might have on that bracelet, but I still don't want you going off alone with him, Kaci."

His words are a warning that twist up my emotions even further. While I'm relieved the equipment is working, I can't help the lust for Travis's blood that soars through my veins or the anger that Blaze thinks I'd be so dumb to put myself in such a dangerous position.

He needs to trust that seduction is my expertise.

"I won't," I reply, plastering on my perfected fake smile and sway my hips, advancing toward the entrance.

Smoothing down my dress and running my hands through my hair, I wink at the young man who checks my ID and keep

my smile in place walking past the two bouncers by the door.

The darkness of night is quickly replaced by neon and strobe lights. Round tables with high back leather chairs line the walls when I step inside, and I give myself a half a breath to take in my surroundings. Two more bouncers are by each of the side exits, and another is standing at the bottom of a set of stairs which, according to the blueprints in the file, is Travis's office.

It takes me less than thirty seconds to be escorted to the VIP section, and I'm relieved when I see it's a small, sectioned off area near the back of the establishment. While I don't intend on sitting alone for very long, things will go a lot more smoothly somewhere like this. Getting anywhere would be next to impossible in the middle of the crowded area around the bar and dancefloor where people are screaming in one another's ears to be heard over the loud drum of the bass seeping through the speakers.

"Chardonnay, please," I ask politely when the waitress approaches. She nods and I pull out cash to pay her. I don't want to start a tab in case I have to leave quickly.

When she walks away, I place my clutch at my side, using the opportunity as a diversion once my hair falls to conceal my face. "I'm at my table," I whisper, already knowing Blaze can see me through the security cameras he'd placed when he came here alone.

I feel his eyes intensely watching every move I make.

"Travis just sat down," Blaze says into my ear, his voice a deep, irritated rumble. "He's alone right now."

If he speaks much, he's going to be a distraction because it feels like those full lips of his are at the base of my ear. If I don't block him out, I'll be squirming in my seat. That'll be a problem if Travis takes it as a sign I'm turned on by him, and touches me more than the killer inside me can take.

I'll break my wine glass and slice through his jugular.

I should just do it. He's involved, and we all know it, but I never would. Raven's Oath motto exists for a reason: Live by the oath or die by the blade.

Raven doesn't issue a kill order without solid proof.

Sitting up straight against the plush velvet booth, I push my hair over my shoulder in time to thank the waitress when she sets my drink down.

"Make sure he notices you before he sets his sights on someone else."

I say nothing as I take a sip of my wine, and peer at Travis sitting in the booth next to me from the corner of my eye. Soaking the man in as he sits there on his throne like he's on top of the world. There's not a crease of worry in his expression that two of his people are missing. He's trying hard to appear like he's just casually sipping on a drink, taking in the fruits of his labor, but I know better. He's disguising his uneasiness.

I internally laugh.

Setting his drink down, he runs his fingers through dark hair, and rolls up the sleeves on his dress shirt, revealing his forearms that are covered in ink. By the time my eyes make their way to his face, my sultry smile is in place. When he

turns his head in my direction, his lips spread into a wide, cocky beam that only makes me want to carve it from his face. I don't let him see that, though. No, I let him see exactly what he wants to see.

Another unwitting victim, waiting and willing to be used in his disgusting little game of cat and mouse.

I empty the last of my wine, my eyes never wavering from his as I slide the empty glass to the edge of the table suggestively.

Travis takes the bait, lifting himself from the booth, drink in hand, and takes the few steps separating us with a confident swagger to his stride.

Bile climbs up my throat.

He reaches me at the same time as the waitress, and without breaking eye contact, motions for her to grab me another glass of wine.

He's much better looking up close. Quite insanely so that I can see how he'd stun a woman speechless.

If he only knew the woman he thinks he's about to score with is imagining him strapped down like a death row inmate while I stand above him with my lethal injection.

"Hello there." His deep voice scrapes down my spine like crushed glass, and when his lips turn upward into a look of straight seduction, accentuating his dimples, my stomach rolls. The pig already thinks he's captured his conquest. His eyes dip to my chest, taking me in as I do the same with him, and slowly he drags his eyes back up to my face. His tongue flicks out to run across his bottom lip while I sit here visualizing him

foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog once my poison hits his system. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“It’s my first time.”

“Ah.” His grin widens as he tilts his head slightly. “Well, I hope you’re enjoying the place so far. I’m Travis. And you are?”

*One of the people fucking up your circle of hell.*

“Scarlet.”

“Like the color of your lipstick?” he lifts a brow, pulling a feigned blush to my cheeks.

“Like O’Hara.” Intrigued laughter leaves him in the same breath as my flirtatious one, and he takes the glass from the waitress and presents it to me. “Or the letter.”

I rim my glass with my index finger to stop the twitchiness to jump up and dig his eyeballs out.

“Really?” Blaze whispers into my ear, and I can’t help the way more laughter that leaves my lips.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Travis’ eyes dart to the seat across from me, and I hold in the nauseating shudder vibrating beneath my skin.

“I would love that.”

He slings himself back against the booth casually and drapes an arm over the back. His tall body takes up a large amount of space that would be impressive if he wasn’t such a despicable monster.

A tainted human who breaks precious things.

We make our way through the stage of deeper introductions. I tell him a story about recently passing the bar exam in nursing and moving here from the other side of the state to take a job at Detroit General. I make sure to carry on about how impressed I am over his club when he tells me he's the owner.

As the evening progresses, I notice how he's constantly tapping his fingers on the table, twirling his tumbler, and rubbing his thumb over the silver ring on his index finger.

All clear indications he's on edge.

It isn't long until he's shifting closer to me, and the four drinks he's downed clearly begin to take some effect. I sip from mine carefully, ignoring the increased heavy breathing of anger in my ear the cozier I find myself with Travis. I suspect they will only get worse from here on out.

"Dance with me?" Travis runs his finger down my arm, his touch chilling me to the bone, turning my blood to ice.

I have another visual of him taking that finger to poke and prod women, shattering them into a million pieces.

Destroying them.

Breaking them.

"I'd love to." I down the rest of my wine, the need to get out of here, to erase his touch so overwhelming that my eyes shoot to the closest exit.

Taking my proffered hand, he leads me to the dance floor, and with a quick spin, one that highlights the way the short and flowy fabric of my dress skims high on my thighs, he pulls



me close enough to graze his lips across mine, and his hands slip down to tease the swell of my ass.

I feel like I could vomit, but I continue to play my role. The actress who can charm this snake the same way he's trying to put a trance on me. The same way he no doubt does his victims.

He might be good at it, but I'm fucking better.

My hips begin to move to the slow sensual beat of the music, his following my lead, and I hold in my shiver of disgust, letting it coil around my insides when he presses his hard cock against me. My palms fall flat against his chest, my fingers slowly skimming the edge of his opened collar, tracing the thick gold chain nestled in the hair.

Growling sounds hit my ear, and I stare up at Travis, pretending it's Blaze I'm with instead.

"You're so damn beautiful." His green eyes glimmer under the lights with the need to kiss me, and I honestly think if he does, I might bite his tongue off.

"I'm going to mutilate that motherfucker." Cold rage bleeds out of Blaze's gravelly voice. "You're laying it on pretty thick, kitten. Don't you think?"

I find his words conflicting.

The use of the pet name he'd given me when we were together sends heat into my cheeks, Travis mistaking their pink tinge for something else altogether. To the contrary, I nearly tell Blaze to shut the hell up, but I choke down the words, forcing myself closer knowing it's ticking Blaze off all the more. He's going to think I'm doing this on purpose.

Maybe a part of me is. Maybe a part of me wants to play with him, too.

“Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.”

His knee brushes the inside of my thigh where I usually keep my weapon, making me thankful I don’t have it. My cover would be blown without question.

I twirl, playing coy as I glance at Travis over my shoulder, my hand lifting to caress the back of his neck as his dirty hands flatten against my hips, slowly moving lower until he palms and kneads the cheeks of my ass.

Blaze starts cursing up a storm.

“Mmm,” I hum, then release a low giggle as I stumble forward to get his nauseating hands off my skin. “You keep that up and we’ll be leaving.”

The unrelenting need to elbow him in the gut, grip his pathetic dick and give it a good hard twist until he’s on the floor has me clenching the fabric of his shirt in my fists.

My heart pounds faster as I focus on the growls, the swearing, and the threats in my ear when his hands make their way up my outer thigh, tracing the hem of my dress. The song comes to an end and shifts to something faster. When I excuse myself to use the bathroom, one of the bouncer’s approaches, and I have to stifle a sigh of relief.

“Excuse me, boss. I hate to interrupt.”

“Then why the fuck are you?” Travis hisses, the sudden shift in his demeanor giving me a little more insight into who truly lies underneath. They exchange a few words I’m unable

to catch no matter how hard I try. “Carl, I’m with someone. Can you handle it?”

“I’m sorry, sir.” He shakes his head, and Travis’ jaw goes rigid as Carl’s voice lowers. “That wouldn’t be wise. I don’t know how to tend bar.”

A deep, rough chuckle blasts in my ear, and I choke down my own laugh knowing Travis is being called away to help his employees because Brian has seemingly vanished into thin air.

By the time Travis faces me again, all traces of his true self are long gone. The man is looking at me just as seductively as he has been. Like he wants to get to know me, like he really wants to fuck my brains out. Like I could be different from all the rest of the women I’m sure he’s sent to live in a void of nothingness, robbing them of a life with happiness to live one of fear.

Sending Carl to retrieve my clutch, he faces me, eyes filled with apology, disappointment, and a whole host of other bullshit emotions he wants me to think he’s capable of.

“I have to go take care of something.” He pulls out a business card and hands it to me.

“Will you be long?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m leaving for a business trip tomorrow. If all goes well, I’ll return Tuesday. If you’re free?” He pauses and raises a hand to brush his fingers over the edge of my jaw, dragging his thumb over my lower lip as he wraps his free arm around my waist, yanking me into him. “I’d like to take you to dinner, maybe pick up where we left off.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“It will be.” His eyes gesture to the card in my hand. “You’ve got my cell number. Text me yours and I’ll make the arrangements and get back with you on the time.” Before I can stop him, he crushes my mouth to his. My lips part in shock, my gag reflexes silently scream, as his tongue delves hungrily into my mouth. “Sweet dreams, Scarlet.”

As he walks away, I hear the echo of Blaze’s possessive growl and his fist destroying whatever is in front of him.

## CHAPTER TEN

*Blaze*

“Keep it up, Kaci,” I dare her as I slam the door to our suite shut, my words rolling out in a rough challenge where they left off when we pulled into the parking lot of the hotel. “Keep pushing my buttons.”

She huffs out a breath, makes a beeline for the kitchenette and my eyes rake over the way her dress molds to the perfect curves of her hips and ass. When I first saw what she was wearing, I wanted to shove it to her waist, slam her against the wall, and fuck her sweet little pussy. Now, I want to burn it right along with the man who fucking touched her.

The fact she went and let him only adds more fuel to the fire erupting inside me.

I’d been on edge all day wondering how she’d draw Travis in. It doesn’t matter that it’s her job. It doesn’t matter that I know Kaci well enough to know she didn’t want his grubby hands on her any more than I did. I knew watching was going to toss me into a turmoil.

A dark pit I’m not used to.

Rip me to shreds.

Don't know any man who would enjoy that shit, and fuck all if it's something I'll ever get used to.

We've been arguing the entire drive about her little performance. Screaming and yelling like a couple of kids, neither hearing a word the other said. By the time she made it back out of that club, I was beyond livid. All I could see while she was grinding her tight little ass into Travis's cock was red and it still hasn't completely lifted.

I was so enraged, I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to maintain control. I wanted to pulverize his face with my fists. I wanted to scoop his eyeballs out for looking at her the way he was. I wanted to rip the arms he had wrapped around her body from his torso and beat him to death with them.

Somehow, I accomplished to stay out of sight, but it wasn't until Travis fucking kissed her that parts of me completely disengaged.

Now, I just want to blister her ass. Blow his fucking hands off and cut out his tongue.

I'll deal with him once I have him in my grasp, but Kaci and I are dealing with the issue we've been dancing around. We're putting an end to this finger pointing and blame placing bullshit tonight.

We've weaved a web of emotional anguish neither of us have had the nerve to resolve since we came back into each other's lives.

We're both swimming in agony right now.

Anger and heartache.

Emotions bubble to the surface, and I've had enough.

"I was doing my job, Blaze." She spins around to glare at me, amusement behind the smile I'm about to wipe off her pretty face with my mouth. "If you don't like my methods, feel free to call Raven. I'm sure someone else won't mind taking your place."

No, fuck that.

Neither of us are going anywhere until this job is finished.

Until we get a few things straight.

Until I get the one answer to the question that has been nagging me for five years and finally take back what has always been mine.

"You sure as hell wouldn't find this situation funny if the roles were reversed. How would you like it if another woman had her hands all over me?" Her body jolts at the truth of my words, anger vibrating under her skin. I'd smirk over that if both our hearts weren't on the line. I yank one of the chairs from the table, drag it across the floor until it's directly in front of her, and facing me. "Sit."

"I think I'll stand," she counters, crossing her arms over her chest. My palm spasms at her insubordination. She's bound and determined to get that spanking she practically purred for the other night. I'll give it to her when I see fit.

"And I think you're in no position to argue with me right now, Kaci."

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She tilts her head. “I went into that club, and I did exactly what I was supposed to do.”

“No. No, what you were supposed to do was get him to notice you. Not let him put his hands all over you and shove his tongue down your fucking throat. You opened yourself up like an invitation to be fucked.”

Her face turns red, and I brace myself for the bitter bite of her hand. She doesn't disappoint. Within a blink of an eye, she slaps me hard across the cheek. My head jerks to the side, the ugly sound bouncing off the walls.

I deserved that. She knows that and so do I, but if she doesn't do as she's told and sit her ass down, I'll have her over my knee. I'll alternate between finger fucking her and shading those globe's cherry red. She'll beg to come, but I'll be damned if I let her.

Based on the way she glances at my twitchy hand, she's aware of that, too.

“How dare you speak to me like that. If you think I enjoy being touched by men like him, then you obviously don't know anything about me. Besides, you're full of shit anyway. We both know this little tantrum of yours has nothing to do with this job,” she shakes her head. “You were jealous, plain and simple. Why don't you just admit that's what this is really about.”

“You're damned right I was. I fucking hated it, Kaci,” I confess, pointing toward the chair she's still ignoring. “And I know this is your job, that you don't want men like that all over you. You're damned good at what you do. I'll give you



that, but that doesn't mean I have to fucking like it and that's not what this is about. It's the unfinished business between me and you. You've been avoiding this conversation since we got here, but enough is enough. I'm going to speak my mind and you're going to listen whether you like it or not. Now for the last time, get your ass in the chair or I'll do it for you."

She bites down on her bottom lip, the movement shooting directly through my body, making my dick punch against my jeans. It aches to feel that tongue licking up its shaft, to have her wrap her lips around me with the same hungry lust she used to.

She continues to defy me, and whatever is left of my patience flies out the fucking window. Her breathing hitches when I grip her by the hips and plant her in the chair, wedging myself between her legs, and placing my hands to the back of the wooden arms, caging her in.

Those blue eyes flick over my face, begging and pleading to ease the ache I know damn well is swelling between her thighs. I struggle like a goddamned lunatic not to do just that. To drop to my knees, spread her wide, inhale her arousal, and feast on her pussy.

That'll come soon enough.

First, we're getting our shit straight.

"You've been unpleasant, rude, downright fucking shitty to me. I don't deserve that, Kaci. I didn't deserve you running away the way you did without so much as a word or a reason why, either. I'm owed an explanation and by God, you're giving it to me right fucking now."

Regret creases her forehead, her body going stiff as a statue. All at once, I see her shed that hard exterior she wears as a cover for her job, replacing it with the submissive woman I saw the day I met her.

I didn't fall for Kaci only because of that.

It was the protective side of her when it came to Tara. The one who sacrificed herself to save her. The one who wanted to be a mother and who didn't give two fucks that I had money. There are a million reasons why this woman staked a claim over my heart, but the soft, broken eyes looking back at me now? They were the first thing I fell for.

"I was scared," she whispers. Her confession is like a punch to my chest. It kills me to think she was afraid of me when I treated her the way she should be. Like she fucking mattered. Like she was more than some broken down woman who worked her way out of the gutter. "Not of *you*."

Her blue eyes lower and the dominant in me wants to demand her gaze. Instead, I exhale some of my pent-up frustration, and hook a finger under her chin.

Misery and five years of suffering bleed from her.

So much hurt.

Hers and mine, it circles around us.

I want to erase it as badly as I do that slime ball's touch.

"I don't understand, Kaci."

"I know. It's just ..." she swallows, nerves scattering all over the place. "I know all you wanted was me." Those words are the most honest ones that have come out of her mouth

since seeing her again, because they are the truth. I would have given up everything to be with her. “I wasn’t the girl you needed me to be back then, Blaze. Yes, we were making headway with my past, with my trust issues, but no matter how hard I tried, how hard we both did, I couldn’t give you what you wanted. What I knew you deserved. I couldn’t trust you because I didn’t trust myself. How could I let you give yourself to me when I didn’t even know who I was?” she shrugs, eyes swimming in unshed tears. “I’m so sorry. You have no idea how much I’ve regretted the way I left things with us, Blaze,” she admits, and I swallow hard. “I know I broke your heart.” Her eyes drop as she takes my hand in hers, squeezing it gently before she returns her gaze to mine. “I know that because I broke mine, too.”

Her past claws at my insides, her admission tightens my stomach into a fist of guilt. I should have seen the signs. Maybe I was blinded by my love for her, by all the things I wanted to give her that I didn’t see how damaged she still was the way Raven did.

If I were in my right frame of mind, I would go straight to my room to give us time to think, but I’m not. Even if I did walk away, it wouldn’t change the way I feel. Wouldn’t change the way she does, either.

Kaci is still as in love with me as I am with her.

We’ll deal with the rest of it later, but there will be no regrets when we wake.

I won’t allow it.

Consequences be damned, I’m taking back what’s mine.

Her attention flits over my face again, jumping from my eyes to my mouth. That connection between us fires off like a livewire. Sparks of electricity zap the air and hit me in the chest, and I come undone when she squirms.

Five years of anguish over wanting someone I never thought I'd have again rages a fire inside me. That's the shit that charged through my skull today instead of concentrating on something happening to Kaci. That I'd lose focus and that dirty fuck would take her. It was why I went and bought that bracelet.

"I'm done playing games, Kaci." A gasp falls out of her lush mouth, her hands slide up my chest, clinging to my shoulders when I cinch my hands around her slender waist and guide her to her feet. I pull her flush, rolling my hips so she can feel my intentions. A needy whimper slips from her chest. "If you don't want me, you have to tell me. Just say the word. Tell me to stop and I will."

"I have never stopped wanting you."

That's all it takes for me to pounce.

One hand slides into her hair and the other wraps around her throat. My mouth crashes to hers in a kiss so violent our tongues twist with uncontrollable desperation. It's a punishing kiss, a battle she will never win.

I swipe every inch of her mouth, snag her tongue with my teeth, and nip.

I devour her.

Lapping and licking and taking.

She moans, her hands sliding down to grip hold of my ass. My already hard cock turns painful when I palm the cheeks of her ass to find she isn't wearing any panties.

Son of a bitch. She is not going out in a dress with nothing underneath again. That will not be up for discussion.

My tongue continues plundering hers as I lift her, setting her roughly onto the table. Her legs fall apart to give me room, her back arches as her tits press to my chest.

“Hike your dress,” I command, dragging a mewl of anticipation from her throat. I run a hand down her stomach, until I'm cupping her slick wet pussy.

“I want you so fucking bad, Kaci,” I grumble, voice scraping against the gravity that bangs between us, trembling under my feet. “Do you have any idea how much I've thought of you?” I push two fingers deep into her. She's so wet that I inhale, my lungs filling with her delicious scent. “How much I've craved you?”

Thrusting my fingers, I fuck the hell out of her as my lips hover against her mouth. She whimpers and gasps. Her legs tremble at my sides.

“As many times as I did you, I hope.”

My heart kicks in my chest at her whimpered confession. When her head falls back, her eyes squeezing shut, I pull my hand away, giving the inside of her thigh a sharp pinch.

“Look at me.” She does as she's told, and it wrenches a low rumble of satisfaction deep inside me. “You want my cock, baby?” Her head nods frantically, and her hands fly up to fist

in my hair when I dip down to bite a nipple through the fabric of her dress. “Use your words, kitten.”

“Yes.”

A low groan leaves me.

“Fuck my fingers. Take what you need. What only I can give you.”

Flames leap in between us.

Singeing and scorching my skin.

I want to worship every inch of her, taste her. Her pussy is so wet, so warm, so fucking perfect.

“Oh, my God.” Her words come out broken and ragged. I brush my thumb over her clit, and just like that, she falls apart. “Please,” she begs, her lips parting eyes wild with lust. “Blaze, please.”

Spasms start rocking through the nerves of her pussy, her pleasure under my control.

It’s agonizingly beautiful to watch.

“That’s it, Kaci. Come for me.”

Her fingers tighten around the hair at the nape of my neck, a scream of pleasure ripping through her. My name leaves her mouth like a plea, a prayer even, and I inhale it, delving into the warm well of her mouth.

Flesh stroking flesh.

As I swallow her moans, all the wicked things I want to do to her flood my mind.

Primal.

Filthy.

I pull my fingers from her, giving her pussy a sharp smack that has her writhing, and I raise my fingers to my mouth. The taste of her on my tongue damn near has me groaning as I shuck through the button and zipper on my jeans.

“Please,” she continues to beg, body sagging forward, her mouth kissing my throat as pleasure burns pleasantly across my flesh.

When I free myself, her eyes drop to watch as I stroke my cock. I’m so hard my balls are pulling tight.

I rub against her, running the tip of my dick through her folds, and I nudge in an inch, edging my body back a fraction, intent on watching my cock disappear into her pussy.

I slam into her hard.

Fingers of one hand dig into my shoulders while the other grips onto the table edge for dear life. She’d be wise to hang on tight because I’m about to fuck here senseless.

“Yes, baby,” I hiss, lust sending waves of dizziness to my head as her walls grip me in a needy clutch.

I take what’s mine. Jutting and fucking and taking as good as I’m getting.

My cock drives so deep inside her tight, wet, greedy pussy, that her heels dig into skin as she winds her legs around me like a vice, refusing to let go. Her breath leaves her in huffs, each one flowing over my skin as I thrust into her over and over.

“Give me what I want,” I growl, fisting her hair, pulling it tight until her back arches, her body strung taut in my hands. Those eyes I’ve endlessly craved stare up at me, desperate.

“Blaze,” she cries out, and hearing my name while I’m buried inside her has me snapping. I reach up and rip the dress right down the middle, her breasts spilling free, nipples just begging for my mouth.

Sweat trickles down one side of my face. I didn’t think I could pound into her any harder, but when she licks it from my skin, my hips piston at a punishing pace until the only thing I hear is the sound of smacking skin, my grunts, and her moans.

Flicking the soft lobe of her ear with my tongue, I snare it between my teeth. It only makes her shiver, those moans louder.

“Mine,” I growl. She doesn’t argue. Instead, she locks her gaze with mine, teeth biting hard into her lower lip as she teeters on the edge once more. “I owned you the day we met, and I own you now.”

I grip her throat, hot waves pulse through my body. Her hand lifts from the table and she wraps her fingers around my wrists, that submissive streak in her showing itself all over again. I roar deep at the gesture and pure heat lights up behind her blue eyes.

“Look me in the eye, kitten. Scream for the one who owns you.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Kaci*

The barest rays of morning light greet me when I wake. My head rests on Blaze's warm, smooth chest, my arm wrapped around his stomach, our legs tangled beneath the sheet. His breaths are even and deep, and I angle my head slightly so I can peer up at his face to make sure I'm not dreaming. That last night really happened.

But I don't have to look at him to know it was real. The ache between my legs is enough.

Blaze consumed me.

Reclaimed and rebranded.

Erasing all traces of Travis, and that distance between me and him.

Bringing me completely back to life.

Another revival I never saw coming, one that's changed my life in a matter of days.

Last night, Blaze owned me, plain and simple.

Slayed me and made me remember what it was like to be his.

He'd taken me again on the couch before he brought me to bed and fucked me gently, commanding my body yet giving me pleasure beyond belief. I'd never felt so sated, so exquisitely used. As I drifted to sleep, my body and mind completely captivated, he pulled me to his chest and wrapped himself around me.

I felt protected, cherished.

Of course, we still have things to discuss, but the only thing that matters now is the indescribable feeling coursing through my veins. The fact that Blaze claimed me, and without a shadow of a doubt, he won't ever let me go again.

I don't want him to.

I shift, careful not to wake him as I reluctantly force myself from the warmth of his skin to tend to my bladder. I don't know why at this very moment, my history with Ezra comes to mind. I'm not even sure if the two of them know one another. Just in case they do, however, I'm going to keep what happened between Ezra and me tucked inside.

If by chance he and Ezra are friends, me telling Blaze about the arrangement we used to have would only complicate things. Things with us were never emotional or serious. We were merely scratching an itch, fulfilling a carnal need, nothing more. I would never lie to Blaze if it were to come up some day, but until that day comes, the last thing I want is to take focus from what's happening between the two of us now.

Blaze is still very possessive. I knew that all along and if I had needed a reminder, the proof was in the way he acted last night. The way I knew he would. Besides that, there's just some things a person needs to keep to themselves, and to me, this is one of them. It's not much different than whatever he's keeping from me regarding him and Raven. I have this feeling Blaze knows Raven's story and prying is wrong on my end when Raven, too, has kept the lid closed.

I have to respect that, and I do.

"Where do you think you're going?" he murmurs, his voice deep, raspy, still thick with sleep. The sound of it has me curling my toes into the carpet.

I don't have time to answer before his wide palm bands around my stomach and tugs me back until I'm draped across his chest.

His eyes drag down my body, scorching my skin, and the air between us ripples with illicit promises.

Blaze is about to devour me.

Dominate.

I instantly become wet.

"You have exactly five minutes and then I expect you to have your ass back in this bed with me," he says, words a growl.

Tremors rush through my body, and my pulse flutters out of control. I scramble into the bathroom, flick on the light and relieve myself. Finishing, I wash my hands, dampen a cloth under warm water to cleanse away the remnants of makeup from last night.

“You good with me in here for a minute?” Flames tumble down my spine, and my mouth waters when he comes up behind me, presses his front to my back, and sets his hands on the sides of my waist. His body dips low enough that his black boxer briefs brush against my ass, his hard cock pressing into me.

A taunt.

A tease.

A promise.

“Of course,” I mutter, my voice surprisingly steady, and I hold in my needy whine when he kisses the back of my head, sets a toothbrush on the counter, and heads to the private toilet.

My thighs tremble, pussy throbbing as I reach for my toothbrush and paste. I’m in no better shape when he makes his way back out, washes his hands, brushes his teeth, eyes darting back to watch me.

“Fuck,” Blaze grunts, spitting into the sink and wiping his mouth in the hand towel. “Hurry up, kitten.” His lips graze my shoulder, and then the man leaves me standing there in a puddle of desire.

I’m burning alive with want when I step back into the bedroom to find him sprawled out across the bed, his impressive frame leaning against the headboard, his hands clasped behind his neck, muscles in his biceps bulging.

“Come here, Kaci.” His voice is soft, not demanding like I expected it to be. My knees wobble, the floor shaking beneath my feet when I walk toward him, and the second I’m within his reach, he tugs me on top of him, my legs straddling his

waist, our mouths barely an inch apart. Those dark eyes full of lust, but there's something else in them, too. Something he lets me see clearly. The same thing I thought of minutes ago. To cleanse the air between us. To discuss things. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too. So much." My admission comes without hesitation, my heart beating hard. My body still scorching, sizzling with anticipation.

His arms tighten around me, palms going to my ass, the movement has me wanting to rub against his thick erection.

"You're different, harsher in the spots you need to be, yet just as soft and caring in others. You slayed those demons, didn't you?"

I swallow, nerves rattling in a different way than years before. "I did. Although, it took some time."

*I watched all of them burn, I think to myself. Set them on fire and then danced around the flames.*

I close my eyes, trying not to cry. To not ruin this moment of truth. To not let my mind take over and shut down my heated and fevered body or remember the nights I'd wake in a cold damp sweat after a nightmare. The many times I'd scream Blaze's name out into the dark. Just as many as I wished I didn't break us the way I did.

"Look at me," he says quietly, and I comply. One hand raises to brush the hair from my face and cup my cheek. "I'm proud of you. I know that couldn't have been easy for you to face alone."

It wasn't easy.

It was lonely.

Agony.

“Living with that, and knowing I broke your heart. That I failed you, lied to you, and left you the way I did was pure and utter hell. I had to become someone new. I knew that, but the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you in the process. I’m so sorry, Blaze.”

“I know that now,” he assures me. “You might have needed to find yourself, but your heart is still the same. You’ve hidden the beautiful thing for years. Don’t guard it anymore, Kaci. Let me hold it, nurture it, take care of it. I know how it works, how it feels, what it wants in ways nobody else ever will.”

I’ve known all along he’s right. Except for Tara, the part of me I’ve always shielded from the world, even from myself, was something I’d only ever shared with Blaze.

No amount of time would ever take that away.

I relax against him, my nose in his neck, breathing him in. I’m not the least bit surprised when he wraps his arms around me, crushing me against the hard planes of his chest.

He allows me less than a minute to stay that way, then one of his palms splay wide, gliding up my spine, and into my hair. He takes hold of a fistful and lifts my head up until my neck is bent back.

My breath catches in my throat at what I see in his eyes. An inferno of longing and lust, of fantasies and pleasure.

I shiver knowing he’s about to take control.

To let me finally please him.

Desire scalds my blood. Singes my skin.

“Blaze.” His name comes out on a breathy plea.

“I’ve forgiven you, Kaci. We don’t need to discuss it again. Do us both a favor and never look back at that time.” I don’t deserve his forgiveness, but I’m taking it anyway. “You’re here with me now. After last night, you’re mine, and that’s all that fucking matters. You’re all I fucking care about. Now, say it,” he demands. Those eyes darken, reminding me of the bracelet I haven’t taken off and don’t intend to. “Say what I want to hear. What I need to hear.”

The words float easily, happily from the spot I shoved them in. Words that I once told myself if I were ever to be lucky enough to find myself back in Blaze’s arms again, they’d slip from my tongue without reluctance. There’d be no one from my past haunting me, tormenting me, making me deny him. Mostly, their meaning would chain us together so completely, nothing and no one would be able to break us again.

Not even me.

“I trust you, Blaze. I’m yours.”

The words have barely left my lips before he has me flipped onto my back, hovering over me, staring so deeply into my eyes I feel him in my soul.

The soul I’d once imprisoned but is now freed.

His mouth is on me then, and I trace his lips with my tongue, seeking entry. He growls, his tongue raiding my mouth, devouring me with raw and primal lashes. Our teeth clash together, and when I reach up to grip his shoulders, he grinds his erection against my slit, kissing me harder.

He kisses me as if his life depends on it, as if he's been revived, too. I've no doubt he has because it's true. Blaze loved me fiercely back then. He would have given me the world. I know with just the telling of this kiss, I'm still the blood in his veins, the air in his lungs the same as he is in mine.

I gasp when he stops kissing me, but I moan when he runs his lips along my jaw and up to my ear.

"We'll go slow," he whispers, and I want to tell him I don't want slow. I want him to dominate as he pleases. That I'll get on my knees and worship him if that's what he wants. But I'm not in control, it belongs to him. "Do you remember the rules?" he asks, pulling a whimper of confirmation from my mouth as he assaults my neck with his lips.

He shakes his head, and his hand clamps around my throat lightly to hold me in place.

"A whimper is not an answer, kitten. It's part of your pleasure. When I ask a question, you verbally answer. You might trust me now, but I need you to speak. I need to be sure you remember. Am I understood?" His eyes stare into mine with ownership. With need and greed that seizes the sexual power Blaze has over me a little bit more. "Do I have your consent?"

That was the thing about him back then, and it'll always be. He robbed me of my senses, of my thoughts, rendering me speechless when he touched me. When we were skin to skin.

The same thing is happening now as he stands to shove his boxer briefs down, steps out of them and begins stroking his cock.



I hum in desire at the sight. In urgency to take him into my mouth.

“Yes, Sir.” A low, animalistic groan of approval rips from his chest, and I love that my compliance has the sound echoing around the room, but I want his touch. To finally show me what’s it’s like to be on the edge of oblivion, only to be pulled back when he decides.

“And your safe word?”

“It’s red.”

“Red what, kitten?” His brows raise, and he climbs back onto the bed, his hand going right back to my throat, squeezing tighter. “How do you address me, Kaci?”

“My safe word is red, Sir.”

“Good girl.” He praises as his free hand gathers both my wrists to raise them above my head. “Don’t move those hands until I tell you or I’ll put you on all fours, tie them behind your back, and paint that sweet tempting ass red for disobeying me. Tell me you’ll do as your told.”

“I will, Sir.” The words come out on a raspy pant of desperation erupting from my lungs, and when he chuckles, the sound grazing over my skin like a rough caress, the brazen woman in me once to make an appearance because my hands want to touch him everywhere.

To reacquaint.

His tongue matches his name when he licks down my neck in a slow tortuous path, nibbling and sucking at my flesh until his lips close over my nipple.

A mewl flies out of my mouth, and I clasp my hands together to stop myself from snapping them into his hair.

He sucks and licks and bites me until I'm squirming and panting beneath him, my body arching toward his.

Just when I feel an orgasm building, he moves to my other breast, and scrapes his teeth over my nipple, biting hard, and causing pleasurable pain to erupt through my body.

He lets go of my throat and breast, pushes to his knees, those big hands hitting my thighs to spread me wide, and before I release my next breath, his palms slide under me to grip the cheeks of my ass, and he lifts my lower body to his delicious mouth.

He licks from the root of my ass to my clit. "This body and that smart ass mouth made me so hard these past few days."

"Holy fuck," I shout as his lips wrap around my clit, and suck before he shoves his tongue deep into my body.

"If you want to come, you'll keep that mouth shut until I tell you to speak. If you don't behave like a good girl, I'll spend hours feasting on this sweet pussy, denying you, kitten. Just keep bringing you to the brink until you beg for it."

I'll bite my tongue till I taste blood if I have to, and both of us know it.

He eats me ruthlessly. Lapping and licking my juices, fucking me with his tongue until I'm grinding myself in his face. Until wetness is leaking down the crack of my ass, and the grunts and groans he's making have me curling my hands into fists, my nails scoring into my palms.

My eyes roll back in my head, and I squeeze them closed. My inner muscles contract around his tongue, and I have no idea how to stop myself from coming, but somehow, I gather the strength to do so while he continues assault my pussy as if he can't get enough of me.

“Blaze, please. I can't hold it much longer.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize it. He growls in response, and the vibration against my clit sends me over the edge.

“Open your eyes,” he orders, placing my bottom back on the bed. I do as I'm told expecting to see my failure to comply by the rules in his eyes. Instead, they tell me we'll work on them, and then he raises one of my legs, places it against his chest, lines his cock to my entrance, and buries himself balls deep with enough force to pull a gasp from my quivering chest. “Keep them open, kitten,” he grits out, and angles our bodies just enough for his hand to crack down on my ass. “I let you get away with breaking a rule when you told me you remembered. Remind me of what you're supposed to do when my mouth, my fingers, my cock are inside your tight fucking cunt?”

“Look you in the eye.”

“That's right. Don't fucking forget again.” He holds my gaze as he spanks me again.

Sweet agony hits my clit, and I moan.

He spanks me repeatedly then, the sound of his palm meeting my ass a reminder of yet another rule forgotten. I know, too, that he's taking my smart mouth out on my ass. And that's okay because I've never been wetter, more eager, more alight with pleasurable pain in my life.

I've never been spanked before. Maybe a slap here or there, but nothing like this.

I love it.

I crave it.

I want more of it.

Every smack has my teeth slamming together, my hips rolling, begging for him to fuck me harder.

My ass might be on fire, but my body is in tune with this punishment. It's losing control again. My orgasm right on the precipice, and I struggle to breathe around it.

"Are you ready to give me what I want?"

"Yes, Sir. Please."

"Good girl, kitten," he breathes, his hot breath scorching into my flesh as he pulls out to the tip and slams back into me.

"Come for me, Kaci."

My back bows, my lip's part, and I drink in the sight of him plowing into me. I'm mesmerized by the ink flowing over his taut muscles as his big body pins me down, and he fucks me with deep measured strokes and quick snaps of his hips. He roots deep before slamming himself back and rocking into me with a relentless pace that has me whimpering, relinquishing completely.

He fucks me into a chaotic frenzy. Hips bashing against hips, and when his warmth spills inside of me, it's with a deep, shaky breath, then a hoarse whisper of my name into my ear.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Blaze*

Kaci and I tuck away our conscience to make room for the killers inside, the dark energy stirring through the confined space. It's so potent, it doesn't take long for the assassin in me to roar to life.

Give or take about twenty minutes and the dusky sky will match what lies in our souls.

Pure fucking blackness.

Bitter and bloodthirsty.

Working together to snuff out another dark stained inkblot that would have slipped through the cracks of justice.

It's a stirring inside me I'm used to when the time comes to take another's life. Not so much when it comes to Kaci, though.

I'm still struggling to wrap my mind around the thought that, same as me, she's a highly trained, heartless murderer. No matter how you look at it, that's who we are.

We straight up fucking take lives.

You have to turn your heart inside out, become someone else, to take someone's last breath. Even though I know she's taken countless lives, I'm trying so damn hard not to compare the woman she used to be to the one she is now.

I also know her well enough to know she also doesn't slaughter a person as brutally and gruesomely as I do. Even if she hadn't told me her methods, I would know she doesn't beat someone until their flesh is hanging off their bones. She doesn't torture, she doesn't draw more than a dot of blood.

Her victims don't have a chance to spew shit out of their mouth, to goad her the way they do me. Even though Brian won't touch her, even though he's going to die, he's going to be all over her just to get me to kill him faster.

I know his kind.

What a difference a day makes, though. After last night, I thought maybe Kaci would wake and her mind would catch up to her body and bring out the rebellious streak she grew, but the way she submitted to me so easily made me realize a few things about her. Surprisingly, she still knew all the basic rules, still understood what our relationship would be moving forward. Of course, proper submissive training is still needed, but since that's not a possibility right now, we'll have to improvise. Take things slow and not delve as deep into it as we will once this job is done and behind us.

The other is something I noticed when I joined her to soak in the tub after filling in Raven on Kaci and Travis. It's the way she looks at me now. Like she's finally found her way home.

That makes two of us.

It's almost impossible to grasp that only a few short weeks ago, I was still wondering if I'd ever see her again, hear her laughter, smell her sweet scent. The thought of us reconciling wasn't even on my radar because she was nowhere to be found.

Now, she's sitting right next to me, the ache of having me inside her likely still throbbing between her legs as we set out to rid the world of another maniac.

When you put it like that, it simply doesn't seem real.

"Once this job is done, I'd like to arrange for a few days off to show you my house," I murmur, not bothering to tell her I don't ask for time off like everyone else, I tell Raven I'm taking it. That, amongst a few other things, was one of the deals we made when I donated money to The Oath. I reach across the console, take hold of her hand and twine our fingers together.

Between her days off from work and me being away on assignments for The Oath, I never had the chance to show her before.

"I'd like that. I own a cabin in Northern Michigan. I think you'd love it up there. It's -" Her phone pings from where she has it resting on her lap, cutting her off.

Her shoulders slouch forward, and I instantly tense, worried there might be an issue with Tara. When she told me about the guy Tara is dating while we were in the tub, I checked him out. He's as legit as they come. A good one for her sister. When I told Kaci, she figured as much. Both of us agreed that as long as he continues treating her right and doesn't pry into our lives, then there won't be any issues.

“Who is it?” I ask, eyeing her for a clue.

“It’s Travis.” She types something out quickly before dropping the phone back into her bag and shifting to face me. “He canceled.”

“Did he say why?”

I already know why. He’s freaking the fuck out. Covering his tracks and ridding himself of every piece of evidence he can while he’s in Vegas at some huge car auction. Probably buying an expensive classic using the money he makes by his despicable acts.

The tail Raven has on him said Travis is all business. Behaving so professionally, no one would guess beneath the surface, he’s the son of Satan himself.

I’d almost guarantee he’s already had Allison killed. He sure didn’t do it, the coward. His tail said he went straight home after the bar closed last night. It cements my thoughts that just like Brian, Travis’s death won’t be an easy one. It’ll be so much worse than he can ever imagine. It’s the only thing that gives me a little bit of peace.

“He just said something came up.” Her brows bunch. That mind of hers is spinning, turning the text into a million different realities, same as me.

We’re trained to think of every possibility imaginable so that when the time comes, the only surprise is for our victim realizing they’ve just met their end. Which is why I almost answer her question before she has enough time to ask it.

“You don’t think I’ve been compromised, do you?”



“Absolutely not.” My words hurl out of my lungs more demanding than I meant, but my protective side when it comes to her is on high alert. It will be until this job is finished. “You know the reason he had to leave you in a rush. Hell, you saw on the feed this morning, Kaci.”

We both laughed watching Travis help behind the bar last night. The sadistic bastard wasn't enjoying himself. He was flustered as fuck. Other than that, those feeds have given me nothing. I don't expect them to, either now that two of Travis's people have disappeared.

I have an idea that might be able to lead us to where those videos were recorded. Something that will give us solid proof that Travis is neck deep in this shit. I don't like it. I hate it, because it puts Kaci at risk. Right now, though, she and I are going to try one more time to get Brian to talk. If he does, then she won't be going anywhere near the piece of shit without me by her side.

“You're right.” Her eyes gleam, and the devious smile that spreads across her red-stained lips has my dick hardening at the sight. I slow the vehicle, turn into the drive of Raven's house and press the remote to open the garage, pulling inside and staying put until the garage door is lowered back down.

“I know I am, kitten, but you? You're wrong about what's going to happen once we step inside this house.” The flash of defiance in her eyes has my cock throbbing in response. My palm instantly twitches to see how red it can make the cheeks of her perfect round ass if she plans on doing what is so clearly written on her face. She won't fucking enjoy it the way she did

earlier. I can promise her that. “Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no. We stick to the plan, Kaci.”

She leans over the console, takes hold of my hand, and pats it in a show of pity. “Brian didn’t crack for you. Maybe if I try, we’ll have better luck getting what we need out of him.”

“You’re getting pretty cocky over there,” I warn, though my amusement can’t be completely hidden. Not from her. “You might want to tamp that down, kitten.”

Her eyes dance suggestively, bordering on inciting, while mine take in her dress. Even if the flowery thing is a hell of a lot more modest than what she wore to meet Travis, it’s enticing. I can only imagine what it’ll do to a man who will never touch a woman with his dirty paws again.

I groaned so goddamn loud when she walked out of the bedroom, I had to lift the thing up to make she was wearing panties. Then I had her by the throat, backed her to the wall and told her under no circumstances was she to wear a dress without them again.

Not for anyone but me.

She agreed, but not before tossing me some sass.

She could wear a gunnysack and the little fucker is still going to poke and prod and come at her. That thought brings me right back to what I was thinking a couple of minutes ago.

“You said when I gave you my submission, you wouldn’t interfere with my career.”

*Fuck me.*

“Kaci?” I raise my brow in challenge.

“Hey, you make the rules,” she replies, hands up in mock surrender. I’m biting down hard on my tongue, equally annoyed and aroused by her quick wit. Although, I don’t find it one bit funny. We discussed that we’d do this together. Agreed that if Brian won’t give up Travis, tell us who the man in the wolf mask is or who else is involved in this, I’m going to finish what I started and leave her to take out Travis since she’s so headstrong about doing so. “Sir.”

A growl leaves me. She’s just tossed me over a barrel and we both know it.

I contemplate for half a second on how to respond. I suddenly slide my seat all the way back, unhook her seatbelt and a startled yelp erupts from her smart little mouth when I have her straddling me in only a few quick movements.

There isn’t an ounce of fear in her eyes. What is staring back at me is simply a woman wanting to exact revenge. I suppose that eases me a bit more. It’s something I’ve known, but still. Kaci belongs to me as I do her, and she doesn’t get to bend the rules without consequences.

“I’m all for letting you take the reins for a minute or two, just to witness you in action,” I tell her as I rub my cock against her ass. It won’t be long before I own that, too. “However, that doesn’t mean when I see fit, I won’t put an end to it.”

My palm comes down on her left cheek, stirring another squeak.

“And if I don’t comply?” Her tone is playful, and it sets my mind somewhat at ease, but those words instantly make my cock hard as granite. “What happens then?”

I slowly smile, letting her wait and wonder what my reply will be as I slide my right hand up her back, and grip hold of her neck, pulling her to me so I can kiss that sassy mouth, loving the way her body trembles at my touch, the way her mouth opens so I can kiss her soft and slow.

Teasing and winding her up.

“Fuck around and find out, little one,” I breathe into her mouth. The smile splitting my face a mile wide as her eyes flare with a tinge of anger. “What I can promise you is that it’ll be for my pleasure, not for yours.”

Swinging open the door, I set her on her feet, reach over the console to grab her bag, and she takes it from my hand. I can tell with one look at her, it’s taking everything inside her not to scowl back at me.

Fuck if that doesn’t make me want her even more.

I reach for her chin and give her a peck on the lips. “Stop pushing my buttons, or I’m going to fuck that pretty little face of yours senseless.”

“Promises, promises.”

A low, aroused laugh leaves my chest as I step out of the vehicle, and as we face the door that will lead us to Brian, our demeanors instantly shift back to that of two killers.

The pungent smell of piss and shit crinkle our noses when we enter the basement.

Leaning against the wall, I cross my arms over my chest, expecting her to grab the dart gun out of her case, but she doesn’t. She goes straight to the photos I’d left of the girls on the floor and picks up the one of Allison.

My gaze slides to Brian. His head is slanted to the side, dried blood all over his face, obviously focused on Kaci's ass. The guy is practically salivating through the mangled duct tape I'd secured tightly over his mouth.

Memory shifts in my brain, echoes of his sad attempt at possessiveness when I'd met him for the first time at Omnia. How he'd tried to stake his claim on Marley when he noticed me eyeing her as she left the bar and I stifle an angry laugh.

This sniveling little fuck hasn't seen possessive. If he keeps staring at my woman's ass like that, though, he'll get a taste of it faster than he likely expects.

If I didn't want him dead already, I sure as hell do now.

"Where is she?" Kaci demands, shoving the photo in Brian's face after ripping the tape from his swollen, bloodstained mouth. "Where the fuck is Allison?"

The little bastard licks his parched lips and draws them back.

The glint in his eyes pure evil.

Deranged.

"Probably dead by now."

The confidence in his voice leaves no room for disbelief. The guilt for not being able to save her pools in my gut, it corrodes the oxygen in my lungs and makes it hard to breathe. Hard to escape the confines of my mind.

I can feel the same radiating off Kaci, and the need to go to her, to wrap my arms around her, tell her she doesn't have to play the tough act with me. The one she uses to conceal herself

from everyone else. That she can cry on my shoulder, and I'll wipe away every tear, but I don't. Not yet. I force myself to stay where I am.

“Where's her body?” Kaci asks with the slightest of a tremble catching in her throat. So faint, you'd have to know her to hear it.

“You'll never find her or any of the others. They've all been burned to a crisp. Oh, but you sweetheart? Hot damn,” he wheezes, somehow managing a low whistle. “You are fucking gorgeous. They'd never burn you like the others. Oh, no. They'd keep you.”

A howl of rage simmers in my chest, beckoning violence as my blood begins to boil. The need to kill him almost has me whipping out my gun to put a bullet through his skull.

Setting the photo on his stomach, Kaci places both hands at the sides of his head, yanks it up and slams it back onto the table, then takes her elbow and brings it down on his gut, my still half-mast cock, hardens again.

She might be hurting, but I'm impressed by the way she isn't crumbling when she isn't used to interrogating someone. If I didn't want this motherfucker paying his dues, I'd already have my mouth crushed to hers, my hands up that dress, my cock free and she'd be up against the wall in a second flat.

That'll be saved for later.

“Fuck you,” she says, bringing her elbow down onto his face. Blood splatters, and Brian laughs. Instead of gagging or wiping the blood off her skin, Kaci does the same thing to his crotch.

He lets out a wail, and I shake my head, chuckling low.

“Untie me, baby. Spread those long legs and let me see if your pussy is as pretty as your face. I bet it’s nice and tight and hot and pink.” Brian’s words are a jumbled mess as he speaks through his agony. They set my mouth in a hard line, hands groaning with the urge to wrap around his neck, squeezing them slowly so he’d suffer more than he already has while I relish in crushing every bone, and his windpipe. “I like this gift much better than the last one you gave me, friend.” He goads—the vile son of a bitch lifting his head about an inch to glare at me.

I take that as my cue to end his miserable life.

“We’re not going to fuck around with you any longer,” I announce gruffly, the need to kill him for speaking to my woman that way amping up my tone immediately. “We know Travis is involved.” I step forward to hover over his makeshift deathbed, concentrating on the deep wound to Kaci’s soul over Allison. I can see it in her blue eyes as I approach. It reminds me of the day she told me about her foster mother. It’s the kind of pain that never heals no matter how much time passes. She’s stored it, buried it even, but those invisible scars will always be there, certain triggers causing them to resurface. This is one of them. She has me now to help, and I’m never letting her go again. “I’m beginning to think you’re more of a masochist than a sadist, Brian.”

I grip his chin and glare down at him, making sure he sees exactly what kind of evil lies in my eyes.

“I’m both,” he chokes out over the tears leaking from his eyes and the dryness in his throat. “You know, I enjoyed the

smell of fear coming off the girls I've taken over the months. You won't get that kind of satisfaction from me."

Probably not, but I will out of his death.

"There's a nail gun under the table, Kaci. Would you mind getting it for me?"

She does as she's told, and while she's doing so, I untie his left hand, shove the fake bomb onto the floor, and stretch out his arm. He's too weak to fight back, but just in case he decides to attempt anything, I hold it down with my hand, extending the other for the gun. Instead of handing it to me, she pops the battery in place, walks around the table to stand next to me and Brian flinches when she flicks on the power.

"This is for Allison." He doesn't scream when the nail drills through his left hand, and more of his blood is shed.

As we go around, doing the same to his other hand, then his feet, and Kaci rattling off three more names with every stab to his flesh. I think back to the woman I first met, and never in my wildest imagination would I have thought we'd end up here, taking a life together.

I could happily spend the rest of my days doing this with her. Watching her from the shadows as she stabs someone in the neck.

"You're a woman after my heart," I joke, and she rolls her eyes. "Stand back, kitten. You have enough of his tainted blood on you."

Taking hold of the mallet, I raise it over my shoulder and re-break Brian's knee. A shrill scream breaks from his lips. "Goddamn, son of a bitch!"



“I warned you. All you had to do was tell me the truth, and I would have killed you the other night. You refused, so welcome to hell.”

I can barely get the words out. So ready to end him.

The mallet is on the edge of my shoulder, ready to come down again when he begins to beg, urging me to wait.

My anticipation ratches, hoping he'll prove me wrong and give us what we need so we can get the fuck on with our lives.

“You really don't know who's behind this. Do you?” It pisses me off to no fucking end that he just can pick our minds. His bloodshot eyes move rapidly between us for a moment, the psychotic asshole spits out blood, and laughs. “Oh, man. You haven't even scratched the fucking surface. I'll be happily watching you try to put it all together from hell. Thank you for the entertainment. It almost makes all this worth it.” He coughs and gags through his fit of laughter. “I don't know who the fuck the two of you are, but I do know you have no idea who you're fucking with.”

“Well, that's where you're wrong, fucker. We know exactly who we're dealing with,” I correct him, gripping the handle tight in my fists. “And we're going to end them all, just like we're ending you.”

Without another word, or another pause for him to speak, I bring the mallet down hard on his head, silencing him once and for all.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Kaci*

Night falls over the city, and I press my hand to my heart for what seems like the thousandth time, remembering yet again what Brian said about Allison being dead.

It's been four days. No matter what I've done to try and distract myself, no matter how Blaze held me when I cried once we returned to the hotel and showered off Brian's blood or how Raven promised when we called with an update that the blame is not on us, I can't rid myself of this unbearable pain in my soul.

It feels like it's shattering.

Splitting in two.

Weeping for the girl, and her family.

I think if I'm honest, deep down, I knew the moment I walked into Raven's office the chances of Allison making it through this untainted were slim to none. I was confident we'd find her, but finding her alive? I knew that would take nothing short of a miracle, something I've rarely experienced in my life and even less since I took The Oath.

Knowing that hasn't made this pill any easier to swallow, though.

Guilt and grief and regret have pierced my heart like barbed wire dragging across the organ until it's shredded. Here I am the happiest I've been in years, my world turning right side up instead of upside down like I thought when I first saw Blaze again, and that young girl is dead.

While I don't have any proof all those other women are dead, too, I know in my bones they are. Just like I know Travis is behind this.

I've concluded that the unusual heartache and loss I'm feeling is because Blaze and I are doing what Raven normally does by seeing the ugly parts of jobs. It's why I feel so out of my element, so choked full of emotions I'd only been able to purge once I knew Blaze had forgiven me.

It helps me sympathize for Raven's strange behavior a little more.

I close my eyes, and inhale deeply before exhaling, trying to center myself. Trying not to let this waging war get the best of me, but it's damn hard. Not hearing from Travis isn't helping, either. I just want to seek justice, be done with this and move on with my life.

A life I never thought I'd have again.

I jump when my phone blares from the kitchenette where I'd left it earlier. Scrambling to answer, my sluggish heart picks up its beat when I see the name on the screen.

It's Tara.

Immediately, I accept the video call, and her pretty face, her green eyes that are lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July are just the remedy I need right now.

“Hey sister. Are you busy?” The smile she’s wearing lights up her entire face, the joy so apparent, it radiates from her.

Bright and beautiful.

Tara rarely calls when I’m on a job. Judging by the facts she is now, there must something she can’t wait to share. As badly as I want to tell her about Blaze and me, and I have no doubt she’ll be jumping up and down like with excitement like a child, drilling me with twenty questions, there’s nothing inside me willing to take any moments away from her.

“Never too busy for you.” I move to the couch, resting my head on the edge as I prop my phone on my knees. I keep my ears tuned in for Blaze to walk through the front door once he’s done at the gym, but my brows crinkle in curiosity as my eyes trace behind my sister. She’s somewhere I don’t recognize. “Where are you?”

“Standing in the middle of my new kitchen,” she continues to beam. “Liam and I found a house. It’s perfect and huge and everything I was looking for, Kaci. We put in the offer yesterday, and they accepted. I just couldn’t wait to share the news with you.”

There’s a bit of disbelief mixed in with her excited tone. Astonishment that a girl who grew up with doubts she’d ever be happy has finally found it. That doubt does not belong on my sister, not anymore.

There's a short beat of silence, one that transcends this moment and takes both of us back to our childhood. The same one we'd bonded over all those years ago. The place I'd made a solemn vow to protect her, to do all I could to help her find a million moments like this that no one else could ever take away.

Since Blaze told me he'd taken it upon himself to check into Liam, and he's clean as a whistle, it's his privilege now to give those moments to her. His duty to protect her. The scariest part of that knowledge is I'm okay with it. Okay with turning her over to someone else.

"Your joy is breathtaking, Tara." Seeing her this way puts a bandage over how I felt before she called. It won't heal those wounds, nothing will. Not even the revenge we've been seeking on those women's behalf but seeing my sister in this light gives me the uplift I desperately needed. "Just promise me one thing. Promise you won't ever forget just how lucky Liam is to have you."

"Liam would never let me, Kaci. He reminds me all the time." Tears spring to her eyes, and one slips free. Although it's a happy tear, if I could, I'd reach through the phone and swipe it away. "Someday you'll find someone who loves you the same way, and when you do, I'm going to tell you the same thing."

Something bursts inside me at her words, and the intensity, the clarity of it spreads throughout my blood and bores into my pores.

Clogging them.

Blocking anything else from entry.

It's the realization that both me and my sister are living the lives we should. We're right where we're supposed to be.

Loved the way we were supposed to be. And while things are moving at a rapid pace between Blaze and me, our love never weakened. I have no reservations about it growing stronger from here.

My fingers run over the smooth onyx of my bracelet, and I can hear my once mangled heart thanking me for freeing it from its cage.

“Well, give me the tour of this house, little sister. Show me the entire thing.”

“It's everything, Kaci. Exactly what I wanted,” she points out again, sorrow leaving her expression and that elation returning. “As I said, I'm in the kitchen right now,” she continues, turning the camera to show me the immaculate space. “Look at the hardwood floor. It's hickory and matches the cupboards.”

The once dormant smile I'm still not used to wearing spreads. We used to lay in bed and dream of having a home with hardwood floors, and now she has one.

She circles around slowly, and I take in everything from the white marbled countertops and stainless-steel appliances to the long island in the middle with a pot rack overhead.

It's my sister right down to a T.

It reminds me of the kitchen in Blaze's house just outside of the city. His color palette is more black than white, completely decorated as is the entire house, but it's huge and the massive yard overlooks the lake. I fell in love with it.

Pictured myself cooking, which is something I haven't done since joining The Oath. Since me and Tara were on our own, really. He'd taken me there to show me around yesterday and I couldn't help but be blown away by its beauty.

The only thing missing from the home is a family.

People to breathe life into it.

"I love it, Tara." She flips the phone back around and seeing her the happiest she's ever been in her life has my chin quivering. I pray to God she doesn't notice, or the tables will be turned.

"I know, right? This island is going to be perfect for entertaining. And can you just imagine all the baking I'll be able to do here? You and I will be able to make our own holiday dinners."

I think back to our holidays. Though we were always together, the staff at Faith's Hope made our dinner. We'd always made the best of our time together, but being around other families I didn't know, and watching Tara flit around helping didn't feel like a holiday.

It didn't feel like home.

"I can't wait." I agree. "Once you're all settled, I'll come for a visit."

"And you won't be sleeping on the couch," she sighs. "There's still a lot to do between now and then, and I'll miss Faith's Hope. I've made some great friends there, but I'm so ready to get my life started with Liam. So ready to make this place our own and start a new chapter."

"You definitely deserve it."

“Thanks,” she blushes, moving through the house to show me the rest. “I’ve got to show you our backyard once it’s daylight. There’s a spot just off the kitchen that we’re going to transform into a garden. Hey,” she pauses and narrows her eyes. “What is on your face?”

“What?” I look at myself in the phone, thinking I have a speck of ketchup or mustard from my burger somewhere.

“The smile, I mean. That’s a real one Kaci. Not the phony ones you don’t think I recognize, and I’m pretty sure the reason why is standing right behind you,” she arches her brow. “You’ve got some explaining to do, sister.”

I blink back at her, uncertain, until I feel Blaze’s presence behind me. My heart jumps into my throat as I realize I’d been so wrapped up in the moment, I never heard him come in.

Shit.

Blaze bends and places his hands on my shoulders before lifting his face toward my phone. His hair is drenched with sweat, his masculine scent filling my nose. Some might find that disgusting, but for me, it brings images of Blaze’s muscles bowing and flexing in the gym beneath the weights, him pushing his gorgeous body to its limit on the treadmill, beating the crap out of a speed bag the way he used to. It makes my lungs expand as I heave for air that seems to have evaporated.

Need tumbles down my spine, and it feels impossible not to tilt my head upward to get a better look of him, to keep my focus on Tara. I do, though, and I inwardly giggle as she silently takes him in, her mouth falling open a half inch, yet her eyes no longer hold that familiar worry for me.



“Hey, Tara. How are you? It’s been a while.”

“It sure has. I’m good, and you?” She’s good, alright, but those twenty questions have probably turned into fifty by now.

“Better than I ever have been, thanks.” With his words, he kisses the top of my head. “It’s good to see you. We’ll have to make plans for dinner soon.”

“Oh, we definitely should,” she laughs, and Blaze chuckles.

“Sounds like a plan then. I’m going to leave you two to it,” he announces, giving my shoulders a quick, affectionate squeeze as he stands upright. “Try to go easy on her, Tara.”

His last sentence is loaded with innuendo, the asshole. Tara won’t catch it, but I know once I’m done talking, he isn’t going to go easy on my body.

When he stops briefly to pick up his laptop, those gray sweats hanging low on his hips, I inhale sharply. He winks back at me and steps into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. It isn’t long before I hear the sound of the shower blasting on and my mind is infiltrated with visions of his wet, naked body beneath the spray.

“So? I’m waiting. How long have things been back on with you two?” Tara starts, and my face begins to flush. “I’d say by the looks of it, you’ve had plenty of time to properly reacquaint. Good Lord, he’s bigger than I remember.”

*He’s big alright*, I think to myself, though not in the same way as Tara. My thoughts are locked on the place that’ll be bobbing at his stomach when I join him in the shower soon. That is, if he’s still in there and not trying to hack into Omnia’s system yet again.

“I was going to tell you,” I insist, barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes when hers sharpen in disbelief. “I was, Tara. I swear.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t going to be today when you called with news about your house.”

“Yeah well, you need to stop putting me first. Especially now that he’s back in your life. Like you, all I’ve ever wanted was to see you happy. The happiest I’d ever seen you was with him.” Putting her first will always be my priority. She’ll just be prioritized in a different category than before. “So, how did this happen? How long have you been seeing him? Why didn’t you tell me the other day?” She rattles off her questions quicker than a lightning strike.

“We just ran into each other right before I saw you the other day. We got to talking and one thing led to another.”

“One thing led to another and now you’re sitting in a hotel room with him while you’re on a job?” she snorts for a moment before her expression smooths out, more serious as her voice lowers. “Does he know what you do, Kaci?”

She just asked the one question I hoped she wouldn’t.

Lying to her again isn’t an option for me anymore. Not when she’s seen through me this entire time. I’m honestly not as shaken up about it as I should be. Besides, truth be told, like Blaze, she knows me better than anyone.

“Yes.” Disappointment wracks her expression, silence once again fluttering between us. She doesn’t have to say the words for me to understand the betrayal she’s feeling. Though she’d

stopped prying, I always knew this singular secret between us bothered her. Hell, it bothers me, but I had my reasons, and she knew that. For her to believe I trust Blaze more than her, however, makes me worry my bottom lip, my insides seizing in agony. The pain of hurting her shows no mercy as it twines around my lungs, squeezing until I can barely breathe. “Tara, please don’t be upset. I need you to please believe me when I say it’s not how you think it is.”

She remains tight-lipped and my entire body begins to shake at her silence. I push myself to sit as patiently as I can the longer she remains quiet.

It’ll shred me to pieces if she doesn’t understand or at the very least forgive me.

Mutilate my heart all over again.

I won’t survive.

Not without her. Never without my sister.

“You know what? I’m not upset with you. It’s okay with me that you told him. I may not understand, but that doesn’t matter. I know your heart, Kaci. It’s one of the biggest and most loving of anyone I know. You might not believe that, but it’s true. Besides, that smile is the prettiest thing I’ve seen on you since you broke it off with Blaze. It’s wiping away all the sadness you tried so hard to hide from me. It’s obvious that you’re happy. You *are* happy, aren’t you?”

“So much,” I confess, relieved she isn’t mad at me. She has a right to feel bitter, to resent me. “You need to cool it with the kindness over there before you see something else you haven’t in a long time: me being a blubbering mess.” She laughs at my

words, and I swear, right now, it's all my heart needs.  
"Someday I'll be able to tell you, Tara."

"I know you will. Right now, your happiness is all that matters."

"*Our* happiness."

"Yes, ours."

"I love you, Tara. I hope you know how much."

"I do, and I hope you know how much I love you." Her voice drops down to a whisper. "So, now onto more important things. Was it as good as you remembered?"

I laugh loudly and we finish our talk, both of us promising to check in soon. When I end the call, I'm relieved to find the shower door is still shut, steam rolling out of the spot Blaze had stepped into only moments ago.

The outline of his impressive, wide frame is visible through the glass and one look has my mouth going dry, the plush robe threatening to fall from my body into a heap on the floor.

I resist, though. My emotions, my mind, and my heart are all over the place. I know if I wanted to leave them all behind for a moment, Blaze could do that. He absolutely would, but sometimes forgetting isn't enough. Sometimes, as hard as it is, you've got to face the things that hurt the most.

So, as much as I want to join Blaze, beg him to make me forget, I don't. I move back into the sitting room and drop my phone onto the coffee table, curling into a ball on the couch.

And I cry.

I cry tears of happiness and pain. I shed tears for a second chance to fulfill my hopes and dreams.

Tears for Tara who never thought she'd find someone to love her because she had epilepsy, and big ugly sobs yet again for Allison and the rest of the women we just couldn't save.

Tears for the girl who struggled to find herself and finally had once taking The Oath. It's the only thing outside of Blaze and Tara I'd ever done that felt like it fit, like it was destiny.

Now, though, my heart is conflicted. It's sprinting miles ahead of my mind telling me my fate may be taking a wicked, but much needed turn I never saw coming. One that takes me to the only other thing that would ever truly make me happy, yet I know I can't have both.

I don't get to be a Keeper and a mother.

That's just not the way it works. I know eventually, I'll have to choose.

That reality brings forth a new gamut of emotions that course through me like nothing else and I let it. I'm not sure how long I lay there, bawling my heart out, before Blaze finds me.

When he does, though, he lifts me into his arms, carries me to bed and doesn't let go.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Kaci*

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Blaze whispers into my hair with that gravelly morning voice I’m getting used to waking up to. I shiver, curling further into his hold.

His skin is so warm, I could stay like this forever.

Lose myself in him.

Hoping. Wishing. Dreaming.

His fingers begin to skim up and down my spine in slow-moving circles. The comforting gesture has me melting into the warmth of his body even further.

He did the same thing last night. Somehow, through the emotional turmoil slamming into me like a freight train, I’d fallen asleep in the security of his strong arms. I’m still eclipsed in them, though we’ve moved from the couch to the bed. I’m not sure how he’d managed it without waking me, but he’d even half-haphazardly thrown the covers over us.

It’s not the first time I’ve fallen apart with ugly, unwanted emotions that were simply too much to bear. It was, however,

the first time I'd ever let another person claim witness to it.

It was agonizing, even with Blaze's compassionate touch.

That alone says a lot about the man holding me tightly, that I'd felt safe enough with him to allow myself to be so exposed. It says even more that he stayed with me all night, refusing to leave me to fight through them alone.

I think it'll take a while to grasp that Tara and I aren't on our own anymore. That the once empty places in our souls are finally full. It's a bit overwhelming to take in all at once. Yet, there's something else filling that vacant spot, too. A light is burning bright, which I'd never seen when my heart lived in the darkness. Not even when Blaze and I were together before.

I don't ever want it to flicker out.

If only that light would burn away the ache and the guilt in my heart. It feels bruised and beaten down.

"Hey, handsome." My throat is raw, and I swallow, attempting to clear it. "Did I wake you?" My arms tighten around his waist, and a rumble of contentment vibrates across his chest. The sound sinks into my skin. "You must not have slept well sitting up all night."

"How could I not sleep well with you in my arms, Kaci?" he mumbles, his full lips still buried in my hair. His kind words pull at my heartstrings. "No, you didn't wake me. You barely stirred once you finally fell asleep." He lifts the hand resting on my stomach to hook two fingers under my chin, tilting my head upward. "Need to know how you're feeling?"

"Better," I admit, though the stinging behind my eyes says otherwise. "But honestly, I could sleep for a year, and I'm not

sure my soul wouldn't still be aching when I woke."

His eyes soften, and both of us swallow hard before he bends to brush his lips against mine.

"I know, kitten," he sighs. His fingers remain at my jaw for a moment before he drops his hand, cradles me closer, and rolls onto his back, taking me with him. "I've got you. I'm here for whatever you need." I nod slightly and blow out a deep breath to quiet the bitter parts in my mind. It's useless, because the guilt scraping at my heart over Allison will take time to heal. Knowing I'm not alone anymore, though is everything my tired heart needs. "You know that don't you?"

"Yes," I whisper, placing a kiss on his chest while keeping my eyes on his. "Thank you."

The corners of his mouth quirk up in silent acknowledgment, and we lay like that for a little while before his arms slide beneath my ass, and he hikes up to standing. My legs instinctually wrap around his waist.

"Come. Let me take care of you," he says, and carries me across the room. "Shower first, and then breakfast."

He doesn't release me when he reaches through the door to turn on the shower, his hand remaining there to check the temperature. Once he steps inside, he sets me onto my wobbly feet beneath the spray and turns to grab my body wash, giving me a quick glance at his tight ass.

No words are spoken as he slides his rough hands over my body, kneading at the knots in my shoulders. Though our physical relationship had always been incredible, this gentle



side of Blaze Lennox, the nurturing lover beneath all the ink and grit, is the part of him I missed most.

My head falls forward, my eyes close, and my body relaxes, my mind drifting to absolutely nothing while I let him take care of me.

I'm so deeply under his trance that when he wraps his arm around my middle, giving me a gentle squeeze before shutting down the water, I suppress my disappointment over not being able to do the same for him.

By the time he reaches for one of the soft bath towels and wraps it around me, I feel somewhat revived.

We dry off quickly, drawn to each other like magnets. When Blaze reaches for my body lotion, tears spring to my eyes as those big hands running gently over my flesh.

He towel dries my hair, combs it out, and walks back into the bedroom, returning with my robe holding it out for me to slide my arms into the silk. He holds my eyes intensely as he ties the sash snug around my waist.

Finishing up our morning rituals, he pecks me on the lips before slipping on his gray sweats and leading me into the kitchen.

“Hungry?” He points at a spot on the terrace that overlooks the city, silently ordering me to take a seat. I start to answer, but the grumble coming from my stomach does it for me. He smiles, and it is blinding. So much so that it has me wanting to weep all over again. Despite the darkness hanging over us, he's happy, too. “I'll take that as a yes.”

Opening the sliding glass door for me, I take a seat, watching him as he heads toward the kitchenette, the sound of the coffee maker coming to life comforting the sting still lingering behind my eyes. Not wanting him to see, I swing my attention toward the outline of Canada on the other side of the river.

The sensible woman in me knows I should give my mind a break and think of something other than work. Yet, the Keeper in me can't help wondering how many more women could be at risk if we don't end the evil.

My mind is spiraling, the burn in my heart threatening to drag me under with the thought that sometimes hunches aren't correct. That Allison could still be alive, and Brian might be as much of a liar as I am. That he could have been playing us the way Blaze did him when he said we knew exactly who we were dealing with. Blaze's footsteps against the tile thankfully snap me out of it.

"What are you hungry for?" he asks, the room service menu in hand, as he sits beside me. "Or would you like me to pick one of everything?"

A giggle slips free. How I managed one beats me, but it wrenches another smile from Blaze. Seeing it twice in a matter of minutes has me wanting to make him smile like that more often.

"Veggie Omelet and whole wheat toast will be fine for me."

Less than a half hour later, our mugs are full, and there's a knock on the door, signaling our breakfast has arrived. We move to the bar since the table is our makeshift office, and Blaze sets my plate in front of me.

We dig in, and when Blaze offers me a bite of his French toast, I take it, humming around the deliciousness. A droplet of syrup makes its way onto my chin, and he swipes it away with the pad of his thumb, sucking it clean.

Shivers spread, and my insides feel like they might rupture from the way he's looking at me.

Like I'm his everything.

The feeling is mutual, and I silently thank the universe he's back in my life.

"What do we have to do today?" I ask, a combination of dread and urgency flowing through my veins.

"Nothing, really. Travis is still in Vegas, Raven's men are on him, his house, and Omnia like hawks, but there's been nothing new to report. He's still putting on the boy scout act, so we're sitting ducks right now. At least until he gets back."

"So...?"

"So, I thought maybe we could get out of the suite, take a day off," he shrugs, his eyes still soft and gentle when he glances over at me. "I think we could both use it."

*Particularly you*, he means, though Blaze is too kind right now to say the words aloud. As for me, I might be a bit too proud to say them myself, but that doesn't matter. He's right. A day off sounds great.

"If you're sure," I offer, finishing up the last of my breakfast.

"I am. Let's get dressed then get out of this space for a little while."

About an hour later, he enfolds his hand in mine. His idea of getting out shoots a thrill through my body as we descend the elevator, move through the lobby, out into the fresh air, and soak up the sun.

I shouldn't enjoy this day, but it's been so long since I've had a moment's peace. I can't remember the last time I'd given myself a day to spend however I choose, let alone with Blaze. No matter what we do, I'm going to cherish it.

He points to places of reference as we wander along the Riverwalk, and I sponge up how he shares pieces of his childhood with me. He tells me how he and his father attended at least one football, hockey, baseball, and basketball game a year while growing up. How his mother brought him to the outdoor amphitheater during the summer to listen to some of the legendary artists born and raised here in Detroit.

We talk about my cabin, traveling and so much more that my brain is overloaded with things I never knew about Blaze. By the time we come to the end of the Riverwalk, I lean against the railing, already feeling a bit lighter.

Calm in ways I never knew I needed.

He steps behind me, cages me in and rests his chin gently on the top of my head, both of us staring out at the water.

It's heaven amongst the hell we've found ourselves in.

"Do you have plans once the job is over?" His question hits me out of left field, and I feel myself tense with doubt. Obviously, with Blaze so close, he feels it, too. The man spins me around to face him and places those giant palms on my face. He holds me still while his obsidian eyes burn the

uncertainty that he's mine right out of me. "Let me put an end to that mind before it wanders, kitten. I claimed you the same as you did me. There's no going back for us. Now tell me what, if any, plans you had."

I swallow because I'm a wreck of emotions all over again. So many that they assemble into a mass at the center of my chest.

I need to purge these dreadful thoughts that keep trying to weigh me down.

"If Raven will give it to me, I'd like to spend some time off with Tara. I promised I'd come to see her and Liam's house once they settled and I know it'll be bittersweet for her to leave Faith's Hope. It's been such an important part of her life; she might need a little support when it's time for her to say goodbye. I need to be there for her for whatever she's going to need."

"Don't worry about time off, Kaci. You'll get it. And I still have my apartment in Chicago. You can spend your days with your sister, and at night, you'll stay with me. Once she's settled, we'll go from there."

"Really?" I smile, reaching onto my toes to press my lips to his. "I would like that very much."

"Good. Then it's settled." Before I can reply, Blaze's mouth crashes down on mine with enough force, my body trembles. His mouth takes over so easily that I surrender to the sharp whip of his tongue. Pouring my emotions for him into this kiss. I hope he feels it. I hope he knows how badly I need him.

We kiss for what seems like forever. Until I can hardly breathe, and my legs nearly give out, his tongue plundering my mouth the same way it does when he fucks me.

I'm panting as he pulls away, the lively sounds of our surroundings slowly creeping back into my subconscious, reminding me of where we are. His wide palm moves over my lower back, slowly dipping over the cheek of my ass and giving it a possessive squeeze that pulls a breathy moan from my belly.

"Soon," he whispers against my lips, releasing me with a final chaste kiss before he leads my dizzied frame back the way we came. "Let's head back and find a place to have lunch."

We spend the rest of the day hand in hand as we continue to plan for our future, filling in the space that took up our time apart. He takes me to lunch at one of his favorite spots, and we laugh with each other as we share one side of the booth, no other reason than the need for our bodies to be close. Nighttime is slowly beginning to fall over the city as we make our way back to the hotel, and the lights start to twinkle off in the distance, cascading over the river.

"It's beautiful," I gasp, taking it all in. I feel his eyes on me as I pause outside the revolving doors to the hotel.

"Not as beautiful as you," he remarks, his whispered words making my cheeks heat. "Let's go, kitten."

The energy between us charges inside the elevator. The sweet, gentle, nurturing side of Blaze was precisely what I needed this afternoon. Now, however, that's not the man my

body craves. Right now, I want the side of him that wants to ravage me.

I'm ready for this man to eat me alive.

We make it inside the suite, and his mouth is at my neck, and he grunts against my pulse, flicking it with his tongue, and scraping it with his teeth.

"Kaci," he whispers my name, his voice raspy as he tugs on my waist to pull me flush with his front. The muscular ripples in his chest come secondary to the feel of his thick, hard cock resting against my belly through his jeans. He leans in, his tongue teasing my lips as his mouth moves against mine, those dark eyes peering into my soul. "I've been craving you all fucking day."

"Me, too," I mewl as he lifts me and carries me across the suite to our bed, setting me on my knees against the mattress.

He keeps me close with one arm wound around my waist, his free hand slipping between us and under my dress, twisting the lace panties before sliding the fabric over my clit, repeatedly.

My hips to buck at the sensation, and a gasp falls from my mouth when he rips them from my body and tosses the fabric away. His fingers begin to tease my slit, sliding in one greedily, followed by another, and he curls them, applying pressure against the spot under my clit.

My legs spread wide, my head falls to his shoulder, and my hips slowly begin to grind down on his hand as he pumps in and out of me slowly until I'm filled and desperate.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, kitten,” he croons my eyes growing heavy with need. The hand resting on my waist moves to my neck possessively to hold me in place. “My good girl.”

His lips still move like feathers against mine as his fingers thrust into me more fiercely, the sounds of my slick arousal mingling with my heavy pants.

I crave him.

Long for his ownership.

Find undeniable relief in giving him control over my body, my pleasure.

Right now, I’m so desperate for him to shove his cock inside me and have his way with me, I’m panting. Abruptly, he pulls all three fingers from my cunt and slaps me across my ass cheeks sharply, stealing my breath as his hold tightens slightly on my throat.

It’s hard to believe when I’m feeling like this, his hands on me, his very essence taking over me, that we’d spent so much time apart. Don’t get me wrong - I felt every second of it. The loss weighed my heart down like a block of cement, but who would have ever imagined we could pick up right where we left off, only stronger, in a matter of days?

The sound of his name leaving me in a chant pulls a growl from his wide chest as he hovers against my lips. Blaze finally takes my mouth, consuming me once and for all as he frees himself and pushes my body back onto the bed. In one quick movement, he slams into me with enough force to have me simultaneously screaming his name and begging for more.



Somewhere deep down, I know I won't ever stop.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Blaze*

“Once inside Travis’s office, you’ll be out of my eyesight, but I’ll be in your ear. You can do this, Kaci.” I grind my back molars, hating this situation. Loathing that she’ll be out of my sight for one damn second.

Early this morning, she received a call from Travis asking if she’d meet him at the club. As much as I trust her, it’s hard as fuck not to be even more protective of her safety this time. Of her own anguish and the need to eliminate the cock sucker for getting the best of her.

Even though this was my idea, it’s unnerving the hell out of me. Especially knowing my eyes won’t be on her until she gets the camera in place.

What’s worse is now that Travis has had a taste of her, he won’t be able to resist keeping his soul-sucking hands to himself. He’ll be at her neck, and if he gets too close to her ear, he could find the device, and all hell would break loose before me, or any of the Keepers hiding in the shadows could reach her.

The thought has me all twisted up in a jumbled mess of knots and nerves.

An uproar bangs in the center of my chest, clamping down like a vise. I continue sitting on the bed, close to tying her up and saying fuck the rules as I watch her slip on a pair of black heels.

She looks like the fucking seductress she portrays in her skin-tight black leather pants and an off-the-shoulder silky red blouse that shows off just a hint of cleavage. All that hair curled in loose waves, hanging down her back.

A temptation for a man to grip hold of.

A far cry from the woman who, a few nights ago, I found curled up on the couch weeping. I wanted to reach into her soul and put an end to those tears, yet I knew as hard as it was for me to see her soul shattering, that meltdown was likely long overdue.

Between her sobs, she mumbled how she was honest with her sister about me knowing about her job. She told me about Tara and Liam finding a house and how she and Tara feel both of their lives are coming full circle. Add that to her being emotional over the job, she was a mess.

She ended up falling asleep on my chest. I didn't let her go until we woke and even then, I held her as closely as I could for the rest of the day we'd shared together.

It was unusual, Kaci and I finding a full day during a job as demanding as this one to take a step back and release a little stress, but it was exactly what the two of us needed. Not only was it clear when she woke the next morning she was still

beaten down, the swift turn in our relationship since we'd reconnected was something we hadn't had time to focus on. While I knew we wouldn't truly be able to enjoy our newfound happiness until these creeps were dead and buried, it was nice as hell to be able to focus on us for a few hours.

"I appreciate your concern. I really do, Blaze, but don't forget who you're talking to," she reminds me, her tone a little too brazen for my liking. "You need to let go of the woman you care about while I'm with him and remember that just like you, I'm a completely different person once I'm on the clock."

If she were any other submissive, I'd punish her for talking back, for trying to set me straight. She's not just any other submissive, though. She's the woman I love. The woman I've been obsessed with since day one.

Hell, she's more than an obsession. Kaci's my life. Time couldn't cut the shape of her out of my heart. It didn't remove her from under my skin. Not when she rooted herself through my entire being. And now that she's mine again, after being inside her, waking up next to her, and knowing we are solid, her saddling up to these monsters will drive me insane every damn time.

"You might be different, but to me, Kaci, the girlfriend, and Kaci, the Keeper are still one and the same. Letting go of one isn't an option."

I step up to her, wrap an arm around her waist, tugging her close, and brush back a lock of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. Resting my hand on her cheek, my thumb sweeps across her red-stained bottom lip. Her blue eyes are burning embers, glimmering with that all too familiar fire that rages right

before going in for a kill. That's a good sign she's in the right frame of mind.

It's me who isn't. Me who will never be. Me with the riot clashing around in my chest, but for the time being, I swallow my insecurities down. They'll resurface once she's in there. No getting around that fact.

"Hmm," she purrs, leaning into my touch, her hand palming my dick through my jeans and stroking just enough to make him twitch as she perches up to peck at my lips. "Both Kaci's are always your girlfriend," she corrects me, warming my heart before she presses her lips to my chin and gazes up at me in feigned apology. "You're just not going to tell the other Kaci what to do."

A smirk glides across my mouth, and I grip her chin.

"Watch me try," I counter with a challenge and a warning. My kitten and I will always have this power struggle regarding the rules. I might let her think she's the one holding all the cards, but I will bend them when it comes to her safety.

"You can't," she whispers, not sounding like the skilled liar she is.

To avoid an argument, I say nothing more. Driving my fingers into her hair, I savor the flash of anger that's quickly replaced with desire when my tongue traces her lips, and I take her mouth.

Kissing her hard.

Possessively and breathlessly.

Reluctantly, I pull away and drop a quick kiss on her forehead. "Just give me some time to get used to the woman

you are when walking out the door.”

I spend the next few minutes double and triple checking that the surveillance camera works flawlessly. The plan is for Kaci to find a way to sneak in and plant it in Travis’ office. Besides breaking into his home, which Raven told me has security guards up the ass, the only other choice we have is for me to sit, watch and listen in hopes Travis fucks himself by unknowingly giving us the proof we need.

“I’m ready, babe,” she announces, going to the other side of the room, pulling something out of her suitcase, and placing it inside a small leather purse.

“What’s that?” I ask, flinging my bag over my shoulder.

“My own bag of tricks,” she smiles, glancing at my bag. “I went in once without a weapon. There’s no way in hell I’ll go in without something again. I’m going to be prepared if he tries something that screams out to my instincts. Raven will just have to understand if I kill him.”

I nod, her forethought to protect herself easing me up a bit.

I should tell her to do it and let me take the blame, just as I should come out and tell her why Raven insists on solid proof. That’s another secret about Raven that isn’t mine to tell, and it burns my ass that I can’t. As well as when I called Raven to tell that keeping us here is a crock of shit when we know Travis is not only involved, he’s the organizer. I practically fucking begged, and that is something I never do. I tried telling Raven there are no similarities to this case versus what happened to make this rule so adamant, but it was no use.

I was shut right down.

In less than ten seconds, we're in the hallway, headed toward the elevator, her hand in mine. I don't let go until the two men Raven has pretending to be road workers remove the cones from a parking spot up the road from the club.

Parking, I quickly round the hood, helping Kaci step out, trying not to watch how the leather clings to her tight ass when she makes her way down the sidewalk. I wait until she's out of sight before pulling into the lot, flicking the switch to tint my windows dark to block out the glare from my laptop to anyone passing by. Fishing out my laptop, I set it on the console to bring up the surveillance cameras and connect to her earpiece.

"Welcome to Omnia." A rough gravelly voice comes through her wire, followed by her sweet sound of thanks.

In the next breath, I watch closely, relieved when she comes into view on the security cameras I'd placed when I went in that first day and spotted Brian. My eyes roam from one security camera to the next as she moves further into darkness.

The sound of music and the masses ring in my ears. My hands shake, my heart dropping into my stomach, a chill blowing through me straight to my bones when she saunters up to the bar. Kaci leans down and pushes those perfect tits out when she props her arms just right underneath them, eyes scanning the bar through the mirror.

My body, heart, and mind wage a fucking war with one another not to go in there when a group of men standing off to her left openly worship her ass. It's a damn good thing she doesn't have a dress on, or the fuckers would be falling all over one another to get a look at those long bare legs.

The monster in me threatens to tear through my chest and smash in some skulls, but the man who understands Kaci better than anyone knows she isn't paying them a lick of attention.

Not that she would with me watching anyway. No, my woman now has her vision on her prey. The sick fuck is making his way through the crowd toward her.

"Scarlet?" He mumbles, voice barely heard over the shouting when some song has the crowd of people going wild.

Damn it.

"Hey, you." Her reply is barely audible, but I can catch her cunning smile in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar as she turns to face him, and my gaze switches to another feed.

Her features are distorted from this angle, and I hate not being able to see her entire face. Hate the sick prick is standing so close to her.

"You look ... fuck, darling." He fumbles his loud words, his eyes gleaming in victory. Every nerve ending in my body sets aflame, firing off. "You look amazing, Scarlet." Rage thrashes, and I lose my fucking breath when he winds an arm around her, jerking her close to run his nose alongside hers until he hits her left ear. "While I was away, I kept thinking how good you'll taste. I wondered if you're a screamer. If you like the beg for it. I'll find out soon enough, won't I? I'm going to have my way with you very soon."

She fakes a whimper and through the surveillance camera on her left, I watch as she presses her thighs together and my teeth immediately clench with ownership. However, his words



have me on edge for reasons that go beyond my own possessiveness. There's something about the way he says them right in her ear.

Fuck.

I zoom in to see if his eyes give his suspicions away, but the prick keeps them on her as he tips back a bottle of beer, finishes it off, and sets it on the bar behind Kaci. He doesn't even shift them when he shouts out for a glass of Chardonnay, takes it from the bartender, and hands it to her.

She thanks him politely and takes a sip.

“You remembered?”

I keep my ears perked while reaching for my phone to shoot off a text to Raven that Travis might be onto us. How I have no fucking idea.

The response is quick, telling me to keep my head on straight, to stay where I am because Kaci will be able to pick up on the vibes if he does and the Keepers have their eyes on her.

“Fuck that,” I whisper into the darkness, scrubbing a restless hand over my face, mind pondering what to do.

“You're pretty damned hard to forget.”

“So are you.” Her sultry voice holds no fear, no skepticism.

“As you can see, I'm packed tonight. Give me a couple of minutes to make sure both my bartenders have things handled. On nights like this, I usually have my bar manager working. He's called out sick for several days now,” he lies, still not taking his eyes off her. If he suspects, he's gauging her

reaction. “Give me a minute. We’ll head to my office, and we can get out of here. I want you all to myself.”

My heart stops.

She’s not going anywhere with him.

“That sounds great,” she answers, and I keep my mouth shut until he’s behind the bar talking to his employees.

“Get it done now, Kaci. If he leaves you alone in his office, you slip out the back door the second you have the camera in place. If not, you make an excuse and get the fuck out of there. You stick to the script. Do you understand?” She takes another sip of her wine, sets it on the bar, and motions for Travis, giving me the signal that she’s heard me clearly.

“Is everything alright, darling?” He leans over the bar, asking at her ear again and touching her hand.

Violence boils in my blood. I’m going to brutalize that motherfucker. I’m going to shatter every bone in his hands for touching her. I’m going to make him saw off his pathetic dick for what he said earlier and drain every last drop of blood from his stiffening corpse.

“I’m fine,” she assures, leaning in close enough that only the three of us will hear her words. “I’d like to freshen up before we leave. Preferably not in the ladies’ room. I’m assuming you have a bathroom in your office. Could I go there instead?”

Sharp needles move over the base of my neck as my nerves tense, and I reach for my knife, yank it from the sheathe and remove my gun from my bag, ready to get my ass in there if needed.

“Of course,” he says, my chest cramping even though his tone gives nothing away. “I’ll take you there now.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry if I’m interrupting.”

“Don’t be. You’re the kind of interruption men like me crave.”

“Fucking hell,” I groan, and I can’t keep hold of the beast inside me enough to stay silent.

He erupts like a volcano, and the roar leaving my mouth is feral.

Raw.

I will take so much pleasure in obliterating this rotten piece of human waste.

He rounds the bar, and they thread through the mob of clueless patrons on the dance floor, his hand low on her back.

I hold my breath for the seconds it takes them to climb the stairs, and she’s out of my view until they hit the landing where I’d hidden a camera the other night across from his office.

With his keys now in hand, Travis opens the door motioning for her to step inside. If I had an ounce of nerves left, they’d be gone as she enters.

I can no longer see her.

Alarms go off in my mind.

Arrows sink deep into my chest.

“The bathroom is just through that door,” he states, lifting his hand. I assume he’s pointing her in the proper direction

with his finger, though with his back to me, I can't quite tell. "I need to bring a few cases of beer up from the basement. Ten minutes tops, and I'll come back to get you. Give you a tour of one of my favorite places in the city." His choice of words hooks through my gut, and I imagine he's referring to wherever the fuck he takes the women.

Terror lodges in my throat, uneasiness weaving through every cell as I stare at the back of his head, wishing the barrel of my gun was pressing into it and I was seconds away from pulling the trigger.

"Thank you," she tells him.

I'm about to tell her to go into the bathroom, pull her poison out of her bag and kill him the second he returns when his face returns to view in my camera. He nods, shuts the door behind him, and leans against it.

Turbulence ripples through my senses when a slow vicious grin tics up one side of his mouth. If that isn't the proof I need, the look in his eyes that speaks to the monster in me does. They scream the raping pig is going to take pleasure in making her bleed.

In hurting her.

In making her wish to God she could die quickly.

He chuckles like it's all in a night of fun for him. Like it's a game, and he's just fucking won. I'd burn the goddamn world to the ground before that ever fucking happens.

I fly out of my Suburban, tucking my gun into the waistband of my jeans. Gripping tight to my knife, I run toward the back where she's supposed to exit.

“Kaci, get the fuck out of there. *Now!*” I bark my order, and it goes unanswered. “Did you hear what I said? Damn it, Kaci. Answer me!” All I hear as I sprint across the lot is her heavy breathing and what sounds like drawers slamming, papers shuffling, and the clicking of a keyboard. “What the fuck are you doing?” I demand, darting down the alley between Omnia and the building next to it, desperate breaths pitching from my lungs.

“I’m looking for evidence, Blaze. Now shut up and quit telling me what to do. I’ll have the camera where it’s supposed to be in a minute.”

Outrage sizzles in my chest, and my lungs blister with this sweltering panic. Not a great mixture when Travis could shove open that door any second and blow her fucking head off.

This has gone too far. I can ignore a lot, but not her fucking up a job and I damned sure won’t allow her to put herself at risk. Not more than she already has.

A tremor of anger burns through my chest as I do the unthinkable and lift the phone to my ear. A single ring vibrates over the line before it’s picked up, answered in silence.

“Raven, I need backup. Now.”

“Copy that.”

The line goes dead and before I have time to replace my phone, three red lasers come into view on the surrounding rooftops, all directed toward Omnia, signaling Raven’s snipers are in place.

We’ve got precisely ten seconds before we’re surrounded with Keepers and this club is obliterated.

“What the fuck are you doing?” All movement across the line comes to an immediate halt as the words I’ve spoken hit her. “Really, Blaze? You’re telling on me?”

“Travis knows, Kaci. The look I just saw on his face on the camera outside of his office told me so and you’re refusing a direct order. You’ve left me no other option. Now, do as your fucking told for once and get the fuck out!”

“I know he does, Blaze. Do you think so little of my ability that I wouldn’t notice? I saw it in his eyes when he walked up to me, which is why I slipped a fast-acting mickey into his beer. I’m that good. *You* didn’t even notice. He won’t make it back from the basement. I can promise you that.”

I take a steadying breath, but I don’t slow my pace.

By the time she bursts through the door holding two thumb drives in her hand, I’m seething. She can see it rolling off me in waves, that much is clear, but I don’t think she fully understands just how much shit she’s gotten herself into.

I can’t do anything about what she’ll have to do to regain Raven’s confidence after this, but I know exactly what it’ll take to earn back mine.

My woman is about to learn firsthand the consequences of her insubordination.

Get a taste of the punishment that comes with her defiance.

She went against our plan.

She had me fearing for her life.

The dominant in me welcomes the fight she’ll give me, the fire in my kitten’s eyes when her claws dare to come out.

The submissive in her will want to beg for relief I won't give her until I damn well please.

Mad as I am right now, maybe not even then.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Kaci*

“What the fuck were you thinking, Kaci?” The door to the suite slams so hard behind me, I’m surprised it doesn’t fly off its hinges. Though, that isn’t the first sign of how angry Blaze is. It *is* the first time he’s spoken since gripping my elbow and practically dragging me behind him to his vehicle. He roared like a lion every few minutes on the drive back to the hotel, snarling and baring his teeth. I’d have sworn steam was about to billow out of his ears. “Seriously, are you out of your fucking mind?”

“No, Blaze, I’m not. It’s very much intact.”

“Well, you sure the fuck fooled me with the shit you just pulled out there.”

My entire body winces, fury winding through me so hard my teeth rattle.

I kick off my stilettos and turn to face him, ready for his wrath. He better be for mine, too, because submissive or not, I have no intention of biting my tongue.

Not tonight.



“I knew what I was doing, Blaze. I had plenty of time before someone realized Travis was missing. If either of us failed to follow the rules, it was you. You don’t get to dictate my career, and you sure as hell aren’t going to talk to me like I’m an imbecile.”

Shaking his head, his dark eyes burn through me like hot coals as he whips by me like a tornado set on destruction. He tosses his jacket over the back of the couch, his bag lands on the table with an angry thump and he takes long, purposed strides toward the bar to pour himself a half glass of bourbon. He knocks it back and surprises me when he pours another, handing it off to me.

“No. Don’t you fucking dare. That’s not the issue and you damn well know it. What you did goes so much deeper than the damn rules of our relationship, Kaci.”

“Well, then what are you so angry about?” I take a sip of my drink and move to set it on the island. “Is it because I won’t let you call all the shots out there? Well, I hate to break it to you, Blaze, but you’re not my fucking boss!”

A drawn-out moment passes, and he takes steps toward me until our noses practically touch. His facial expression as readable as I’ve ever seen it.

Anger. Agony. Distrust.

Damn if it doesn’t make me swallow a bit of my own malice, replacing it with unexpected nerves.

“You might want to take a moment to be grateful for that, Kaci.” He throws back another shot of bourbon, eyes still seething as he releases a humorless chuckle.

It pisses me off.

“Really? And why is that?”

“Because if I were your boss, you’d be off this job so fast your head would fucking spin,” he yells, looking at me hard and furious as I gulp at his words, worried he’s right, and Raven will pull me off duty and I’ll be stuck here pacing the floors. The thought fires off every nerve ending like a red-hot flare. “Don’t be fucking surprised if Raven doesn’t do just that. You went off our script and decided to write one of your own.”

“So what?”

“*So what?*” he repeats, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I told you Travis was onto us, and you kept on. I told you to get the fuck out of there and instead, you took it upon yourself to deceive me.”

“I didn’t deceive you, Blaze.”

“Then what the fuck would you call it?” he rails. My expression goes stoic, guilt flooding through me with a vengeance. “Kaci, what you did was a fucking betrayal.”

“That was never my intention.”

“Bullshit,” he spits. “We never discussed any of the shit you pulled tonight. Someone could have seen you slip that shit into Travis’ beer. Someone could have been waiting outside his office for you. He could have given you minutes, *seconds* before he stormed back in. What you did was out of line, especially when you knew the minute he approached you, he was onto you. You should have found a way to tell me, not go off riding on your high horse looking for proof when you

already had it. Drugging him was what saved you. I'll give you that, and maybe I should have gone in there and taken your little ass out of there sooner, so I'll take responsibility for my part, too, Kaci, but you know why I didn't? Because I fucking trusted you. I trusted you to go in and do what we talked about and instead, you went off the fucking rails." He glares down his nose at me, chest heaving as he catches his breath. "Kaci, you could have been fucking killed. Do you even realize that?"

I start to answer him, my stubborn pride still holding onto what tiny thread of reason I'm still clinging to, but as I take in Blaze's expression, my shoulders slump, that last bit of ego going with them. Those dark eyes I'd sought refuge in so many times are tainted with worry, with the thoughts of what could have happened if even one thing had gone differently. His chest rises and falls as he stares down at me, adrenaline still coursing through his veins same as it is mine. When he swallows hard, though, still awaiting my answer, the only feeling I register in my mind is guilt for making him feel so betrayed.

"Look, I know I messed up..."

"You fucking think?"

"Blaze, I couldn't not try one more time to find evidence. Something that would possibly lead us to where he takes the women. I was hoping that maybe we'd find them alive. That maybe Brian was lying."

A sob climbs up my throat, but I choke it down. All it does is gather waves of queasiness in my stomach.

“Kaci, he wasn’t lying. For fuck’s sake, baby. Look, I get it. I understand the guilt. I feel it too, but that is not a good enough excuse for what you did. We had a deal. When I let you have Travis, I told you we do this my way. You get in, you get out. Remember?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer. “And what did do? You wasted your time looking for motherfucking ghosts, Kaci.” He picks up the drives and waves them in my face. “And these? I’ll bet every last dime I have there isn’t shit on them. They were a fucking decoy.” He throws them across the room. As small as they are, they crash against the window loud enough to make me jump. “Travis knew exactly what you were going to do.”

“You can’t be sure of that, Blaze.”

“I’m positive. Just as much as I’m confident that when Raven calls me back, we’ll find out you’ve just fucked this job all to hell. That Travis has disappeared.”

I swallow, searching for anything to grasp onto to give me strength, to make this reality an untruth. I screwed up, and it wasn’t by a little. I made huge mistakes tonight. This could cost me everything. Despite my best intentions, what I did backfired. It’s unforgivable. It’s frightening. Travis could vanish forever and start all over. He could find me or Blaze. He may have even found out about The Oath because of what I’ve done.

Raven will never forgive me for this, and I’m not sure if Blaze will. I can’t even fathom the thought of losing them. It would be as heartbreaking as losing Tara.

His dark eyes flicker over me and for the first time ever, I see something I’ve never seen before seeping out of Blaze

Lennox.

Vulnerability.

Fear.

More accurately, the fear of losing me.

Relief pounds through me that Blaze and I are going to be okay, but Raven? I have no idea where I stand, and I know that if we haven't heard anything yet, it's better for me not to call.

"I'm sorry."

"You should be. You scared the fuck out of me. I could have listened to him blowing your head off. I could have heard someone trying to take you before I got to you. I lost you once, and it ripped my fucking heart out, Kaci. I won't lose you again. If you ever put yourself in a situation like this again, then I'll tell Raven myself you are done being bait." I start to speak, to try and calm his worried mind, but he misinterprets it as me being my typically headstrong, argumentative self and his fingers grip my chin, tipping it upward. "Never again, Kaci. Am I understood?"

My lip quivers as I take in the glassiness of his eyes, darkening the color to jet-black.

The eyes that own me, worship me.

That still want me.

I nod up at him. "I understand."

"Good."

Suddenly, everything in the room stills except the spiking of my pulse and the severity, the savagery radiating from his body. His eyes begin to glint with dominance, and my

fingertips long to run up his abdomen, to trace the deep cuts of muscle in his flesh, get lost in him, but I don't know if it's allowed.

“Blaze?”

“Shh,” he whispers, releasing his hold on my chin and taking a step back. “Undress, kitten.”

Smoke swirls through his eyes, satisfied and sinful. His hands release me completely then, moving with intention to his leather belt. His eyes never leave mine, but the sound of the metal clanking as he unfastens the buckle sends electric heat sizzling through me—a kindling that ignites in my core.

“Do you expect me to repeat myself?” he asks, brow raised expectantly, and I swallow hard.

“No, Sir.” My fingers make quick work with the button on my pants, and I shimmy the leather, along with my thong down my legs, twisting out of them as quickly as I can.

As I kick them free, he pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it carelessly onto the floor. My eyes shift to his chest, to the ink splaying across his skin and I swear to God, it makes my mouth go dry instantly.

“Kneel, Kaci.”

His voice rumbles and quakes through me as his jaw sets.

Fuck, it only makes me need him more.

The man is simply too gorgeous to put into words. So much larger than life itself.

Intoxicating and intense and rough around every defined edge.

I begin to lower, the sound of him clearing his throat reminding me where my eyes belong. I force them away from his body, and back to him. He releases a gritty sound that only spurs me on as I lower to the tiled floor in front of him. They're smooth and cold against my skin, though not near enough to douse out the fire ravaging my insides.

“Present yourself,” he instructs, and I do as I'm told, baring myself to him, legs spread and ready to worship at his feet. Blaze shoves his jeans down, his thick, hard cock springing free. A moan rolls from my lips, desire spreading through my veins. I wrap my hand around the base of his shaft, staring up at him, intoxicated. “Hush,” he whispers, his hand moving to the back of my neck to fist my hair. “This is for my pleasure. It's not for yours. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He nods, beckoning me closer with his finger and I raise onto my knees fully. I savor the feel of him in my hand as I stroke his length. As I lean forward, my hot breath surrounds his cock, making him groan.

I tease him with the tip of my tongue for only a second before flattening it against his base and slowly make my way to the head of his dick. My lashes flutter as I suck the saltiness from the slit and lick the remnants from my lips with a soft purr.

The temptation of tasting him becomes too much to take, and I raise slightly, taking him all the way to the back of my throat. So deep, I nearly choke. My tongue laps around him, my mouth wet and needy for more. Saliva begins to drip from my lips, sliding onto my chin and over his balls.

His jaw twitches when I cup him there, rubbing and stroking them while I continue working my mouth. The bite of the hard tile is unforgiving, promising my knees will be covered in bruises by morning, delicious reminders of my bad behavior. The thought of it makes my lashes flutter slightly before I remember my place and focus my gaze back to his.

“That’s it. Take it deep,” he croons gently, adjusting his grip on my hair to tilt my head back further. His hips begin to move in short, jerky movements, the tip of his dick touching the base of my throat. I gag on it slightly, and it pulls another husky groan from him. “Take all of it in that smart fucking mouth, kitten.”

His gaze never wavers as he takes what he’s owed, what I’m more than happy to give. My eyes begin to water and the sensation of his slick, wet cock sliding across my tongue has my pussy clenching, hot and aching.

Blaze doesn’t let up for several minutes, the man ruthless as he fucks my mouth, every inch of it stuffed with his massive cock. He deliciously uses me as he palms both sides of my head, and thrusts in and out until my mascara is running down my face, blending with my tears. I’m so close to whimpering in need, so close to unclenching my muscles and letting my release fly free in desperation.

He starts to swell in my mouth, and my hips want to rock to seek that friction.

“Don’t you dare come, Kaci,” he warns with a hiss, his breathing labored as his cock pulses against my lips. “I swear to God, if you disobey me again, you won’t fucking sit right for a week.”



His threat sends delirious jolts of pleasure through me, my skin electrified with hungry lust, and all I can do is whimper in anguish around him.

That doesn't go unnoticed, either.

His lips quirk up knowingly on either side as he watches me struggle against the urges coursing through me. The thought of him taking me over his knee, punishing me, make it nearly impossible. He drives into me faster then, biting his lower lip, tipping his head back and a rough, heady growl erupts from his mouth, his hot seed spilling all over my tongue.

“Swallow it all for me, kitten,” he pants. “Don't waste a drop.” I do as he says, lapping at him as he gently massages the back of my hair, easing the sting left behind. After a moment, his fingers move to my chin, angling my face to his. I'm certain I look a mess, my long, blonde hair knotted, and wild, pristine makeup running and smeared. Yet, as Blaze's eyes take me in, the pad of his thumb moving over my swollen, lower lip, his expression is one of devotion. Of pride and desire. “So fucking pretty,” he whispers. “Open your mouth. Show me.” I do, extending my tongue. “Good girl.”

He releases me, holds his hand out to help me stand, and wraps an arm around me, pulling me flush. His other hand immediately moves to one of my quivering thighs.

I'm not sure what to expect now, but he shocks me by pressing his lips against my forehead, my nose, my jaw before kissing me slow and gentle. And as he teases my mouth, his hand slides between my legs, tracing my slit and pulling in a sharp breath at the same time I stifle a scream.

“Please,” I beg, unable to keep my body from quaking in his hold with the overloading sensation he’s forcing through me right now. My vision blurs with tears once more. “Blaze, I need...”

“I know what you need, kitten,” he rasps against my mouth, teasing my parted lips with gentle flicks of his tongue as he punishes me further by gliding his fingertip up and down my folds, pressing on my swollen clit with each pass. “Fucking hell, you’re so wet. Your pretty little clit is vibrating against my finger.” My arousal is dripping from me, coating my thighs and I shudder, earning a sharp smack between the thighs that makes me bite my lip in submission. “The next time I tell you to do something, particularly regarding your safety, are you going to listen?” he asks, his finger dipping inside just enough to pull a sharp gasp from my chest. “I can promise you if you don’t, I’ll be much harder on you next time, kitten. This won’t even compare to what you’ll have coming to you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” I pant, my entire body quaking for him, frantic and pleading.

“I can’t hear you,” he grates, slapping me hard between the legs again. Tears of desperation spring from my eyes and I repeat myself, this time louder. “Good girl.” He lifts me then, walking me toward the bed and lays me down, my legs dangling over the edge as his body cages me in. “Now beg.”

Goosebumps feast on my flesh.

My body ablaze.

Trembling, my hands fist the comforter.

*“Please!”* I finally cry out. “Please, Blaze. I give you my word. I will listen. I will obey you. Please let me come.”

His dark eyes hold my desperate gaze for what seems like forever before finally, his lips begin to twitch slightly in approval.

“That’s my girl.” He lifts himself from the mattress and drops to his knees in one swift movement, sliding his fingers back inside me. Blaze blows on my flesh, and bites my swollen clit, making my hips buck wildly into his mouth as he begins to suck. “Come for me, kitten,” he orders, his deep voice raw and husky. My hand falls into his dark, messy strands and holds on for dear life, praying for the relief I know now only he will ever bring me again. It pulls an approving growl from his chest that sends me over the edge all at once. “And say my fucking name when you do.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Kaci*

The light seeping in from the window tells me I've slept much later than usual. For a moment, I'm in that perfect state of delusion that comes only from exhaustion or too much alcohol.

I wish I could say this was the result of alcohol.

I stretch out, groaning at the reminder of Blaze's punishment as my muscles sear slightly. My much-needed delusion begins to waver, and the knot returns to my throat as I lean up on my elbow, rubbing the sleep from my eyes with a yawn.

"Blaze?" I call out, glancing over my shoulder to find our suite empty, making sense of the silence surrounding me. My eyes move to the side table to check my phone and it's then that I find the note he'd left me behind.

*At the gym. Text me when you wake.*

I shoot him a message, enter the bathroom, and quickly get ready to face the day.

To face my sins.

I've got to talk to Raven.

When Blaze finally got an update last night, Raven confirmed our suspicions that Travis had indeed upped and vanished. He never even made it to the basement before he ran.

Of course, Blaze and I had watched part of this on the surveillance camera. We saw Travis stumble from the back door I'd escaped from only minutes before and climb into the front seat of a silver Aston Martin. The car accelerated so fast, the snipers I never knew were there didn't even have time to take a shot, let alone get a plate number.

By the time Blaze got a phone call last night, Raven refused to speak to me.

It hurt so bad, I thought my heart would give out.

I swear, it felt like death.

Afterwards, Blaze tried to ease my anxiety despite how badly we both knew I'd fucked up, but it was no use. I didn't sleep a wink. Instead, I just laid there like I was shackled to the bed, trying not to wake him. My mind was spinning, tangling in regret so thick I could have choked on it.

There was no escaping the brutal truth that I not only let Blaze and Raven down, but I might also have just ruined any chance we had left of getting justice for the girls we've been fighting so hard for.

The regret returns full force, my body coiling tighter as I cross in the living area, gather my nerve to call the person who'd saved me all those years ago. I wring my hands until

they're nearly as red and raw as my bleeding heart. My stomach begins to lurch, and it takes all I've got to make it back to the bathroom in time. I retch so violently, my throat burns as I empty the contents of my stomach. I straighten my spine and carefully make my way to the sink, splashing cold water over my face before I brush my teeth again until my gums ache.

"You've just got to do it, Kaci," I tell myself, reaching for my phone. "Just make the call and get it over with."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I put the phone to my ear. It rings once before Raven picks up, saying nothing.

"I'm sorry," I start, my voice strained and broken with regret. "Raven, I'm so sorry I screwed up."

Silence hangs in the air for what seems like an eternity but is likely no more than two seconds before I'm granted a reprieve.

"I know, Kaci."

I blow out a deep breath, still a wreck but relieved at least to hear Raven's voice. I know it's just a start, but it's more than I could have hoped for after everything I've caused.

"How bad is it?"

"The Oath wasn't breached," Raven assures me, and I'm slammed with a swelling of relief throughout my entire body. "And we all make mistakes. This? This was a big fucking mistake you made, Kaci, but I know my Keepers. I know this wasn't intentional."

"Of course not," I say immediately, my shoulders slumping as I lean forward, elbows resting on my knees as I pinch the

bridge of my nose. “Raven, I swear to God, I would never do anything to deliberately endanger any of you. You’re my family.”

“We are. And as your family, I’m going to give it to you straight. You made a mistake. That happens to all of us. Believe me, I’m no exception.” Anguish bleeds from those words, and instinctively, my stomach drops, heart throbbing in empathy for Raven. I know there’s a story there, just like I know in the depths of my soul it won’t come. Not yet anyway. Maybe never. Instead, I’m faced with the memory of those brown eyes the night we’d first met, shaded in torturous pain and regret. “But the problem with mistakes is when they’re made from recklessness. That’s what makes this so disappointing, Kaci. I trained you myself. I know you know better.”

“You’re right, I do.”

“Then you know we can’t ignore it.” I swallow hard, nodding dumbly as that knot in my throat returns even harsher than before. “Something good needs to come from this, Kaci, or it was for nothing. I don’t know about you, but I don’t believe in shit happening for no reason.”

“This might be too big for that,” I sigh, surprised but grateful when my words don’t elicit an angry response. “What good can possibly come from this kind of mistake?”

“No mistake is too big to come back from. If it were, I would have never created The Oath.” Raven’s words make my heart stop, the air in my lungs cease altogether for a split second as I try to make sense of them. “It cost me the most important people in my life. People I’ll never have a

relationship with again. They don't even know if I'm alive or dead."

"I don't know what to say to that." Another apology doesn't seem good enough. Nothing is when you lose someone. I can only imagine how torturous it is for Raven to live with whatever mistake breathed life into The Oath.

"You don't have to say anything. Just trust in me like I've always trusted in you. I had my reasons for putting you on this case. Reasons that go beyond The Oath and your role in it. Like I told you, I know my Keepers. Sometimes better than they know themselves. After seeing you and Blaze struggling over the last five years, it was clear the two of you needed to be brought back to each other. Was it wrong to deceive you both? Maybe, but I don't regret it. I meant what I said in my office. The two of you needed to be on this job together, even if it meant The Oath losing one of you." My eyes squeeze closed at Raven's confession, but then rapidly fly back open, fearing the worst. Before I can voice my fear, Raven quiets the thought for me. "You'll always have a place at my table, Kaci, but I need you to take some time and really decide if this is still what you want."

"I don't understand."

"I'm giving you my decision," Raven clarifies. "That's why you called, isn't it?"

"Yes, but-

"One month leave, effective immediately," Raven cuts me off, and my heart begins to crumble as my stomach flips in on itself. "I'm already in transit, heading in your direction to help Blaze finish the job."



“Raven,” I start, my voice shaking in disbelief. “You don’t need to come here. Believe me. It’s never going to happen again, but The Oath is my life. It has been for five years. What am I supposed to do for a month?”

“That’s up to you, Kaci, but if you want my advice, I hope you’ll use it to find some perspective. The Oath has been your life for five years, but things are different now.” I don’t need to hear the words to know Raven is talking about Blaze. I swallow hard. “Decide if it’s still what you want your life to be five years down the road.”

We end the call and for a long while, I simply sit and think over our talk. While there are plenty of things Raven said that weren’t a surprise for me, the things that were have hit me so hard, it takes a minute for me to recover. I can’t make peace with Raven taking any responsibility for my wrongdoings, but a big part of me knows the decision made was exactly right, whether it’s what I knew was needed or not.

Since Blaze had come back into my life, I’ve not only been distracted in the most beautiful ways, but it had also made me take a step back for the first time in years and reevaluate things. Consider possibilities I’d thought had long since been taken out of my reach.

Maybe Raven is exactly right.

Maybe I do need to reconsider a few things now that Blaze and I are revived.

I blow out a long, low cleansing breath and force myself to my feet, desperate for something stronger than the vanilla coffee creamer in our suite. I reach for the key card and pull a twenty from my purse, sliding it into my back pocket. There’s

a barista downstairs who I'm sure can whip up something to help me find the nerve I'll need to break the news to Blaze I'm off the job. Regardless of the anger he had with me last night, how he said if he were in Raven's position, he'd pull me from this job, he knows better than anyone how deeply The Oath becomes a part of us all.

As his partner, I need to inform him.

As his girlfriend, I just need to tell him I'm sorry.

Swinging open the door to the suite, I swipe at my tears, lost in thought. I've not even made it over the threshold before blinding pain shoots across my face, the blow toppling me to the floor. My phone flies out of my hand, skidding across the tile.

The lock on the door clicks, and I try scrambling for my phone, but a steel toed boot smashes into my ribs, knocking the breath out of me. I can't fully inhale before I'm lifted by my hair and slammed against the wall, and glare into eyes that are pure demonic.

Pupils dilated and crazed.

Filled with hatred and flaming with hell.

Travis has found us.

Dread slips down my spine when he brutally grabs hold of my throat and squeezes hard.

The room spins and my vision fogs, leaving nothing but the satisfying smug look on his face.

“You stupid fucking, cunt. Did you really think you could outsmart me?”

Horror tears from my throat, and I grasp onto Travis's wrist, trying to pry them open with my shaking fingers. It's no use. The bastard is stronger than me.

I scream as loudly as I can, calling for help as I push and shove at him. When I dig my nails into his cheeks, he draws his free hand back, and punches me in the mouth. Stars burst behind my lids, and I cough, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth.

"They know who you are. Killing me won't save you," I promise. "It will only mean you being hunted until you're dead."

"We'll see about that now, won't we?" He leans forward, the butt of the gun he's got tucked into the waist of his pants digging painfully into my likely broken ribs. I wheeze in pain, a trail of expletives leaving me. "Now scream again, and I'll slice you wide open and watch you bleed out while I fuck every hole in your body." My eyes squeeze shut tight, the bastard laughing this evil sound that makes my stomach turn. "Tell me your real name."

"Fuck you." I cough and spit in his face, anger surging through me as a sadistic laugh of my own rolls through my bloodied lips. "Does it make you feel like a man to beat and rape a woman? You can do whatever you want to me, but I will never tell you a thing."

"That wasn't a fucking request."

"Then I'd rather die."

"Oh, make no mistake, you're going to, but not until I fill you with my cum." He licks the side of my neck, clawing at

my breast as he keeps me pinned to the wall. If I had anything left in my stomach, it would be covering him right now. As it is, the pressure on my throat has me gagging and fighting for breath. “But first, I’m going to fuck up this pretty face.”

He squeezes my airway so tight, my breathing becomes short and ragged, teetering on the edge of blackness when he drives a fist into my left eye. All I can do is continue to fight and hope Blaze returns and kills Travis before he walks in to find me dead on the floor.

That thought alone has me lifting my legs to knee him in the balls, but I can’t move them; they feel like dead weight.

Panic sets in, fear a living thing in my chest.

My lungs are closing, and for the first time since I became an Oath Keeper, I fear I will die. Pulled into blackness just when the only man I’ve ever loved was brought back into my life.

My lids grow heavy, my mind remembering how unfair life can be, but at least I saw my sister happy, and I know with all my love for her in me, Liam will make sure she’s okay.

“Don’t stop fighting back yet, sweetheart. It makes me harder when they fight. Makes me want to fuck their pussies raw all the more.” The excitement in his voice is terrifying, sickening. “We’re just getting started.”

“You’re insane,” I choke out.

Just as quickly as the words fly out of my mouth, his free hand draws back and connects with the side of my face.

My lungs are burning, barely functioning.

My legs give out, but he doesn't let go of his grip as he pummels my face, laughing with every strike.

Blood sprays everywhere, my lids start to swell, and the pain is excruciating.

I try to let out another scream, but it's no use. My mouth is immediately covered with his putrid hand.

"I'm going to take what you pretended so very well to offer, but I'm not going to do it here. I promised you a trip to my favorite place, and you might not believe me, but I'm a man of my word," he smirks, reminding me of a jackal. "And then I'm going to watch while my partner fucks your bloodied face right before we put a bullet in this pretty little head."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Blaze*

My heart continues to race, adrenaline working through my veins like a drug after my workout as the elevator takes its sweet ass time taking me toward my future.

Toward the woman who starred in every single one of my fantasies while we were apart. The woman who, regardless of the troubles battering her heart, disappointed me last night.

She's hurting, her mind muddled with conflicting emotions. So many more than just her hope those women were alive. I honestly don't think Kaci has come to terms with how much they've clouded her way of thinking. Just as much as I suspect my coming back into her life has risen them to the surface.

I'm not quite over what Kaci did, and I was leery of leaving her to deal with talking to Raven on her own. As much as I wanted to save her from her worry and heartache, it would be crossing another line. One she drew deep in the sand. One she needs to erase herself.

And the greedy part of me doesn't give a fuck if Raven tells her to take some time off. No, that part doesn't care

because she needs it as much as we both need her by my side.

Swiping a towel over my drenched face, I roll my shoulders to help relieve the ache in my muscles from running an extra mile on the treadmill and lifting a few extra pounds. The aggression and turmoil of Travis slipping through our fingers had been burning through me like a wildfire.

Working out has always been an addiction, but more so when I'm on the job. It's a necessity to help eliminate the extra tension from my body, but it also helps clear my mind of everything around me so I can focus. This job seems to require a lot more than usual.

But Kaci was always the fix my body craved. She is again. She always will be.

And until last night, I hadn't realized how deeply I still loved that woman. She tests my dominant patience every damn time she spouts off, but fuck is the reward worth it. For both her and me.

The elevator dings, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I rush down the hallway to get to her. To see how she's holding up. She was a basket of nerves last night, knees juddering while she tried in vain to sleep.

Stopping in front of our suite, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end—unease prickling down my spine like sharp jagged barbs.

Something is wrong.

Silently, I pull my gun out of my bag, open the door quietly, and the eerie stillness burns a hole through the middle of me as I creep in with my finger on the trigger.

I don't need to look around to know Kaci isn't here. Not when the place has been torn apart.

Ransacked.

The couch is flipped over, every door wide open. My equipment is missing, and the bedrooms look like I'm staring at the aftermath of a hurricane.

Terror scrapes across my chest, sinking deep.

I check every room in an uproar of panic. When I see her phone smashed on the floor, an undercurrent of fear drags me down.

"Fuck!" I reel and slam my clenched fists down onto the bar as pain blows my insides apart.

Regret for leaving her alone surges over me like a tidal wave. I lash out, bend to pick up one of the barstools, and send it sailing through the air. It collides against the wall, splintering into pieces and crashing to the floor. That's when I see streaks of blood on the wall, and I drop to my knees, struggling to contain my rage, trying not to let this goddamn fright that Travis has my woman, my lifeline, in his vile hands sway my thinking.

"How the fuck could this happen?" I growl low, dig my phone out of the bag that somehow managed to stay hung around my shoulder and pull up the tracker app to the bracelet. After seconds that feel like an eternity, the blue dot appears on the screen.

They're in transit, twenty miles north of the city in the direction of Travis's house. In two seconds flat, I'm snagging a pair of jeans and a shirt to slip on later and out the door with



my phone at my ear, opting to take the stairs down the twenty flights so no one hears me.

“He has her, Raven. That son of a bitch has her. He trashed the suite, took my equipment, and he’s on his way to his house.” Icy fear clutches me by the throat. Loathing and hostility gnaw at my gut. I could give a rat’s ass if Travis successfully hacked into my laptop. He’d only find my surveillance and the information on him and his grunts. I might have been a dumbass to leave Kaci alone, but I’m not stupid enough to leave shit anywhere connecting me to Raven’s Oath.

“Christ,” Raven hisses. “Motherfuck.”

Before this moment, I thought I knew what fear felt like. It stroked my nerves while I was deployed. Hell, last night, I thought I’d experienced the worst kind of it.

I was wrong.

That was a whisper compared to the terror coursing through me now.

“He’ll rape her, or worse.” I roar, busting through the door and throwing my shirt over my head while running straight for my Suburban. “You better take out every one of your Keepers surrounding this hotel for allowing him to slip passed them. If you don’t gouge out their fucking eyes, I’ll do it myself.”

I check beneath my vehicle for a bomb, for any damn thing that could blow me up or keep me from getting to Kaci. Not finding anything, I climb in, toss my phone on the console, slip off my shorts and pull on my jeans, tucking my pistol into the waistband, and a jackknife in my front pocket.

I crank the engine and peel out of the lot.

“You let me handle them. I’ll take care of the mess he left.” In other words, people will be paid off and threatened with their lives to keep their mouths shut. “I’m on the interstate about ten miles outside the city limits.” Knowing Raven is close should give me a fraction of relief, but it doesn’t. I know nothing will until I see her face and feel her pulse. Until she’s safe in my arms.

“I’m leaving the hotel now. If anything changes, I’ll let you know. And make sure the people you have watching his house are worth a damn to take out his security.”

“They’ll be dead by the time we get there. You need to think with your head, Blaze, not your heart. Don’t you dare attempt to go in there without backup. It’s a trap. I didn’t have it in me to tell either of you, but The Oath was compromised. That’s not important to me. Not as much as Kaci is.”

Questions tumble in my mind, but I’m too worried, too pissed off to ask them right now.

“This situation isn’t going to end like yours did, Raven. I won’t fucking allow it, not after I just got her back. So, don’t you dare tell me what to do. Not when it comes to her. If you beat me to that house, you get Kaci the fuck out, burn the motherfucker to the ground, and you leave Travis for me.”

“Damn it, Blaze, I’m not asking you. I’m giving you a direct order.”

“And what will you do if I don’t listen? Write me up for insubordination? I don’t fucking think so, Raven.” I

disconnect the call, feeling like a rotten piece of shit for rubbing salt into Raven's wounds. "Fucking hell!"

I take a deep breath, slam the pedal to the floor, and weave in and out of traffic, gripping the steering wheel so tightly, the leather threatens to crack.

My insides go ballistic when I notice the blue dot on the tracker stops, and I lift my phone to see Travis made it to his house. I glance at the clock on the dash, estimating I'm about forty-five minutes out.

A lot can happen between now and then, and all I can do the rest of the drive is pray to the God I'll never meet that Kaci is safe.



Once I reach Travis's mansion, I text Raven that I'm here and come to a stop at the open gate. A clear indication he's waiting for me.

That's good.

I want him to know I'm coming for him.

I want him to taste death on his lips before I make him fucking choke on it.

There's a bloodbath all over Travis' pristine grass by the time my I weave through his winding drive, slam the gear into park, and cut the engine. At least five of Travis' security guards are mutilated, and two more are face down at the bottom of the steps leading into his house.

My boots hit the ground, and I reach into the back for my rifle and shove the mag in. Just because I fucking can, I kick the bastards lying in puddles of their own blood in the heads on my way up the steps.

Shards of glass and wood splinter, shattering against the wall behind it as I slam my foot into the door. I step through the foyer, lift my rifle, and sweep the area through my scope, finger ready to blow apart anyone who gets in my line of sight.

An ear-splitting cry from upstairs halts me in my tracks, and I turn around, dread bubbling in my throat.

“Please, stop!” she screams. The plea in Kaci’s voice slides down my spine, her agony smashing my heart into thousands of throbbing pieces.

Instead of letting the rattling terror in my chest take over, I take a deep breath and allow my monster to unleash himself completely.

He’s seething. His fury blinding, stabbing through my veins like a red-hot blade, ready to rage and kill.

Another scream has my feet thumping up the steps, my heart leaping in my chest, and I pass several rooms with open doors before a low, pained whimper comes from the room at the end of the hall.

The door is closed, unlike the others.

I’m ready to launch myself in that direction and take back what’s mine when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Before I can twist around, a stinging blow cracks across my back that forces me to stumble forward, my legs almost giving out.

The second I right myself, the cold tip of a knife digs into the side of my neck against my jugular.

“Give me the rifle, asshole,” Travis barks, a note of satisfaction in the voice I’d identify out of a shouting crowd. Christ knows I’ve heard it enough; I couldn’t mistake it if I wanted to.

“Make me, you sick fuck!” I shout, trusting the level of my own voice will reach Kaci’s ears. I want her to know I’m here. That she needs to hold on for just a little longer.

The blade glides along my throat, the tip nicking my Adam’s apple enough for a trickle of blood to drip down my neck. I don’t swallow, don’t show a damn ounce of emotion. I’ve been well trained in the military not to.

He leans in close, his eyes glinting with sickening excitement for my imminent death. He doesn’t realize that won’t fucking happen unless he slices me open right now.

He might have my rifle. Hell, he might confiscate my other weapons, too, but until I take my last breath, they aren’t his biggest threat.

My fists are the most dangerous things inside this house right now and this dumb fuck neglected to secure those.

“You aren’t in charge here.” Spit flies from his lips and lands on my cheek. I don’t blink a lash, but I do allow him to see my hatred.

“I don’t think you are either,” I say roughly, immediately sensing the truth with a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth.

“I don’t give a fuck what you think.” He yanks the rifle out of my hand, sheathes his knife at his hip, and positions himself behind me, ramming the muzzle into my back. “Lead the way. It’s time for the fucking party.”

Kaci screams so loud, my lungs crash under the weight of it and maniacal laughter spews from his mouth.

“Music to my ears,” he taunts, making my blood boil into lava. My fists clench, desperate to spin around and bash in his fucking face. He uses the muzzle to apply pressure at my spine, goading me as he shoves me forward. “You ready to watch that little bitch of yours be used up like the whore she is?”

The storm inside me rages at his name calling.

The bastard needs dead already.

Placed six feet under.

Wrapped in chains in hell.

“You have no idea who you’re fucking with right now,” I fume. “No fucking clue.”

“Oh, I do, and I’m holding all the cards,” he gloats. “I used to be just like you. I used to let love rule me, take control of my actions without thought. When she broke my heart, I thought I’d die without her, but then something beautiful happened. Do you want to know what that was?” I grunt my answer, taking another step as I calculate my next move. “I realized just how much money I could make off her. It turns out you can put a price on love, and it’s a pretty fucking penny, brother.”

“I’m not your fucking brother.”

“Maybe not, but just like me, you enjoy inflicting pain on others. You enjoy taking lives that aren’t yours to take.”

“Don’t compare yourself to me. You prey on innocents, but me? It’s people like you who I enjoy shooting in the head. Big fucking difference, fucker,” I snarl. I’m dying to pull out my knife, twist it through his black heart and shoot whoever the fuck is behind that door torturing Kaci.

“Well, isn’t it a shame you won’t succeed this time?” The confidence in his tone has me smirking. “You know, I thought about killing your sweet little thing, but I changed my mind because you, Raven’s Oath, and that bitch in there stuck your noses into business you shouldn’t have. It was damn hard not to bend her over the couch, hold a gun to her head and fuck her before slicing her up. Now, you’ll suffer as much as she will while I make you watch her being fucked ragged. I’ll make a lot of money selling the video, but first, answer one question.” He laughs again, his mouth close enough to the back of my neck to send another wave of fury through my chest. “Was she worth it, asshole? Knowing what you know now, how it’s all going to end, was she worth losing your life, Keeper?”

My military training comes back to me in a flash, reminding me of countless missions, countless times I’d looked death in the eye and blew it a kiss right before I sunk a bullet into the enemy’s skull.

Today will be no exception.

*Live by The Oath. Die by the blade.*

Today, I fucking live.

And so the fuck will she.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Blaze*

Something that sounds like a whip meeting flesh cracks through the other side of the door, immediately followed by an agonizing wisp of a whimper. The evidence that Kaci's barely hanging on springs me into action.

The thought of both Travis' and this mysterious person's hands, and what they've done to so many countless women, including mine, only infuriates me more.

"To answer your question, yes. She's more than fucking worth it." My jackknife is out of my pocket then, flipped open and lodged into the center of his left palm before he can take his next breath.

Shock morphs across his features, blood seeping from the wound and painting the floor at our feet. It's hot and sticky against the pads of my boots, and I savor the thought of his death being so close now, I can taste it.

His will to fight back leaves him instantly, and my rifle hits the floor with a loud thud. I kick it out of my way, grip the wrist of his other hand and slam his arm against the wall,

breaking every one of his fingers before wrenching the knife free and stabbing through the middle of his right palm.

He'll never use these hands to hurt another woman again.

Hell, once I'm finished with this piece of human filth, he won't ever taint the earth again with his sullied mind.

"The man tearing into your woman's body knows we're out here," he sneers at me through his anguish, his eyes filled with a mix of agony and absolute hatred. I know the look well. "You kill me and that little whore is as good as dead. Same thing goes for Raven's Oath."

There's no sign of his lie as he fiercely keeps eye contact with me, but I can smell it just as strongly as I can his fear.

They both smell like bullshit.

A heaping pile of it.

I've got enough common sense to know the person behind that door doesn't give a flying fuck about Travis. Not just that, he'd be dumber than a box of rocks to place The Oath in the hands of the authorities or anyone else that could possibly bring it to the ground. Any entity with that kind of power would sniff out the blood on their hands long before they came knocking at Raven's door.

No, this person cares about something else. He wants something and needs The Oath to get it.

If that weren't the case, I'd be no more than another body littering Travis' lawn by now.

Not that it matters. I couldn't give two shits who these people are or what they want. I'm done fucking around.

All that matters right now is my woman needs me and I'm coming to fucking save her.

"I'll take my chances," I ground out as I shove his free hand, still bleeding like a sift, roughly between his teeth. He hisses, his breath a weak rasp, face scrunched in pain. "You like to choke out women, motherfucker?" I ask him, lodging my arm under his throat and applying enough pressure he's unable to open his mouth. I want him to know how his blood tastes. Lord knows, plenty of innocents have tasted theirs because of him. He gags and whimpers on his own flesh and I hum to the symphony of his pain. "Let's see how much you like it now."

With that, I pull the knife from his now useless hand, relishing in the sound of his body as it hits the floor with a heavy thump. I drag him to the French doors overlooking the immaculate grounds.

"You were already dead before I ever walked into this motherfucker, but your biggest mistake was putting your hands on my woman. You never should have touched what's mine."

I spit in his face, watch his eyes bulge beautifully before I toss his mangled body over the edge of the cold stone balcony, leaning forward to watch it splatter on his driveway.

I don't take the time to stay and admire my work. Instead, I release a roar of rage, knowing I'm just getting started and whirl around, eyes locked on the door standing between Kaci and me.

I barge through it, immediately crashing into a video camera in the corner when I make contact.

“You sick son of a-”

The words die in my mouth.

Disintegrate into ash as my vision clouds with unshed tears.

My heart. My breathing.

It all comes to a screeching halt when I see her.

Never in all my years of fucking people up have I seen someone as brutally beaten as Kaci.

My kitten is a bloodied mess. Her nose is smashed, both of her beautiful eyes blackened and swollen shut. Bloody spit drooling from her slackened mouth. Her gorgeous, naked body is covered head to toe in nasty welts and she has her arms wrapped tightly around her stomach, like she’s holding her insides in place. Her wheezy breaths and the gentle, almost invisible rise and fall of her chest is the only indication that she’s even still alive. The only evidence my girl is still fighting through the abuse her fragile, petite frame has endured. Her legs are spread wide, secured with rope to the same frilly pink bed as Allison in the video I’d found on Brian’s phone.

They’ve been performing their disgusting acts from this very fucking room.

And now, they’ve got Kaci.

Jesus Christ.

And next to the bed stands the man in the mask, a whip I would only use for her pleasure, never her pain, is resting lazily around his neck. Like he’d left it there as an afterthought and not just used it to beat her to within an inch of her life.

He's panting profusely, his sausage like fingers holding a gun to her head as he tucks his pathetic dick back into his pants.

My eyes immediately swing to the space I'd worshipped between Kaci's legs, and I tremble so fucking hard, worry seeping out of my pores at the possibility that he'd raped her. With the amount of blood still oozing from the vicious gashes marring her perfect skin, it's impossible for me to tell.

What I do know is there's a feeling coursing through my raging, hate filled veins, in ways it never has before. This rotten, lowlife, sick piece of shit just fucked with the wrong man's woman.

I'll tend to her first, there's no question about that, but I swear on everything holy, I won't stop hunting him until this bastard is burnt to the fucking ground.

"Drop. Your fucking. Weapon." I growl through clenched teeth, my vision red and marred with so much anger, so much agony and fury, I can't see anything else. "And back the fuck up. Now!" I roar, so loud, I swear the room around us vibrates and shakes. The sound of Kaci's low whimper tugs my glance to her, and her eyes widen as much as they can when she realizes I'm here, her broken sobs sending fire into my lungs. Tight knots of misery stretch taut and tight in my stomach, threatening to snap. "I'm here, kitten. I've got you."

I speak to her sweetly, tenderly.

When my eyes sweep back, though? Only feet away from the psycho who did this to her?

Nothing but sweltering anger howl through me, desperate for a way out.

For a way to kill.

A way to get to her.

Wrap her up and breathe life back into those lungs that are barely moving.

I hate myself for leaving her.

I swear to Christ I never will again.

“Shut the fuck up.” There’s something familiar about his voice, something I can’t quite put my finger on. My gut tells me exactly what it is, but my mind argues the thought. “You’re a hard man to find, Blaze. Please don’t disappoint me and tell me you’ve come here all alone.”

Every muscle inside me tenses to the point they freeze.

Locking up tight.

There’s no way in hell the person behind this fucked up shit is who I think he is.

Yet, it must be.

Though he’s put on several pounds since the last time I saw him, there’s no denying it. If he took off the mask, the curve of his jaw, his nose and eyes would be damn near identical to the face I’ve looked into more times than I can count.

“I’m all you got, Senator Black,” I grit, suddenly aware of the gun tucked into the waistband of my jeans.

“Well, isn’t that a shame?” His words are filled with disappointment while darkness threatens to raid my vision. I shake my head trying to clear the fog that this man, if you want to even call him one, *this* fucking piece of trash, the

reason behind The Oath forming to begin with, is standing feet away from me, holding my *life* in his hands.

One wrong move on my part, and he'll shoot her.

Steal the last bit of her breath away, taking her from me all over again.

Only this time, it'll be forever.

My stomach lurches at the thought.

He grabs the end handle of the whip so fast I don't have time to blink. The blood drains out of my face when he cracks her across her breasts, ripping into her flesh. Her screams are so earsplitting, they dry out my mouth and scrape like jagged edges of a knife down my throat.

Instinctively, I reach for my gun.

"Get those hands where I can see them or she dies," he promises.

I do as he orders, and he flicks his wrist, issuing another strike. Her back bows, her sobs echoing violently through the air. I grit my teeth, pulse racing, heart shattering with helplessness as I wrack my brain looking for ways to stop this. To save her from this hell.

When he drops the third strike, this one over her hands resting on her stomach where she's already sustained the worst of the gashes, she releases out another deafening, anguished howl that pierces my soul.

"Come on, Blaze," he taunts, wicked amusement staining his voice. "Beg me to let her go."

"You sick fuck!" I roar.

Without thinking, I dive through the air, fueled by my love for Kaci. Shock flickers through his eyes when my hand wraps around the barrel of his gun, wrenching it clear from his hands.

Quick and sharp as I've always known him to be, he clocks me upside my head, and I stumble backward, catching myself before landing on top of Kaci's bloodied frame.

"Kaci, say something," I command her gently, desperate to get her to speak, hoping the sound of my voice is enough to keep her with me until either Raven can get here, or I kill this sick bastard. "Baby, please tell me you're okay."

She releases a low, almost barely audible whimper and it's enough for me to know she can hear me. Enough to know she's still breathing, still fighting to stay with me.

It's exactly what I need to finish this.

I'm on him in a flash, picking him up by the collar of his suit jacket and hauling his fucking ass away from the bed.

I snarl, rip off the mask and look into the same brown eyes I'd suspected since I first heard his voice, and I scream into his terrified face. Before he can even begin to beg for his pathetic life, I slam my fist into his face repeatedly.

I won't stop until his last worthless breath.

He's going to pay for what he's done to those women.

He's going to suffer, bleed from his pores for ever daring to come near mine.

It's not until a pair of black boots identical to the ones I'm wearing come into view that I slow my assault. I don't stop fully until I hear Raven speak my name.



I glance up at his signature trench coat sweeping open as he lifts an arm, aiming his Glock at the man chest.

“I’ll take it from here.” Those old wounds of Raven’s bleed and weep from his mouth as he keeps his eyes locked on the bloodied face beneath me. Slowly, Raven tilts his head, attempting to get a better look. “Take Kaci home now. The Oath’s doctor is on his way to your place.”

My chest is still raging with heavy breaths as I release my grip on him and his heavy body falls against the floor at Raven’s feet. I forget his existence completely as I whip around and move toward her, desperate to get to her as quickly as I can.

“Kaci?” I call out frantically, untying the binds at her ankles before wrapping her battered frame in a blanket and cradling her to my chest. “I’m right here, kitten. Please say something.”

She coughs, gasping air into her exhausted lungs, but no words come out of her mouth as I slip from the room.

The raised voices behind me echo loudly, ringing in my ears.

“There he is. My one and only son. The man who walked out of the family business. The man I spent years trying to find, only to learn he turned into a monster after all. Just like me,” Raven’s father says, and fuck all if my heart doesn’t cramp at what this is going to do to my brother.

I couldn’t tell Kaci, but I understood better than anyone why this job had been so different for us. Why it had been so hard on Raven.

It was almost exactly the same thing that happened to him. So similar, a person couldn't have made it up if they tried.

“Fuck you, *Senator Black*,” Raven hisses. “I stopped being your son the day you took something from me. The day I found out wickedness lives in your veins. I’m no monster, father, but I’ve got enough of you inside me to know I’ll see you in hell.”

Before Raven’s father can say anything in return, eighteen bullets unload from Raven’s gun, silencing him for good.

One for each year he lived under the senators’ roof before his world crumbled to the ground.

## EPILOGUE

*Kaci*

The citrusy scent of peonies fills my senses from the summer breeze as it comes off the lake. The sheer white fabric billows beyond the window, and I inhale deeply, smiling so wide I wouldn't be surprised if my face cracks as I glance at the beautiful pinks, golds, and blues that cascade across the wide, perfectly manicured lawn.

If you'd come here any other day, you'd never recognize this as Blaze's private residence. It's been transformed into one of the most breathtaking, romantic places I've ever seen.

Just perfect for a day like today. A day I'm grateful to be alive to witness.

If it weren't for the bracelet and Blaze acting quickly on his feet, I might not be. Although the only thing I recall after that last blow from the whip was Blaze's arms and vaguely the sound of Raven. I do know from Blaze telling me that Senator Black, whom I had never even heard of, was the man behind the mask. The man I'm trying, and one day will succeed in,

shoving into the closet of my mind with my childhood demons.

And, of course, Raven cleaned up the entire mess. Senator Black's body won't ever be found, just like all the rest of the mark's taken out by Raven's Oath.

How he manages to do all he does will forever remain a mystery to me. Honestly, I don't think I ever want to know, but something is going on with Raven still. Something that's troubling me, and I wish there were a way I could save him the way he keeps on saving me.

A gentle knock comes at the door, and I've never been more thankful for someone interrupting my thoughts than when I turn to see Lily pushing her way inside. Today is a happy day and remembering will drag me into murky waters. Since I'm not as good at hiding my emotions as I thought I was, I can't let that happen.

I refuse on this day.

"Your husband is going to go out of his mind when he sees you in that, Lily," I tell her when she shuts the door. Her hair is up in a twist, her rosy colored knee-length matron of honor dress hugging her curves, held up by two thin straps.

I shake my head at how she's shrunk right back to her tiny self after delivering her and Ezra's son, Maddox, four months ago. A week after the hardest case I've ever worked on had finally come to an end. A case that will forever haunt the families of those women whose bodies will never be located.

"And your man is going to do the same when he sees you." Her response is soft, full of affection and happiness for me.

She's been on cloud nine since I told her mine and Blaze's story once I was strong enough. She and Ezra drove from their home in Colorado and stayed here for a week helping Blaze and Tara take care of me. They brought Maddox with them, and just seeing him took so much of my mental anguish away. "The guests are starting to arrive. You have about twenty minutes or so."

"Thank you," I whisper, blowing out another deep breath.

"Are you okay?" She frowns, crossing the room to stand next to me, and I swallow around the lump that decides to clog up my throat.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, to be honest, you look like you want to vomit."

She knows me well. I definitely want to do just that.

"I'm fine. It's my nerves. I don't know why they are getting to me. It's silly, really. Especially when I saw this day coming from a mile away."

"I think we all did," she says quietly with a sigh. "But it's a big day, and you're allowed to be a little nervous."

"Well, I shouldn't be more nervous than the bride," I reason. "Now that the time is almost here, I'm one breath away from having a panic attack."

"Speaking of me," Tara calls out from the bathroom, the sound of lace swishing when she walks out, giving me my first view of the bride to be in her wedding dress. Of course, I'd seen her in the dress when we went shopping, and my emotions were all over the place then. They are flopping around uncontrollably now. "How do I look?"

“Oh, my God!” Lily gasps, squeezing my shoulder when I raise my hands to my face, and tears prick my eyes. “Tara, you’re absolutely stunning!”

*No truer words have ever been spoken*; I think as I take the beauty of my sister in. The champagne-colored vintage-style dress with cap sleeves and crocheted detail moving all the way down the train is perfect for her. Just like the man she’s about to marry. A man who has proven he’s worthy of her.

“You look beautiful, Tara,” I manage through my emotions, taking a few steps closer to her to get a better look. Her long hair flows down her back in waves, swept off to the side the way she used to tell me she wanted it to be when we’d dream of this day. “Everything is just perfect.”

“Thank you but could you do me a favor and not cry again? You’ll have Lily and me crying, too. All our makeup will be ruined, so do your job as the mother of the bride and help me with my veil,” she teases, and for a reason she’s unaware of, I stifle a gasp.

“Don’t you mean big sister?” I toss my ongoing joke at her, and my heart stutters, my gratitude toward Blaze shaking the ground beneath my feet as I move across the room.

Thanks to him, Tara’s dreams are coming true.

He was all for hosting the wedding here when I asked. He dug right in and helped. I’ll never know how I have lived without that man for so long, but I know I’ll never walk away from him again.

Not only that, but this is where he brought me to heal. Unless you count the numerous times we’ve traveled back and

forth to Chicago to help Tara finally get settled in her new house, I haven't left since.

Not even for a job.

I lean over to retrieve the veil from the dresser and push away the second round of nausea since I woke up this morning. Hot beads of sweat move over my brow, and I swipe them away, careful not to be noticed.

“Everyone decent?” Blaze’s deep voice seeps through the door before he carefully cracks it open, just enough that all I catch are those black as night eyes.

“Yes, but you can’t come in here!” Tara shouts. “It’s bad luck!”

“I’m pretty sure it’s only bad luck if the groom sees you before,” he reminds, waltzing in and looking as good as I’ve ever seen him in his black suit. “Believe me, Liam will see you alright. You look gorgeous.” He tosses her a wink and shifts his gaze to me. I pay him no more attention until I have Tara’s veil in place. The second I do, he’s wrapping his arms around my stomach, and placing his wide palms flat against me, his lips going to my ear. “You look good enough to eat, kitten.” He whispers low enough Tara and Lily can’t hear him. Thankfully, they’re both so wrapped up in last minute adjustments, they don’t notice our private conversation. One palm lowers discreetly, landing between my legs, and he gives my pussy a squeeze. “You feeling alright?”

“Yes,” I nod, keeping my voice low, not taking my eyes off Tara. “You’d better behave yourself, Sir. I’m pretty sure this baby growing inside of me started with your mouth right where you’ve got your hand at.”

My playful words pull a quiet chuckle from his lips that vibrates against my back.

It's my symphony.

"Why don't you just tell her?" he asks, threading his fingers into mine over my stomach. "She's going to be thrilled."

"I know she is, but this is her day and I'm not taking it from her," I insist. "It's making me crazy, not sharing with her, but Tara deserves this. I mean, look at her, Blaze. She's glowing."

"So are you," he presses his lips to my hair. "We've been holding onto it for a week already. I suppose one more day won't hurt. That's all you're getting, though, kitten. I want everyone to know you're having my baby."

"*Our* baby," I remind him for the hundredth time since we found out I was pregnant.

I force myself away from him, clearing the distance and coming to a stop behind my sister, my heart soaring once she turns to face me.

"I'd better get back out there," Blaze says as he leans in to give Tara a sweet kiss on the cheek. "The groom is chomping at the bit. We best not keep him waiting."

"Blaze thank you again," she says sincerely, giving him a tight hug and beaming from ear to ear as she pulls away. "Everything is so beautiful."

"You're welcome."



He gives me a quick kiss and I watch him as he goes, the sight of him as he makes his way out onto the back lawn enough to take my breath away all over again. Seeming to sense my eyes on him, he glances back toward the window and gives me a gentle smile, one that speaks to where we've been, but most importantly, where we're headed.

It speaks to the revival that took place in both our hearts.

"It's time," Lily announces. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Tara replies, and I bite my tongue as Lily pulls the door shut behind her. "Are you ready to give me away, sister?"

"Are you kidding me? I've been trying to get rid of you for years."

"You're such a liar," she laughs, pulling me in for a hug. "I love you."

"I love you, too, sister," I promise. "Always."



Raven's story, [Retribution](#), is coming 2023.

Want to read Ezra and Lily's story?

You can find it here in [Relinquish](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Kathy Coopmans*

*USA Today* Best Selling and multiple Amazon top 100 Author Kathy Coopmans is a Michigan native where she lives with her husband, Tony. They have two sons Aaron and Shane.

She is a sports nut. Her favorite sports include NASCAR, Baseball, and Football.

She has always been an avid reader and at the young age of 50 decided she wanted to write. She claims she can do several things at once and still stay on task. Her favorite quote is “I got this.”

### CONNECT WITH KATHY

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TikTok

*Professional Inquiries*

Kathy is represented by SBR Media. For inquiries regarding foreign rights, audio, and other media outlets, please contact Stephanie Phillips. [stephanie@sbrmedia.com](mailto:stephanie@sbrmedia.com)

*Kate Benson*

Kate Benson was raised in Texas and currently resides in central Florida with her husband and their fur-boy, Boomer. She learned to read at the age of four and has been hooked ever since.

She credits her passion for literature to her mother, her love of story-telling to her father and her unwavering faith in happily-ever-after's to her husband, Sean.

Some of her favorite things include rainy days, loud music, superhero movies, sweet tea and of course, lazy afternoons with a great book.

To find out more about Kate, her work or to just say hello, she loves hearing from her readers and can be found on social media.

To be sure you never miss a release or announcement, join her readers group on Facebook, [Benson's Book Babes](#) and sign up for her [newsletter](#).

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