



TAMED

JACKIE
ASHENDEN

An Arcadia Novel

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JACKIE ASHENDEN

*Welcome to Arcadia...where every dark fantasy can be yours.
For a price.*

Caleb

I'm a man without limits, except for one: my best friend's daughter. Isabel is a tempting little brat, but she's definitely off limits. She's too young, and far too innocent, and I'm not the right kind of man for that. My tastes run toward the dark side. When she shows up at my sex club spoiling for a fight, I'm tempted to give her one...and a punishment she won't soon forget. I'm sure that I can scare her away, but when I tell her to call me daddy, she doesn't run. She obeys.

Isabel

I've had a crush on my dad's best friend for years, but who knew he wasn't just hot? He's also kinky, and he makes me want to do very bad things. He makes me call him daddy, and I want him to take care of me, and corrupt me in a hundred different ways. But when I start to want more than sex, Caleb is clear: He'll take care of me, give me boundaries, make me his little girl, but he'll never fall in love.

Unless I can change him.

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Isabel

“I have to say, Isabel, I’m very disappointed in you.” Caleb’s hard black stare bored steadily into mine. “I expected better.”

Caleb Cross. Certified asshole, well known slave driver, CEO of Cross International, a Fortune 500 investment company, with offices around the globe, head office currently based in New York.

Also, my boss.

Also, one of my dad’s closest friends.

I’d known him all my life and when Dad had asked him to give me a position interning at Cross International, I’d been thrilled. Cross was a prestige company and working there was going to give me great experience for when I finally took over as CEO of Fox Tech, my father’s company. Also, Caleb was a brilliant businessman, and even though he was reputed to be somewhat of a tyrant as a boss, he paid his staff *extremely* well and apparently they all loved him.

To say I was pumped to start work there would have been to understate my excitement.

Then I actually started work, and it soon became rapidly clear that the rumors of Caleb being a tyrant were absolutely true. He *was* a tyrant, and the only question that remained was

whether he was a prick to all his employees or whether he was just a prick to me.

Now I'd been there a whole month, I decided that he was just a prick to me.

He sat behind his desk in the massive corner office that overlooked Manhattan like the Death Star overlooking Alderaan, lounging in his CEO-registered black leather chair as if he was Darth Vader himself. And even though I was starting to resent him with all my being, even now I had to acknowledge once again my secret shame.

He was hot.

He was just. So. *Hot*.

Six foot five and built like a Greek god, he wasn't typically handsome — his face was too rough-hewn for that — but he was so charismatic you literally couldn't take your eyes off him.

He had this intense energy, something kinetic that set the air humming whenever he was in a room, that made everyone in it sit up and look around to see what the fuss was about.

It was him. He was the fuss. With short black hair, straight black brows, and eyes dark as midnight, the man put Lucifer himself to shame. His features were all hard angles and brutal planes, like someone had taken a chisel to him and hadn't bothered to smooth out the edges. Not that Caleb needed smoothing. He was too much as he was.

Anyway, he was gorgeous and I had a crush on him a mile wide and needless to say I was angry about it. After all, he was nearly twenty years older than me, used to look after me when I was a kid, and still saw me that way if I wasn't much mistaken. *And* he was also one of Dad's best friends, so completely off limits.

I was also angry because he was still gorgeous even when he was being a complete asshole and calling me out for being late. By two minutes.

I glared at him. "Sorry," I said, not sounding sorry at all.

Caleb looked at me with that intense, laser focus, as if he wasn't just memorizing my face, but memorizing every cell of my being. It was disconcerting, mainly because I found it such a turn on.

Mentally I cursed my father for getting me this job and then I cursed myself for taking it. What the hell had I been thinking? I'd heard the rumors of his dictatorial management style, but I'd assumed that since I was a family friend, I wouldn't have to deal with that bullshit.

How wrong I'd been.

"I don't know that you are," Caleb said. "Because if you were, you'd be on time."

"The subway—"

"Don't give me excuses." His voice was deep, almost a subsonic rumble. "If you're late tomorrow, you're out. Understand me?"

I could feel my cheeks heating even as I fumed silently, and the blush didn't help my temper.

There was no reason for me to feel ashamed, not over two minutes, and I hated that I did. I also hated how he made me feel like a naughty child called to the principal's office for punishment.

Are you sure you hate that? Don't say you wouldn't love to be turned over his knee.

My hands clenched into fists as the thought popped into my head fully formed. Of me, face down and spread over Caleb's powerful thighs, while he—

No. *Hell* no.

I was not going into full-on fantasy mode right here in his office, with him staring at me. That was for later, in the privacy of my own bedroom for God's sake.

Anyway, I didn't know why he was being such an asshole. He wasn't normally. The Caleb I'd known growing up had been kind and understanding, always ready to listen and provide support. A man who'd once been like an uncle to me

and who'd used to take my side whenever Dad was being his usual over-protective dad self.

Yet as a boss he was a demanding, driven perfectionist, who did not allow any kind of mistakes. Which would have been fine if he'd also been fair. But he wasn't fair. It felt as if he'd singled me out for special attention and not the good kind.

Perhaps it was because he and Dad had given me the job here and he didn't want to show me special favors. Whatever, it was annoying and so much for nepotism.

"It was two minutes, Caleb." I tried to keep my voice neutral. "Not two hours."

He merely raised one black brow. "What did I say about excuses?"

I clenched my jaw hard against the 'fuck you' that threatened to spring out. Arguing with him was useless and anyway, I didn't want to argue with him. Not a good look to argue with the boss when he'd only given me this job as a favor to Dad.

I'd wondered off and on if he was being an asshole to test me because I hadn't earned my position here like everyone else. I'd even wondered if he hadn't wanted to give me the job and was trying to get rid of me, though that was unlikely.

He wasn't a man who'd ever had a problem saying exactly what he thought or doing exactly what he wanted, and if he hadn't wanted me on staff, he'd have simply said no to Dad.

No, it was probably a test. In which case there was no way I was going to fail it.

I needed this job. It was my chance to prove that while I might speak my mind more than was appropriate – my bullshit tolerance threshold was low – and could be difficult at times, I was trying to be better.

Dad had given me a talking to the previous week about how my lack of personal self-control was a concern. He told me he'd gotten me a job with Caleb and that this was my chance to prove I could be the daughter he wanted to take over

Fox Tech, because if I couldn't, he was going to have to rethink his choice of successor.

It was sobering and it made me feel ashamed of myself.

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth.

"If you don't want this job, Isabel, you only have to say." Caleb leaned back in his chair, his elbows resting on the arms, his long-fingered hands loosely linked. Today, he was wearing an impeccably tailored suit in dark blue wool and a crisp white shirt. The jacket was slung over the back of the chair, and he had the top couple of buttons of his shirt undone, no tie. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to expose muscular forearms. The lines of one of his intricate blackwork tattoos licked down the olive skin of his left arm, nearly to the heavy platinum band of his Philippe Patek watch.

God, there was something about a big watch on a man's strong wrist. It made my mouth go dry and unfortunately it was dry now.

I needed to get over myself. I was twenty-three, not sixteen, and he'd watched me grow up. I should not be getting all hot and bothered over his stupid watch.

"I do want the job," I said woodenly.

He frowned. "You'll have to be more convincing than that, Isabel. I have a hundred other people all desperate to take it if you don't."

"Yes." I tried to keep a grip on my patience. "I do want the job."

His rough features betrayed nothing, his black eyes impenetrable. "Then you'll be on time tomorrow, won't you?"

"Caleb, I—"

"Won't you?"

Asshole. Asshole. Asshole.

"Yes," I forced out. "I'll be on time tomorrow."

"Because that's what you're wasting. Time. *My* time. Mine and my company's. And I do hate a time waster, Isabel."

He always called me Isabel, even back when I was little. When everyone else called me Izzy, I was Isabel to him. I'd always liked that. It used to make me feel grown-up. Now though, it had the opposite effect and I felt about two inches tall.

I knew I should keep a grip on my temper but living with an over-protective control freak in the form of my father, I'd developed a healthy dislike of being told what to do. I absolutely hated it now.

"Then why did you waste ten minutes of your precious time chewing me out for the sake of two minutes?" I snapped.

Of course, as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted it.

Dad would be even more disappointed in me than he already was if Caleb fired me because I couldn't control my tongue; he didn't think much of people who couldn't control themselves, especially when he had a multi-billion-dollar company he wanted to pass on. *'If you can't hold down a job, Izzy, how the hell are you going to manage being CEO?'*

It was a good question and one I had no answer to. I just hated unfairness. I hated being talked down to and dismissed, and I hated it even more when men were doing the dismissing. Perhaps if I was CEO, it would be different, but no amount of telling Dad that had made him change his mind.

I had to do my trial at Cross International and that was that.

A trial that looked like I was on the point of failing right now.

I braced myself, waiting for the ax to fall, trying to look meek and mild, but probably only ending up looking sullen and belligerent.

Caleb pinned me with that hard, black stare for what seemed like a whole lot of long, uncomfortable eons, his features unreadable.

Then unexpectedly, he smiled.

It was a lightning strike that smile, arrowing through my body, pure electricity. His smile had always had that effect on me, making me forget what I was doing. Making me forget my own name.

“Good point,” he murmured. “Run along then, there’s a good girl.”

The casual dismissal instantly got my back up and I could feel yet more hot words pouring into my mouth. This time, though, I had enough presence of mind to bite them back, turn on my heel and stride for the exit before they burst out and dug the hole I’d already dug for myself even deeper.

I wanted to slam the big double doors of his office, but I wasn’t a rebellious teenager anymore, so I closed them very gently before stalking past Sally’s desk in the direction of the elevator.

Sally was his chief secretary and she guarded him like a lioness with a favorite cub. She was in her sixties, with expertly coiffed platinum hair and the most exquisite bone structure. It gave her an ageless, slightly distant quality, as if she was an angel on some higher plane of existence to the rest of humanity.

Armored in classic Chanel, she gave me an intent, assessing stare as I went past, no doubt x-raying me for any possible threat to her beloved employer.

It was ridiculous. As if I could be any threat to that asshole. Though to be fair, in that moment, I might have punched him in the face if I’d had been given half the chance.

“Everything okay, Miss Fox?” she asked with icy precision as I paused in front of the elevators.

“He’s fine.” I punched the button with a little more force than was strictly necessary. “Is walking and talking and has all his limbs last I checked.”

Sally sniffed disapprovingly and I was so mad I wanted to punch her too.

Run along, he’d said. There’s a good girl.

As if I was a naughty kid at school who needed a late slip.

Asshole. Why was he making my life so difficult? Why?

Mercifully at that moment the elevator dinged, and the doors opened, and I was able to escape.

As the elevator went down from his lordship level to peasant level, I leaned against the back wall and let out a long, shaken breath.

I didn't know why I'd let him get to me the way I had. It shouldn't matter, yet somehow it did. It was as if he was trying to make me quit, trying to make me fail and I hated that thought.

I suppose I could have asked him, but I didn't want him to know I'd thought about it. I didn't want to betray the fact that I'd even noticed.

Yeah, that's going really well. He'll certainly know now.

Sadly, he would. He knew me. He knew me better than anyone apart from Dad and their other close friend, Atlas Blackwood. The three of them had been constants in my life and they all knew what I was like.

Headstrong. Stubborn. Disobedient. Spoiled. And those were just the good things.

I knocked my head against the back wall of the elevator. Not hard, but hard enough to get rid of some of my excess irritation. "They're all assholes," I said to the elevator at large. "Complete, fucking assholes."

Perhaps not so much Atlas. He was relaxed and nothing was a drama. He was chill. But Dad? Uptight and anal? Yep, asshole. Caleb, bossy and hot AF? Yep, asshole.

I wished I could just chuck the whole thing in, but I didn't want to give Caleb the satisfaction. And I certainly couldn't stand the idea of disappointing Dad.

The elevator announced we were back on peasant level and the doors opened.

I pushed myself away from the wall and strode out, heading back to my cubicle. God only knew how Caleb had discovered I was a little late, but he had. Perhaps he'd checked the surveillance cameras. I wouldn't have put it past him. After all, that's just the kind of guy he was.

Then I spotted Zara, who was in the cubicle next to mine, slip casually into our floor's kitchenette and I changed direction, heading there instead, because OMG, if someone needed a massive caffeine hit it was me.

I'd made friends with Zara almost as soon as I'd started at Cross. She'd started at the same time, and we were both more or less the same age. She was blonde and beautiful, with the most gorgeous, delicate little tattoos on her arms and wrists, and a sprinkling of stars on her hands. She was also a party girl who was out most weekends, making the rounds of the clubs. She'd invited me along a few times, but despite being a grown woman, Dad was still up in my grille about me doing basically anything that wasn't coming directly home from work. Of course, I could go out, he'd say. As long as I took some protection with me. Protection being three burly men in black suits all called John.

No, that was a lie. Only two of them were John. The other was Mike.

But still, I wasn't having John, John and Mike coming along and cramping not only my style, but the style of all of those who happened to be with me.

So no, going out was not happening.

I'd managed to put Zara off with a variety of excuses, not wanting her to know who my father was, which would then mean having to also tell her why I had this job since basically everyone in New York knew Caleb, Atlas and Tennyson, my dad.

Three men who'd come from the mean streets to make it very, very big indeed in the world of business. There were lots of rumors about them, lots of stories. About how Caleb had once been the kingpin of a major crime empire and had

disbanded it all to go straight, bringing his two right hand men with him.

That part was lies. Well, not so much about Caleb being an ex-crime lord — that's exactly what he'd been — but Dad had never been part of that and neither had Atlas. Dad, being encumbered with me at the stupidly young age of eighteen, had been taken off the streets by an elderly philanthropist who'd left him shitloads in his will since he didn't have a son. From there he'd grown Fox Tech, that while it had its origins in tech, now encompassed a whole lot of other things as well.

Atlas, by contrast, had been born into an aristocratic family who sadly had links with the crime empire that Caleb used to work in. His family money was tainted, and he never touched it. He'd made a fortune in construction and his firm owned most of Manhattan.

So yeah, people knew about them.

Being Tennyson Fox's daughter was a pain in the ass.

Anyway, Zara, bless her, had already put my mug into the coffee machine and was in the process of pressing the button when I stalked in.

She turned, took one look at my face and her grey eyes widened. “Wow, you look particularly growly today. What happened? His beastliness?”

Everyone in the entire company apparently called Caleb ‘his beastliness’, mainly because he was a ‘sexy beast’. I thought it was a dumb name, but since no one had asked me what I thought, I'd never said.

“Yeah,” I said grumpily. “I was two minutes late this morning. Two minutes! And I got called upstairs.”

Zara picked up her own mug from the counter and grinned at me from over the top of it. “Highway to the danger zone or stairway to heaven?”

I glared at her. “More like highway to hell.”

“Oh, like that is it?” She took a sip of her coffee then waggled her eyebrows at me suggestively. “So, what did he

do? Give you a stern talking-to? Turn you over his knee?”

Zara knew about my crush on Caleb and teased me about it unmercifully. It was all in good fun — most of the time — but today I wasn't in the mood. Mainly because I'd been picturing the same thing in my head, and I very much wished I hadn't.

Firstly, as if I'd ever let anyone turn me over their knee, and secondly, Caleb doing it? No fucking way.

Except I could feel a little pulse of heat, right down between my legs, an ache I couldn't quite ignore. The image of him turning me over his powerful thighs and hauling up my skirt...

Zara, seeing my guilty flush, widened her eyes. “Oh my God, did he—”

“No,” I interrupted and reached for my coffee mug. “No, he did not. Jesus, Zara. He's the boss.” And it was all a little too close to home. Seriously, what was wrong with me that I had a thing for a man twice my age, whose past was shrouded in mystery and extremely dark? Yeah, I didn't know either.

I blamed an early exposure to Darth Vader at an impressionable age. Though more likely, it was the gala that Dad had dragged me to a couple of years ago. He'd disappeared to talk shop with some colleagues, leaving me alone in the ballroom. It had been my first big social gathering, and I knew no one, and I'd stood there feeling out of place and nervous, then Caleb had found me in the crowd, sweeping me onto the dance floor during the formal waltz.

He'd been in a beautifully tailored tux that had highlighted his incredible physique, the stark black and white accentuating and somehow honing the brutally handsome planes and angles of his face. His black eyes had looked into mine, giving me all his attention, and it had been a heady drug for an impressionable nineteen-year-old.

Four years later and I was still fantasizing about it, because I was clearly a stupid idiot.

“The blush in your cheeks would beg to differ,” Zara pointed out. “Seriously, though. He's really got it in for you,

hasn't he?"

"Tell me about it." I leaned back against the kitchenette's counter, holding my mug between my palms. "And no, before you ask, I have no idea why."

Zara gave me a sympathetic look. "Fuck the patriarchy, right?" Then she grinned. "Literally, sometimes."

I gave a reluctant laugh. "At this particular point in time, I would like the patriarchy to fuck me a little less."

"Fair." Zara assessed me speculatively. "Speaking of, what are you doing Friday night?"

I tensed. This was going to be another invitation that I was going to have to decline, wasn't it? "Um, not sure," I muttered, at my most noncommittal. "Why?"

"Because I heard about this incredible private club that has a special night once a month where they let certain guests in. You want to come with me?"

I didn't want to say no, not immediately, so I raised a brow. "What kind of club?"

"It's very exclusive, only the super-rich or super famous get in. Like, not even B listers have access."

"But on Friday anyone can come? Doesn't sound all that exclusive to me."

"Not just anyone," Zara corrected. "It's auction night and those who have something to auction get in whether they're a member or not."

"Auction night?" I repeated blankly. "What? You bring along your grandmother's silver or something?"

"Uh, no. It's not *that* kind of auction. It's um.... more sexy than that."

"Sexy?" I gave her a narrow look. "What do you mean sexy? Is this some kind of fetish thing?"

Zara had, by her own admission, been to a number of sex clubs and I wouldn't have been surprised if this club was one of them. But she shook her head. "Nope. It's a private club and

it's really, *really* exclusive. But one Friday a month, they allow a kind of auction where you can auction yourself off for a night to members." Her eyes glowed. "I thought I could make some money."

I blinked. "Seriously? You're going to auction yourself off? To anyone?"

"Sure, why not? I need the cash and it could be fun. Certainly, a great way to meet a billionaire, right?"

Zara hadn't been that forthcoming about her background, but I did know that she didn't have much money and was always looking for more. I kind of related. My money was all bound up in Fox Tech and was Dad dependent, and I'd never felt like any of it was mine. But it was still more than she had, and I felt the same urge I always did, to offer to pay for things or lend her some cash. Except I suspected she wouldn't take it. She was proud in her way and was all about doing things herself, and hey, I definitely related to that, too.

"Sounds sketchy," I muttered.

"Maybe." It didn't seem to bother her much. "But life is for living right?"

I lifted my coffee mug in a toast. "Not wrong and more power to you."

She clinked her mug with mine. "So? Want to come along? Make sure I don't get into trouble?"

The same old excuses leapt to my tongue, and I was on the verge of being ready to spout them, when I caught myself. Because really? Twenty-three and I was still allowing myself to be held hostage to my dumb, overprotective father?

Why shouldn't I go? It sounded potentially risky, and Zara might need some support. And I never did anything risky. I never went anywhere. I never did anything, period.

I was tired of it. Tired of being told what to do and chewed out by stupid men.

Perhaps on Friday night I'd go out to a super exclusive club with Zara and who knew, I might even auction something

off myself.

I grinned. “Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

Caleb

I stared in the direction of my office doors, not failing to notice how very carefully they'd been closed.

Isabel Fox was a goddamn problem.

I was very tempted to call Ten up and tell him that Isabel was proving to be an issue, and that I couldn't have her working for me anymore. But that would involve me having to tell one of my closest friends that his daughter had a crush on me, and it would be better if she wasn't in my vicinity, and that was a conversation I was in no hurry to have.

Ten would be appalled and it would make things difficult for Isabel, and considering he already made things pretty fucking difficult, it wasn't fair on her. And it wasn't as if I couldn't handle her myself.

Trying to make her quit was petty, I could acknowledge that, but if being an asshole would make her reconsider this ill-advised crush, then an asshole I would be. Not that I wasn't one ordinarily. If I had a problem with someone, we either fixed it or that someone didn't work for me anymore.

I shoved back my chair and stalked over to the windows, feeling restless.

The real issue was that Isabel was here because Ten wanted me keeping an eye on her. Ostensibly it was all about proving her worth as a potential CEO, but that was a bunch of

bullshit he'd told her because he didn't want her to know the truth.

Ten had said she'd been asking difficult questions about her mother and if there was one thing she couldn't do, it was to ask difficult questions about her mother. Not when that mother had been the daughter of James Hamilton, head of one of the most powerful and dangerous families in entire country. Juliana Hamilton had died giving birth to Isabel and now, after twenty-three years of silence, Ten had heard rumors that the Hamiltons wanted Isabel back.

Naturally, he wasn't having it, which was a pain in the fucking ass, because now he'd made it my problem.

Isabel had grown up — she'd always been headstrong and stubborn, and now she was even more so — and Ten wanted to keep her close to protect her. He'd always either held her too tightly or not tightly enough and now she was an adult, she was tired of his overprotectiveness. She wanted her freedom, yet she also craved security, and I knew it because I knew her better than her father did. I maybe knew her even better than she knew herself.

Boundaries. That's what she needed. What she'd always needed.

I put my hands in my pockets and stared down at Manhattan, crouching below my office like a supplicant.

I meant to conquer this city and I wasn't far off doing so already. With an office in Paris opening in a week and then two more in Singapore and Manila, my investment company was on track to be the biggest on the planet.

Not bad for an orphaned street kid from nowhere in particular.

I liked to think that Old Nick would have been proud, but Old Nick, the head of the crime empire I'd taken from him before he could stab me in the back, was dead and he could fucking rot in hell where I'd put him.

Unlike him, my ambitions had never been small.

This city was mine and after it the entire goddamn world.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I took it out, glancing down at the screen. It was Ten, because of course it was.

I hit the answer button. “Yes, she’s here,” I said before he could speak. “Yes, I had words with her for being late. And yes, she’s a pain in my fucking ass. Any more questions?”

Ten was silent a moment and then his cool voice said, “She can go work with Atlas, it doesn’t have to be you.”

“I thought you said a building site’s the wrong place for her.”

“It is.” Ten sounded irritated. “Though, I think now I may have to send her further afield.”

I stared down at the Manhattan streets, cars moving along them like ants. This could only mean one thing. “You have a problem with her mother’s family.” I did not make it a question. I already knew. Just because I’d gone straight years ago didn’t mean I’d gotten rid of all my contacts and my contacts had been very clear.

The Hamiltons were ready to move. Ten, Atlas and I were powerful, but they had blood on their side, not to mention access to the kind of generational wealth that had been sitting in Swiss bank accounts since before there was even a Switzerland. They had links to royalty, to government heads of state, and maybe even a few crime syndicates, and they were prepared to use any means necessary to get access to Isabel.

I’d told Ten years ago that a couple of visits with them wouldn’t have hurt and would have meant better relations with them now, but he was an uptight prick. They’d never forgiven him for taking their beloved daughter from them, and he’d never forgiven them for not accepting their relationship. He didn’t want Isabel anywhere near them and perhaps turning her against him, since that’s the least of what they would do. They had a reputation for grudge holding.

“Cal,” he began.

“Leave it with me,” I said, not letting him finish. “I’ll deal with them.”

The Hamiltons might be powerful, but even though I'd gone straight years ago, I still owned the underworld. If I didn't want anyone touching her, then no one would touch her, no matter how powerful they were.

"No." Ten's voice was flat. "I'm not having you start a war. We're done with that."

He might be. But I wasn't. Ten had never been part of Old Nick's empire. He'd refused. He'd had a kid to look after and didn't want her dragged into that world, and I'd understood. It was only a pity that his scruples had caused more bullshit over the years than if he'd joined Old Nick along with me. He hadn't, though, and so now we were dealing with this.

"Take her overseas then," I said. "Or I could. The Paris office, perhaps."

"She won't go." He sounded pissed and I couldn't blame him. Isabel never did what anyone told her.

"She won't go if you tell her to," I pointed out. "If I explain it's a promotion and she'll be working in one of Cross's new offices then she might."

Also, I'd make it so that she'd have no choice in the matter. With Isabel it was all about the correct handling. It had been me who'd suggested to Ten that he tell her that her taking over Fox Tech was predicated on her performing well at Cross. I knew she wanted to be CEO of Fox Tech and I knew she wanted to prove herself. It was all about getting Daddy's approval for Isabel.

Ten was silent for a long moment. "It might give us some breathing space," he allowed. "But they'll get to her at some point. If she's in France, I can't keep an eye on her."

It was never a good idea to tell a man how to raise his own child, but that didn't stop me. "You can't keep her in your pocket forever," I told him. "And you stopping her from seeing Juliana's family is only going to make them more attractive. You know what she's like."

"Thank you for telling me what I already know about my own daughter." Ten's voice was icy. "Last time I checked, I

was her father.”

“And thank fuck.” That was not a job I wanted or ever had. “My point still stands, however.”

Ten muttered a curse. “Fine. Then I’m going to need twenty-four-hour security on her to keep them off her and you’ll have to do without an intern.”

Naturally, that was his response. He held tighter, not looser, which had never worked with Isabel. She was already on the verge of giving him the middle finger and if he wasn’t careful, when she ran, she’d run straight into the arms of the very family he was trying to prevent her from running to.

“If you do that, you know where she’s going to go,” I said bluntly. “And it won’t be straight into the cage you’ve built for her.”

“Fuck.” Ten must be pissed — he used his cursing sparingly — and it was because he knew I was right. “Then what the hell am I going to do? I don’t want her anywhere near the Hamiltons.”

It wasn’t the time to tell him I disagreed, that Isabel both wanted and needed to talk with them. Nevertheless, I knew what was coming. I’d seen it a mile off, from the moment he’d asked me to create an intern position for her.

“Don’t act the helpless maiden, Ten,” I said. “It doesn’t fucking suit you.”

“Fine. Then you know what I’m going to ask, don’t you?”

“I’m not her goddamn babysitter these days. She’s too old for that now.”

“I don’t care. This is Isabel we’re talking about.”

I sighed and shook my head. We both knew I wasn’t going to refuse, because as he’d already said, it was Isabel we were talking about here. “Fine. I’ll keep an eye on her then, shall I?” It was the obvious solution since she was already working for me, and the Cross International building’s security was as tight as Fort Knox.

“Yes,” Ten said. “Not that I have any choice in the matter since you’re the only one she seems to listen to.”

There was more than a little sarcasm in his voice, but I didn’t rise to the bait. “If I’m going to be responsible for her, there’ll be some ground rules that she’ll have to obey.”

“Good luck with that,” Ten said acidly.

I ignored him. “And you can’t interfere. If I’m in charge of her safety then she answers to me, not to you.”

It was best to keep things simple, especially when you were managing difficult people, and I’d managed the worst there was. Old Nick’s empire was now a shadow of what it once was — or maybe, if you looked at it another way, it had been the root of Cross International that had grown into something far beyond Old Nick’s meagre ambitions. I’d told him once that I’d take it from him. He hadn’t listened.

“I’m her father,” Ten growled. “She pays attention to me —”

“My house, my rules,” I growled back. “You know the deal.”

He was such an overprotective motherfucker and controlling to the nth degree. But no one told me what to do, especially when I was the one who’d offered to take care of the mess he’d made with her.

“She doesn’t have any contact with that family,” Ten snapped. “Understand me? None.”

“All right,” I said, allowing him that. “No contact.” I paused. “Friday’s auction night at Arcadia. Come and we can talk about it then.”

Arcadia was the very exclusive private club I owned. It catered only to the very rich and members were heavily vetted. Anything went at Arcadia, as long as it was legal.

The auction nights had started with a couple of members who were into master/slave fetish and wanted to do some role play. It had proved very popular even with those who weren’t into the same kink and so it had become a monthly event.

I'd been too busy to go for months but I had some space on Friday night and I needed to check on the club, and it was the perfect opportunity to drag Ten out. He hated the place but was a huge fan of the very rare Macallen single malt I had in the cellar and could always be tempted out with the promise of a glass or three.

"Auction night?" Ten sounded disgusted. "No, I think not."

"It's a virginity auction," I said, purely to piss him off. "You could put a bid in yourself."

Ten's silence spoke volumes. He wasn't particularly prudish, but he did have very firm ideas about self-control and appropriate behavior. I blamed Sir George, the old man who'd taken him off the streets, for that. Being a father at eighteen likely had something to do with it too.

"No," he said stiffly. "I'll pass."

I grinned at the disapproval in his voice. "I get it. You're enjoying that stick up your ass too much."

"If you think I want to watch a young woman auctioning off—"

"You know the process, Ten. The women are vetted thoroughly and all applications are run by me first."

It had been six months ago that Elizabeth, the club manager, had come to me with a virginity auction request. It had been from the guest of a member and my initial response had been to refuse. A member could do what they wanted, but not a guest. There were too many uncertainties about guests and Arcadia was a play project. I didn't want it to get complicated.

However, Elizabeth had argued that if we didn't host her auction the young woman concerned was going to take it somewhere else, to a much sketchier organization or eBay, and at least at Arcadia, with its vetted membership, the woman could have some reassurance that she'd be safe.

I wasn't in the business of saving people from the consequences of their own bad decisions, but Elizabeth did have a point. So, I'd agreed, along with the caveat that an

application process was gone through, and proper legal contracts drawn up.

It had been a tremendous success and the woman had been thrilled with the money she'd earned, which had all gone back to her bar a hosting fee for Arcadia. And after that, we'd had more applications and, in the end, I decided to allow a couple of virginity auctions a month for non-members, on an application only basis.

"I don't care," Ten said coldly. "I don't like it."

"Luckily, I don't give a shit whether you like it or not." I gazed out over the city, Lady Liberty in the distance. "You want Atlas in on this?"

Atlas had links to the Hamiltons. Distant links but links all the same. For all that the Blackwoods were New York royalty, they weren't exactly pure as the driven snow, and had fingers in more than a few pies.

There was a silence.

"I suppose so," Ten said at last, sounding reluctant. He was a cagey bastard and even more so when it came to Isabel. "He might know why they're putting the pressure on now."

"You know why they're putting the pressure on now. They want the same as what we do: power. Isabel's your only kid and they know what she stands to inherit. They want her *and* Fox."

"You don't know that. Not for certain."

I snorted but didn't rise to that bait either. Some old loyalty to Juliana's memory kept him thinking the Hamiltons' interest had more to do with Isabel than his company, but I knew how those old, powerful families worked. I'd planned operations with people them, negotiated with them, did violence for them... They were like wolves. It was all about power and territory.

Of course, they persisted in thinking they were the real alpha wolves in this city. A fundamentally flawed notion that I was going to disabuse them of.

The only alpha wolves in this city were Ten, Atlas, and me.

“So,” I said at last, letting the subject go. “Arcadia. Friday. Nine o’clock.”

“Fine,” Ten said and disconnected the call.

Putting the phone back in my pocket, I glanced back out at the city. Heavy cloud lay over the glittering skyscrapers, promising snow.

Isabel was not going to like being made my responsibility, not one fucking bit.

She’d been enraged with me this morning for calling her out on her lateness, though she’d tried to hide it. Except she wasn’t very good at hiding her emotions. Those big green eyes flashing emerald and her hands curling into fists, her clear voice giving me a smart, sarcastic comeback.

It was wrong of me to enjoy pissing her off yet enjoy it I did. She was such a little firecracker. Lighting her wick and watching her crackle then explode was a pleasure I kept to myself.

Don’t enjoy it too much. You know where it could lead.

I ignored the thought. It would lead precisely nowhere because Ten was one of my oldest and closest friends, and Isabel was his daughter.

Turning away from the window, I strode over to my desk and hit the intercom button. “Sally,” I said. “Cancel my lunchtime meeting. I want Miss Fox up here at one.”

Isabel

I stared gloomily at the spreadsheet on my computer screen, trying not to pay too much attention to the clock that was moving with aching slowness.

Honestly, I couldn't wait to be done with the damn day. Not that it was going to be a bed roses once it was done since John, John and Mike still lay at the end of it.

Gee, thanks Dad.

I glanced down at my phone beside my keyboard in case I'd had any interesting texts. Interesting texts being anything from the unknown number that had first contacted me three weeks ago. It had been a voice call, a man telling me that if I wanted to know more about my mother, I was to go to the carousel in Central Park at three PM on Wednesday. Then the call had disconnected.

For two days I hadn't known what to do about it, whether to go or not, but in the end I'd gone. How could I not? Dad didn't talk about my mother, Juliana, who'd died having me. He'd told me her first name, but nothing else. For years I'd accepted that it was something Dad didn't want to talk about, and that was okay.

But as I'd started to grow up, I'd gotten more and more curious. I wanted to know about her, and it had annoyed me intensely that Dad still refused to tell me about her. I'd asked

Caleb a couple of times, but he'd been as cagey as Dad. Same with Atlas.

Men were the worst.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I'd managed to get J, J, and M to give me some space by telling them I just needed to feel like I was on my own for a bit. They'd given me five minutes, which was enough time for me to realize that no one was going to show for this meeting. Yet as I was walking away, I'd gotten a call from the same man, telling me that the meeting had been a test of my interest, and since it was clear I *was* interested, he'd contact me with a real meeting time soon.

Obviously, he and I had had very different ideas of when 'soon' was, since three weeks had passed and I still hadn't heard from him. Dad, though, had been annoyed I'd managed to evade my security even for five minutes, and so had beefed it up. I was even beginning to wonder if he'd somehow known I'd been contacted. How, I had no idea, but I wouldn't have put it past him to have found out. It would have surprised me not at all if my asshole dad had bugged my phone calls, for example.

Honestly, he and I were going to need to have a conversation, because I was sick of his constant interference in my life.

At that point the phone on my desk rang and I picked it up. "Isabel speaking."

"Miss Fox?" It was Sally, the snooty secretary. Great. "Mr. Cross would like to see you at one."

I mouthed a silent curse. "Oh, really? I have a lunch date ___"

"At one, thank you." Then she hung up.

"Goddammit," I muttered, slamming the phone down.

Instantly, Zara's blonde head popped up from behind the cubicle divider. "I sense trouble." She put her elbows on top of the divider and leaned on them.

I gave her a sour look. "What gave it away?"

“Your general air of bright, shiny happiness.” She raised a brow. “What’s up?”

“Looks like I can’t make lunch, sorry.” She and I had been going to try a new deli a couple of doors down and then discuss our plans for the evening at this new club of hers. “I have to go see his lordship, a-fucking-gain.”

Zara put her chin in her hands. “Oh dear, what have you done now?”

“Nothing. Absolutely zero things. Unless in the space of the past couple of hours, he’s instituted some new rule no one told me about. I did put my mug in the cupboard slightly off-center, come to think of it.”

Zara grinned. “Just think of Friday and how you’re going to blot out the memory of his beastliness with a couple of very strong martinis.”

That was true. And the more I thought about it, the gladder I was that I’d agreed to go to this club with her. It would annoy the shit out of Dad and right now, annoying the shit out of Dad was exactly what I wanted. Though I was going to have to work out a strategy if I wanted to avoid J, J and M.

Petty of me, perhaps, but I felt petty. Petty was a country I’d emigrated to and now I was building myself a life there and it was all thanks to him.

Very mature, Isabel.

I shoved the voice away. Too bad. If Dad was going to treat me like a child, I was going to act like one. Anyway, it wasn’t as if I’d cut loose completely and started snorting coke in the bathroom and swinging from the chandeliers. It was only a couple of drinks at a club, that’s all.

A club where your friend is going to auction off sexy stuff.

Yeah, that made me.... uncomfortable. Zara had promised to tell me about it at lunch, but clearly that would have to wait.

“I guess so,” I muttered. “Tell me what the deli’s like.”

“Hey, I’ll do better than that. I’ll bring you back something delicious.”

I gave her a grateful smile, because that was true friendship, then tried to busy myself until one o'clock rolled around.

When it did and Zara, the lucky bitch, escaped out to the deli, I made my way to the elevator and reluctantly pressed the button that would take me up to his lordship's office. Again.

Nervousness sat in the pit of my stomach, though I had no idea why since I was sure I hadn't done anything. I just couldn't think of what else he wanted to talk to me about if it wasn't to chew me out over some minor transgression yet again.

I shoved the nervousness aside for something stronger, for anger, because seriously? Up to his office again? During my lunch break?

I stared at the elevator doors, fulminating as I went over his condescending bullshit this morning and getting more and more wound up about it. Which I knew was the wrong approach, and yet I couldn't stop myself. The whole thing with Dad and then Caleb's constant nitpicking was driving me crazy, and anger was easier than self-doubt.

So, if I couldn't shout at my father, I'd shout at Caleb instead.

You're trying not to get fired, remember? You wanted to impress Dad. Be CEO of Fox, etcetera, etcetera.

Dammit. Why did good sense have to get in the way all the time?

The doors slid open, and I strode out, holding on to a little of my rage, but not too much. Enough to be able to face whatever he was going to say to me with equanimity, but not enough to embarrass myself by shouting childish insults at him as if I was twelve again.

"Miss Fox," Sally intoned as I went past. "Would you take these in for me, please?"

I was very tempted to ask her what her last slave died of, but I was trying to be an adult, so I bit it back and gave her a cool smile instead. "Of course," I said regally, and grabbed the

stack of papers sitting on her desk before carrying on toward Caleb's office.

It would have been polite to knock, but since I had no politeness left in me, I didn't bother. Instead, I tucked the papers under one arm, shoved open one of the doors, and marched in.

Caleb was standing by the windows, talking to someone on his phone. His broad, muscular back was to me, his deep voice a low rumble, and he didn't turn as I came in.

Fine. If he wanted to be like that, he could.

I went over to his desk and dumped the papers on the desktop next to a half full cup of black coffee, then I stood there, waiting.

He kept on talking, clearly in no hurry, standing at the windows with one hand in the pocket of his pants, his gaze resolutely turned to the city beyond the glass.

Oh, so that's what he was doing. He was making me wait.

What. An. Asshole.

Well, two could play at that game.

I turned to sit casually in the chair set in front of his desk but as I did so, my hip caught that damn stack of papers and they all slipped, falling against the coffee mug, and pushing it off the desk and on to the floor. Needless to say, coffee went everywhere.

I bit off a silent curse, glancing over at Caleb. Luckily, he didn't seem to have noticed my epic clumsiness, still talking on the phone.

Thank God.

Continuing the litany of curses in my head, I knelt and began pulling the papers away from the rapidly spreading puddle on the carpet, before casting around for something to clean it up with and hopefully before Caleb noticed. But I had no such luck.

Caleb was a neat freak, and his desk was clean of stuff, so I had to scurry out of his office and into the nearby kitchenette, avoiding Sally's beady gaze as I grabbed a couple of cloths before scurrying back. Only to find that he'd turned around and was watching me dispassionately even as he continued his conversation.

Goddammit.

There was nothing for it but to ignore him as I went back to his desk and knelt in front of it with my cleaning cloths, dabbing ineffectually at the carpet. It was cream carpet of course, which mean the coffee left an impressive brown stain.

Of all the stupid things to do. Knocking over his coffee mug and staining his carpet. And I hadn't even done it on purpose, though I'd been mad enough to earlier. He'd be so pissed, especially given his neatness tendencies, and that would be another black mark against my name.

You're really killing it today.

I growled under my breath, dabbing harder at the stain as a pair of expensive handmade leather shoes slowly came into view.

I froze. He was standing very close. I could feel his gaze on the back of my neck, boring into me, and he must have finished his conversation because I couldn't hear him talking any more.

I felt self-conscious all of a sudden. For some reason, I couldn't tear my gaze from his shoes. The leather was a deep, sooty black, all polished and perfect, and I could almost see my own face reflected back.

"What are you doing, Isabel?" His voice was deep and textured, soft like fur yet rough, like velvet.

There were butterflies in my stomach and I didn't know why, but they were fluttering around madly. My face got hot, and I felt unaccountably flustered. "What does it look like?" I snapped, concentrating on dabbing at the carpet. "I spilled coffee on your floor so I'm trying to clean it up."

“Two minutes late and now you’ve ruined my carpet. Give me one good reason not to fire you right now.”

I looked up sharply.

He was standing right beside me, and he was so very, *very* tall. Looming over me like a giant redwood, muscular and massively built, his midnight gaze on mine. I found it hard to breathe. It was all consuming that gaze, a dark current, a black storm, and it went through me like a spear. Seeing into me. Seeing everything about me, including my silly little crush on him and all my silly little virgin feelings.

My face flamed. I wanted to tear my gaze away, but I couldn’t.

He was so goddamn beautiful he made my heart ache.

“Isabel,” he said in that dark voice of his. “It seems you and I need to have a little talk.”

Caleb

I turned and went around the side of my desk, reaching for the intercom button. “Sally, get someone in here to clean up a coffee spill, please.”

Then with a great effort of will, I sat in my chair and forced away the sight of Isabel Fox, on her knees at my feet, staring up at me with wide green eyes as if mesmerized.

Her face had been flushed and I’d realized that the top button of her white blouse had come undone, and I could see down between her breasts. The flush had crept down across her chest too.

I knew what that flush meant, what the glitter in her eyes meant.

I fucking knew.

I knew what the deep jolt that shifted inside of me was as well.

I’d felt it the moment I’d approached her, watching her trying to clean up the coffee she’d knocked over. Her red hair was in a low bun at the back of her head, but some wisps of it had started to escape, little tongues of fire against her pale, exposed neck.

It looked vulnerable, that neck. Fragile. I could put my hand on it, curl my fingers around it, feel the frantic beat of

her pulse at her throat. All very wrong thoughts to have when that lovely, graceful neck belonged to the twenty-three-year-old daughter of my closest friend.

Yet those thoughts might have passed out of my head without comment if she hadn't looked up, all wide eyes and flushed cheeks. Reminding me of how much I enjoyed a woman kneeling at my feet. Especially when that woman was a bratty little girl, desperate for attention. *My* attention.

It had been too long since I'd indulged in that particular kink. Far too long.

I'd never been a man who held back. If I saw something I wanted, I took it, and so far, no one had ever complained. And if she'd been any other woman, I might have kept her on her knees and played with her a little....

But she wasn't any other woman.

She was Isabel, Ten's kid. Whom I'd looked after when she was small more times than I could count, and there was no world in which those thoughts would have ever been appropriate. So, no matter how long it had been or otherwise, I ignored them.

Perhaps on Friday, I'd put in a bid on the virgin myself. Or find another woman to play with. Perhaps if I let myself have some playtime, I'd be less...distracted.

Isabel had gotten to her feet, still flushed, the cloth clutched in her hand. She looked furious, though whether it was at herself or me, I had no idea.

No, on second thoughts, I knew. She was furious at me.

"You're not going to fire me because I spilled coffee," she said hotly. "That's dumb."

"Is it?" I leaned back in my chair and lifted one foot, resting it on the opposite knee. "That carpet is expensive."

Predictably, she bridled. "You can't fire me. Not for that."

Of course, I wasn't going to fire her. But she was so easily rousable, I couldn't resist. "I can do whatever the fuck I want," I said mildly. "I'm the CEO. And if I want to fire you, I will."

She looked like she was going to say something — probably something she'd regret since she was very much a shoot first, ask questions later kind of woman — then her mouth compressed as if she was physically biting back whatever it was that she'd been going to say.

Pity.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked instead. “Presumably it's something important since you're making me miss my lunch break.”

I almost smiled. She'd always been a sassy little thing and at ten that had been delightful. She had no fear of me, said whatever she thought and loved it when I teased her. But as she'd gotten older, the sassy comebacks had become sharper, more biting, and very intentional. Pushing at me since Ten's long absences meant she couldn't push at him.

I'd let her back then, because that's when Ten's grip on her had tightened and she'd rebelled against it. She'd needed a safe space to vent her anger and someone to sharpen those claws of hers on. Someone who wouldn't take it personally.

Yet she wasn't a teenager now, and I was no longer prepared to be her safe space. I had boundaries for all my staff, and she was no different just because she was a family friend. She worked for me, which meant she needed to give me some fucking respect.

I'd allow her a couple of swipes, but if she thought she could keep on pushing, she had another think coming.

“Sit down, Isabel.” I made no secret of the fact that it was an order and one to be obeyed. “I have less than zero interest in your fucking lunch break.”

Her chin firmed, emerald sparks glittering in her eyes. Yeah, she did not like that.

Too bad.

I stared at her until eventually she looked away, red lashes veiling her gaze, her color still high. She put the dirty cloth very deliberately on my desk, before smoothing her plain black skirt aggressively. I knew her. I knew that she'd be

imagining her hands around my throat or perhaps punching me in the face.

But she didn't say anything as she turned and sat in the chair. She crossed her legs, her hands clasped in her lap, and looked at me with exaggerated interest. "There, I'm sitting," she said acidly. "And I'm all ears."

Oh, she was pushing it. Yes, she was, the little witch, sitting there in her demure white blouse and plain black skirt, stockings and low-heeled black pumps. Plain clothes, yet expensive, because of course Ten was a rich man and there was nothing but the best for his daughter, no matter how much of a pain in the ass she was.

Her hair though, that gave her away, all those red curls she'd inherited from Juliana. They were always escaping no matter how she tied it, curling around her ears and falling down her back. Disobedient and unmanageable, just like her.

Even now those little curls were feathering around the sides of her neck, and I had the oddest urge to take one and pull on it gently. Or perhaps...not so gently.

Get it the fuck together.

I shifted in my chair, ignoring the inappropriate thoughts. They had no place here, not given what I was about to tell her. Which was the truth about her mother.

Over the course of the past couple of hours, I'd decided she needed to know and even though it wasn't my place to tell her, I didn't give a shit. Ten had made this whole situation immeasurably worse and since he'd given me responsibility for her, I was going to make my own decisions about what was best for her.

I couldn't put more security on her without an explanation, especially when she found her existing security measures already chafing, and I wasn't prepared to lie to her.

She was desperate for information about her mother, any fucking idiot could see that, and since I'd known Juliana, and since Ten was being a prick about it, I'd be the one to tell her. Ten was going to be pissed, but he could suck it up. He should

have told her years ago, but he hadn't because he'd wanted to protect her.

I got it. I understood. Isabel was all he had left of Juliana, but still. I should have told her years ago when she'd first asked me about her, yet I hadn't because I'd respected Ten's silence on the matter. Not now, though.

A kid should know where they came from, even if where they came from was a place they didn't ever want to go back to. My own parents being a case in point. After all, there was a reason I was where I was now and not murdered by my fucking father the way the rest of my family had been.

Knowing your past was a lesson. It helped determine your future and it was wrong to deny any kid that.

"I called you up here, because your father is concerned," I said without preamble. "I talked to him this morning and he thinks you need extra protection."

Isabel let out a sharp breath and opened her mouth.

"It's about your mother," I went on before she could speak. "It's about who she was, which is why your father is being an insane prick about your security."

Isabel shut her mouth, her hands clenching in her lap. "Okay. Presumably you said that because you're going to tell me who she was. Or are you and Dad going to continue being insane pricks about it together?"

The angry flush in her cheeks hadn't faded and sarcasm edged her tone. I noticed that her knuckles were white.

Fucking Ten. The man could run a huge company like nobody's business but was apparently useless when it came to being a decent father to a young woman. Not that I could talk, having never been anyone's father. Then again, I had opinions. Isabel was important to me, and he'd mishandled her badly.

"No," I said. "I'll tell you who she was. Her name was Juliana Hamilton, only daughter of James Hamilton."

Isabel stared at me, green eyes widening. "James Hamilton? You mean of *the* Hamiltons?"

“Yes. Your mother was his precious little princess, and he was extremely pissed when she married your father.”

Isabel blinked at me. “Married?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Had Ten not even told her that?

“Yes,” I repeated. “She and Ten married in secret just before you were born.”

Anger flickered over her vivid, expressive face, the flush in her cheeks making the bright green of her eyes even more pronounced. Little freckles dotted her cheeks and nose, making her look even more like her mother. Juliana had been a full-on redhead with a temper to match, and she’d brought Ten down like a ton of bricks.

I’d told him that getting involved with her was a mistake, that he didn’t know what he was getting himself into, but naturally he didn’t listen. He’d been pulled off the streets by Sir George, a certified hermit, who wouldn’t have known who the Kennedys were let alone the Hamiltons, while I’d been rescued by Old Nick. And I say ‘rescued’ in the loosest possible sense.

Anyway, Ten had been a hotel valet, parking cars and carrying luggage, and had met Juliana in the hotel. It had been love at first sight. They’d been young and not very careful, and soon enough, she’d gotten pregnant. Ten, being an honorable bastard, had then married her on the sly. They hadn’t told anyone since her family would never have approved of their princess marrying a nobody one-time street rat, and then she’d died having Isabel.

When the Hamiltons eventually found out, they’d been incandescent with fury, and Ten had had to disappear with Isabel, otherwise a) they would have taken her from him and b) he’d possibly have been one of those bodies that get washed up on the banks of the Hudson. After the immediate threat had died down, she’d been brought up by a succession of nannies provided by Sir George, me — when I had the time — and by Ten whenever he could. Later, Atlas had helped out.

It had been a shitty upbringing, especially since a grief stricken Ten had refused to even mention Juliana's name. I'd only met Juliana a few times. Gorgeous, but a real handful.

Just like her daughter.

Yeah, I had to admit that. On both counts.

"How wonderful," Isabel said bitterly. "Be great if my father had ever given me even a little bit of my mother, but apparently that's impossible. He'd much rather lock me in my bedroom, throw away the key, and keep on telling me sweet fuck all since that's the obvious answer."

"Your father was wrong not to tell you." I had to give her that at least. "I tried to get him to talk to you about it, but he refused. Juliana is a sore subject for him."

"Oddly enough, she's a sore subject for me as well." Isabel abruptly pushed herself out of the chair and walked over to the windows. Anger poured off her, and fuck, she had a right to it. I'd have been furious too if I'd been her.

"He's not doing it to hurt you," I said, because she needed to know that. "He's got a whole lot of shit he needs to work through and sure, he's made some mistakes. But he only wanted to protect you."

"How? By keeping all information about Mom from me?" Isabel stared out the windows, her jawline set, looking every inch the stubborn teenager that I remembered who used to give me such shit.

But she's not a teenager now, is she?

I found my gaze being drawn down along the lines of her body, her white blouse pulling tight across her breasts, the light shining just so, highlighting the hint of lace of her bra. Then the curve of her waist and hips in that tight little skirt... Pin-up worthy.

Definitely not a teenager. And you shouldn't be fucking looking.

No. I should not. It wasn't the right time, and she was the wrong fucking woman.

I shifted again in my seat, irritated. I'd gotten too consumed by work the past couple of weeks and hadn't had much time to myself. Clearly that needed handling.

I didn't usually take part in the auctions at Arcadia, but for the second time that day, I found myself reconsidering. God knew I had to get rid of this sudden itch somehow.

"He's paranoid," I said. "And to give him his due, he's got good reason. The Hamiltons are dangerous. They were furious when Juliana died and then they found out that not only had she gotten married, but she'd also had a kid. Ten had to go into hiding with you."

Isabel kept staring ferociously out the window, her figure still tense. "What would they have done to him if they'd caught him?"

"Don't be naive. You know what they would have done."

She turned, flashing me a glance. "So why didn't Dad tell me about them? Why is keeping me in the dark protecting me?"

I had no desire to venture into that particular minefield, so I only shrugged. "You'll have to ask him that. He wouldn't tell me when I asked him."

"So why are you telling me all of this then? Shouldn't it be coming from him?"

As ever, since Ten wasn't here, she was turning all her anger and challenge on me, which was fine. This morning I hadn't been prepared to let it go, but I would now. Hearing this news wouldn't have been easy for her.

"I'm telling you because Ten has good reason to suspect that the Hamiltons are trying to contact you, hence the increase in your security. And he's not telling you himself, because he wouldn't have. He'd have continued to keep you in the dark till kingdom fucking come."

Isabel turned around to face me, her arms folded, her jaw stubborn as hell. "So, he doesn't know you've told me all of this?"

“No,” I said shortly. “He doesn’t.”

“But won’t he—”

“I don’t give a shit what he will or won’t think. He wanted to increase your security and I thought you needed to know why.” I paused, because she wasn’t going to like this, not one fucking bit. “Especially because I’m now the one responsible for it.”

Her eyes widened. “You?” That flush was back, washing slowly down her neck and beneath her blouse.

Interesting, that flush. Was that because she hated the idea or liked it?

I lifted a brow. “You have a problem with that?”

Her flush deepened even more, which I found fascinating. “No.”

Oh, so she *did* have a problem with it, and I suspected I knew what that problem was.

“Little liar,” I murmured.

Her jaw became even more set, the sparks in her eyes glittering, and I felt that jolt again, deep in my gut. The awareness of the hunter discovering prey. When I played, I played hard, and I’d always loved a challenging woman. It made her eventual surrender so much sweeter if she fought me, and they always fought. And they always surrendered willingly. Every single time.

She’s got a crush on you a mile wide, so stop fucking flirting with her.

“I’m not lying.” She kept staring at me, obviously desperate to prove me wrong. “But I don’t need anyone to ‘keep an eye on me’. Jesus Christ. I’m not twelve.”

And I wasn’t a teenage boy. I was forty-two, for fuck’s sake. I could control myself when I wanted to and while Isabel Fox might be pretty, she was still the little girl I’d looked after when I’d started as a bouncer at Old Nick’s first club on the Lower East Side. Sitting beside me on an old box as I stood at the door, music from the club pounding. She should have been

in bed asleep, but Ten was out of the city with Sir George on some business trip, and he didn't trust George's security.

He'd trusted me instead.

I shoved the urge to keep holding her gaze aside. Playing dominance games with her was a stupid move. If I wanted to do that, I could do it with any number of women who weren't the daughter of one of my best friends.

"Oh, believe me," I said calmly. "I'm well aware you're not twelve. But you know nothing about the Hamiltons. They're dangerous—"

"And who's fault is that?"

"I just told you why—"

"Yeah, and you should have told me that at least ten years ago."

"Let me finish, Isabel," I growled, my patience thinning. Not many people had the balls to interrupt me twice in a row, but of course she had to be one of them. "Ten suspects the Hamiltons are going to make a play for you, welcome you into the family fold so to speak."

She glared daggers at me. "Sounds great. Their family fold is one hundred percent better than mine."

I ignored that. "It's not only you they want. It's Fox too."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Fox? Why the hell would they want Fox?"

"For the same reasons most people want anything: power and money. Fox is huge and its turnover is in the billions."

"I mean, has it ever occurred to you that they might actually just want to talk to me?"

There wasn't any point sugarcoating it. "If they'd wanted only to talk to you, they would have tried years ago and they didn't."

Something flashed across her face that looked like pain, but then it was gone. "Well, thanks for the support I guess," she said acidly. "So, why now then?"

Of course, the fact that the Hamiltons hadn't moved before now would hurt her. Then again, maybe that wasn't a bad thing. Maybe that would stop her from rushing headlong into contact with them.

"I have no idea," I said. "Though it might have something to do with you being on the verge of being named Ten's official successor at Fox Tech."

A rebellious light glittered in her eyes. "That's what all this security bullshit's about then? You and Dad wanting to stop them from contacting me?"

It was clear she didn't see the danger, and of course she wouldn't. Because it wasn't only the power and the wealth of the Hamiltons that were the issue, but also the fame. A long-lost Hamilton turning up out of the blue would hit the headlines in a major way and it wouldn't be only the media who'd be interested. Ten and I had made enemies in our climb out of the streets and that already made her a target. If her origins as a Hamilton became known then she'd become an even bigger target, the number of enemies doubling overnight.

Our enemies were known, we could handle them. But enemies of the Hamiltons? Of which a number would be random opportunists thinking to make a quick buck? Yeah, that could make things even more difficult for her.

But Isabel wouldn't think of that. All she saw was a chance to find out about the missing piece in her life: her mother.

"Yes." I kept my voice hard. "That's exactly what we want."

"And what about me? What about what I want?"

"You don't know what you want." I didn't bother sugarcoating this either because it was only the truth. "You're only fucking twenty-three."

Her cheeks were now flushed, her whole body almost vibrating with the force of her fury. She'd clenched her fingers so tight that her knuckles were white. "I'm not a child, Caleb. Stop treating me like one."

“Then start acting like a goddamn adult and listen to me.”

Her full mouth compressed into a hard line, but she said nothing.

“Do you have any idea how many enemies a family like the Hamiltons have?” I went on. “Or of how big the target will be on your back once it hits the media that a long-lost Hamilton has been found? You’re the grand-daughter of Charlotte Hamilton, the matriarch, and there’ll be people who’ll see you as an opportunity to—”

“I get it,” she interrupted for the third time. “That horse is well and truly dead, fuck’s sake. But there has to be some other way that doesn’t consist of denying me information about my mom and confining me to my room for the rest of my natural life.”

I eyed her. She looked about ready to blow and who could blame her? It wasn’t every day you found out that you were related to one of the most powerful families in the country. Then being told the security measures that were already suffocating you were only going to increase? Yeah, I’d have been fucking pissed too.

However, there was no other way. Her safety was too important and neither Ten nor I were going to compromise on that. If the Hamiltons got hold of her and it all hit the headlines...Who knew who could come crawling out of the woodwork? And if that happened, no matter what Ten said about not wanting a war, the three of us would bring one if it came to that. We’d bring down this entire fucking city if need be.

“Sit down, Isabel.” I tried to make it a request rather than an order, since pushing her into losing her temper, while spectacular, would not make my life any easier and I had shit to do this afternoon. I didn’t want to spend the entire day arguing with her about her safety.

It was clear that the last thing she wanted to do was sit, but at that moment, there was a knock on my office door. “Come,” I said, and the door opened, a harried looking member of the cleaning staff rushing in.

It might have been an interruption, but at least it broke the tension. As the woman started doing what she could for the stain on my carpet, Isabel, after standing stiffly by the windows for a minute or so, finally came over to the chair in front of my desk and sat down.

“Thank you, Kayla,” I said as the cleaner finished up. “Can you ask Sally to bring us some tea on your way out?”

She nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

A silence fell.

Isabel gazed fixedly at her hands twisted in her lap.

“Perhaps the tea was a mistake,” I said. “Am I going to get a cup in my face?”

“What? And ruin your precious carpet?”

“You’ve already ruined it. Surely a little bit of tea won’t make that much difference?”

Isabel’s shoulders relaxed slightly. “It might to your suit,” she said.

“I’m sure my suit can handle it.”

“I bet. You probably have a hundred just like it in your closet.” She didn’t look at me. “You’re like...Stepford CEO or something. CEO bot.”

“No, that’s your father.”

Her mouth twitched. “Not wrong.”

Now the tension in the room had dropped, it was time to get back on track.

“You’ll have security tonight at your apartment,” I said. “And tomorrow, you can go to my Central Park penthouse. Not for long, okay? Just until we figure out how to deal with the Hamilton bullshit and perhaps find that other way you wanted.”

For a second, I thought I’d miscalculated, that she was going to blow up anyway despite my best efforts, because the air around her suddenly seethed again with fury.

Then like a door shutting, it was gone.

Her chin lifted and her gaze met mine at last, calm as a frozen pond. “Of course, Caleb. Not a problem.”

Isabel

What. A. Dick. What. A. *Complete*. Asshole.

I left Caleb's office with a smile on my face, closing his office doors gently and smiling even more brightly at Sally. "Thanks for the tea," I said. "It was delicious."

Sally said nothing, only looked at me with deep suspicion.

As well she might.

The moment I got into the elevator and the doors shut, the smile slid straight off my face like a greased-up firefighter sliding down a pole.

My jaw ached, my shoulders ached. Everything ached.

I'd felt like I'd been going to spontaneously combust, while Caleb had lounged behind his desk, casually destroying my life as if it meant nothing to him.

Okay, maybe that was a *slight* exaggeration.

He wasn't really destroying my life. But telling me that Mom had been one of the Hamiltons? *The* Hamiltons? And that she and Dad had gotten married? That her family was now after me and not for me per se, but for Fox?

It wasn't so much destroying my life as blowing apart what I'd known about it, then leaving me to pick up the pieces. Fuck, I was so done with men and their secrets.

And as for him ‘keeping an eye on me’...

I groaned, leaning back against the elevator wall, and putting my hands over my face, remembering that moment by his desk when I hadn’t been able to look away from him. Then, by the windows, my whole face going red as he told me he was now responsible for my safety....

Gah. I’d never wished so hard for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Then arguing with him, letting my fury at my ridiculous reaction to him get to me, when what I should have been thinking about was what he’d told me about Mom...

If I’d had a cup of tea then I’d certainly have flung it in his face, his precious suit and carpet be damned.

I shouldn’t have gotten angry. I shouldn’t have kept interrupting him. I should have kept my cool and asked more questions about the Hamiltons and what they wanted and why they were so dangerous, and what happened to Mom, but no. I’d lost my temper like the dumb kid I apparently still was, giving him ample reason to treat me accordingly.

Jesus. I *knew* shouting at him wasn’t going to change things, it never did. Because if there was one thing I’d learned over the years, it was that Caleb Cross was a solid brick wall and that brute force and pushing wouldn’t move him.

Luckily, I’d had some control though, and had managed to force down my rage and swallow my curses. I’d made my face arrange itself into something that vaguely resembled pleasant. And I’d told him ‘no problem’ and even managed to dredge up smile.

He’d been suspicious — I’d seen his eyes narrow — but he’d accepted my ‘not a problem’ without argument.

Of course, I had no intention of doing what he said, and I wasn’t going to be moving into any damn apartment of his. My place was small, but it had been hard won after months of extensive arguing with Dad. Stupid that a woman my age had to argue with her father to be ‘allowed’ to move out of home, but at least now I had context for Dad’s apparent paranoia. The

Hamiltons were rich, powerful, and while I didn't know much about them, I knew enough to understand that yes, me suddenly appearing would be a big deal media-wise and yes, I guess that would make me a target for their enemies.

I just wished there was another way to approach it that wasn't keep-Isabel-locked-away-in-the-equivalent-of-a-nunnery-for-the-next-hundred-years.

I let out a breath, staring into space.

Perhaps I should have told Dad about the texts I'd received. Perhaps we could have a mature conversation about them... Then again, considering his and Caleb's automatic reaction to any threat was to double-down on their protective instincts, perhaps that wasn't a good idea after all. I hadn't told him before because I hadn't wanted him to interfere, and nothing had changed.

I still wanted to meet my mother's family. Caleb had said they were only after Fox, but what did he know? Mom was Charlotte Hamilton's daughter, and I was desperate to know more about her, more about her life.

I was desperate to know more about my family, period.

Growing up, all I'd known was Dad, Sir George, Caleb and a bit later, Atlas. I had no brothers or sisters. No cousins. No grandparents. I had no female relatives at all, and I felt the lack like a strange kind of ache.

Don't get me wrong, I loved Dad and the rest of my weird little family of sorts. But I wanted more. I wanted to know whose blood ran through my veins. I wanted to know whose history had influenced mine. And I... I just wanted to know my mother. Was that so very much to ask?

Apparently, according to the fucking patriarchy, it was.

I needed to do something, assert my agency in some way. Get out from under their collective thumbs. I needed to follow up on that contact I'd had three weeks ago, and I needed to keep the three assholes from finding out.

Unfortunately, I had a sneaking suspicion that the only way to do that was to fly under their radar and not attract their

notice. Which, double unfortunately, meant doing what they said for the time being.

Ugh.

My mood wasn't exactly awesome when I slipped back into my cubicle, though it got slightly better when I saw the bagel and coffee sitting on my desk, waiting for me. Zara was an angel, a saint.

"Thank you, goddess," I murmured with feeling as I sat down.

"No problem," she said from her own cubicle. "Got a minute? I need to go over a spreadsheet with you."

I was still trying to puzzle out why Zara would want to go over a spreadsheet with me when she didn't have anything to do with spreadsheets or, indeed, numbers of any kind, when she suddenly appeared beside my desk and sat herself down on the edge of it.

I pushed my chair back, cradling my coffee, and gave her a look. "What spreadsheet?"

She grinned. "There is no spreadsheet. That was just a cunning ruse."

"Ah." I took a sip of my coffee. Man, it was good. "So, what do you actually want to talk about?"

Her expression was expectant. "You coming with me on Friday?"

Oh, that's right. The auction. The sexy auction.

Suddenly escaping J, J, and M to go to this super exclusive club and watch Zara auctioning off herself off seemed like not a great way to fly under the radar. In fact, it seemed like a great way to actively encourage the kind of attention from the three assholes that I was hoping to avoid.

"Oh." I hoped she wouldn't pick up on my reluctance. "That."

"Yes, that." She folded her arms. "You're having second thoughts, aren't you?"

“No,” I lied. “Not at all. This coffee is really good, by the way.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s the perfect strength and it’s just the right temperature—”

“I’m not talking about the coffee.”

I sighed. Zara was no fool, worse luck. And now I felt bad because I had promised her....

You should tell her.

I should. Then at least she’d know the reason why I’d always been so reluctant to go out, and that it wasn’t her. It would mean revealing who my dad was, not to mention my connection with Caleb, but maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. It wasn’t fair to keep things secret from her, especially since she was my friend.

I took a breath and met her gaze. “Okay, here’s the deal My dad’s Tennyson Fox, the Fox in Fox Tech.”

Zara’s expression betrayed nothing. “Uh huh.”

“And I’m telling you that because he’s insanely paranoid about my safety. Every move I make is watched and I can’t go anywhere without a security detail. That’s the reason I never go out with you. Because you really don’t want me and my three bodyguards trailing you and basically background checking every single person you meet.”

Zara pursed her lips.

“Also,” I went on, on a roll now. “I just found out that my mom who died having me was Juliana Hamilton, the only daughter of James and Charlotte Hamilton. Yes, *the* Hamiltons. And now they want to make contact with me, but Dad is certain it’s only going to paint a giant target on my back and now he’s being even more insane about my security.”

Zara tilted her head, gray eyes assessing. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “Huh,” she said at last. “You kept that quiet.”

“I know. I don’t like telling people because honestly, sometimes it’s more hassle than it’s worth.”

“Fair enough.” She frowned. “So, is he a control freak or is he just over protective?”

“Who? Dad?” I thought about it. “Probably both.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You know, I could use a little of that in my own life.”

I stared at her. “Seriously? You really want to have your every move watched? Dad wouldn’t even let me move out of home. I had to argue with him about it, and he only let me if I had accepted my three stupid bodyguards.”

Zara lifted a shoulder. “At least he cares.”

It wasn’t the response I’d been expecting, and it made me wonder about her own home life, or, given her previous comment, her lack of it. Complaining further seemed dumb, especially when it was true that for all his bullshit, Dad *did* care about me, and I knew that.

“I suppose,” I said reluctantly. “But he refuses to tell me about my mother. Even now I can’t mention her name.”

A crease appeared between Zara’s fair brows. “Still?”

“Yeah. It’s been over twenty years.”

“He must have been devastated when she died.”

“He was.” Not that I could say for certain, though. Because how? When he never talked about her? I could only assume.

Zara gave me another speculative glance. “So, I guess you must know his beastliness quite well then. Isn’t he your dad’s best friend or something?”

I took another sip of my coffee and shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “You could say that.”

Again, proving she was no fool, Zara said, “You didn’t just happen into this job, did you?”

I shifted uncomfortably again because this was heading into tricky waters. “No. Dad wants me to take over Fox Tech

eventually, so he wanted me to work for Caleb for a while to... prove myself. Or at least, that's what he told me. "

Zara's eyes widened slightly. "What constitutes 'proving' yourself?"

"I'm... not very good at controlling my temper," I admitted. "I kind of shout at people I shouldn't when I'm mad, and they...don't take it well."

She eyed me for a long moment, then her mouth curved. "Did you shout at his beastliness then?"

I flushed. "Um. Maybe."

This time Zara laughed. "Now, that I'd pay money to see. If I had any of course, which I don't."

And there was another reason for me to feel uncomfortable. Here I was, complaining about how my super rich dad was worried for my safety, while poor Zara didn't have any money and maybe didn't have anyone to worry about her.

What a fucking whiner I was.

"Zara," I began. "I could lend—"

"No," she cut me off. "Absolutely the fuck not. The only money I'll take is the money I earn myself. No offense."

I held up a hand. "None taken. But please promise me you'll tell me if I ever come across as a whiny, privileged asshole."

She nodded slowly. "I can do that. As long as you come with me on Friday."

I sighed for the third time. "I'd love to, but you don't know the rest of the story."

"So, tell me the rest of the story."

Briefly I explained the text I'd gotten three weeks earlier and about how I thought it was the Hamiltons reaching out. Then I told her about Dad beefing up my security and Caleb taking responsibility for it, and my own fears that I'd never find out about my mother and her life if I didn't take matters

into my own hands. Also, how it was imperative not to draw the attention of Dad et al if I was going to investigate the Hamiltons myself.

It ended up being kind of a lecture. Luckily, Zara was a patient woman.

“If you come with me, I’ll help you escape your minders,” she said when I’d finally finished. “And I’ll help make sure no one knows you’re gone.”

I stared at her in surprise. “You will? How?”

She tapped the side of her nose and grinned. “It’s a secret. Leave it to me.”

A tiny burst of excitement went through me. It had been far too long since I’d been anywhere or done anything that wasn’t going to work or seeing Dad, which if I thought about it too much, was just straight out depressing.

I was sheltered, there was no doubt about it. Dad had hired tutors for me when I was a kid, effectively home-schooling me from the Pre-War brownstone he’d inherited from Sir George. Then I’d gone to an eye-wateringly expensive girls’ school for a few years to ‘socialize’ me — which hadn’t worked. I’d lost my temper with one of the bullies on my first day, effectively ostracizing me not only for the rest of the school year, but for the rest of my school life. After that, while college had been great for me academically, my social life was still a disaster. How could it have been anything else with security dogging my every footstep?

In the end it was easier not to go anywhere or do anything and tell myself I was happy with the status quo. But I wasn’t happy with the status quo. I was twenty-three and I wanted a normal goddamn life. I wanted to go out with friends, see movies, concerts, go traveling, and hell, maybe even have a boyfriend. Because of course if I hadn’t had any friends, I hadn’t had a boyfriend either.

Maybe you could find one at the club?

The thrill inside me got more intense. Finding a boyfriend at the club didn’t seem likely, but I perhaps I could find myself

a one-night-stand. Get rid of my stupid virginity and get myself some experience. Shit, I hadn't even been kissed before let alone anything else, and you know, that was just *another* thing I hadn't done.

You're five years older than your mom when she had you.

A strange electric shock joined the thrill sitting in my gut. Mom had me when she was eighteen. She'd been in love, had a boyfriend. No, she'd been *married*. And here I was, her daughter, at twenty-three more sheltered than your average nun.

Suddenly, I couldn't stand it. I wasn't going to sit here wishing I could do all the things I'd been denied for so many years. I was going to go out and do them. My mom had done more in her eighteen years than I had in twenty-three, and who knows what she could have achieved if she'd lived? Well, she hadn't lived. She'd had me and then she'd died, and here I was moaning about my life and how I was stuck not doing anything.

Enough was enough.

I was going to go to that club with Zara and maybe find some guy to go home with, lose my virginity. Then I was going to find out all about my mother from the Hamiltons, and to hell with Dad.

And to hell with Caleb too.

"Excellent," I said to Zara and downed the rest of my coffee. "Then I'm in."

Caleb

Thursday night I watched Isabel stalk around my penthouse apartment high above Central Park. I'd decided to stay in another apartment I owned downtown while she stayed here so at least she had the illusion of privacy.

She hadn't uttered a word of protest when I'd picked her up from the shitty little apartment in the Village that she'd insisted on living in since moving out of Ten's brownstone, so of course I was suspicious.

She hadn't wanted to come here, and I knew it, no matter that she hadn't argued when I'd laid down the law in my office the day before. The expression on her face had fooled no one, least of all me. It had been so determinedly neutral that it was obvious she'd been seething inside.

I knew her far too well, that was the problem. I knew she'd hate coming here, that she'd hate anything cramping her already cramped lifestyle. Too bad, though. Keeping her away from the Hamiltons was too important and I was with Ten on this.

What did surprise me was that it had soon become clear that she hadn't told Ten that I'd informed her about her mother. Because if she had, Ten would have shown up on my doorstep ready to punch my face in.

I'd mentioned it to Atlas, but he'd only sighed and said I was asking for trouble and good luck to me. But that was Atlas. He avoided confrontation where he could, and not because he was afraid of it, but because he just couldn't be fucked dealing with it. Laid-back, everyone called him. Showed you how much they knew.

I wasn't laid-back. Everyone knew where I stood, and it wasn't on the side of the angels.

Except one of those angels was now in my living area, looking around as if she was in a seedy motel that reeked of cigarettes and rented rooms by the hour, trying to mask her annoyance, and failing.

"It's fine, I guess," she said, no doubt deliberately trying to aggravate me.

I'd already decided I wasn't going to rise to any bait she set, however, so I merely shrugged. "Glad you approve, princess."

She scowled. "Princess? What? Don't call me that."

"Then don't look at my multi-million-dollar apartment like it's something you wouldn't be seen dead in. It's privileged as fuck. You could be sleeping on the streets, which believe me, you don't want to do."

Her chin jutted, but I could see that tell-tale flush. Her pale skin, dotted with all those pretty little freckles, always betrayed her. She was in jeans tonight and a simple sweatshirt with a wide neck that kept slipping off one shoulder, exposing the thin line of a pale green bra strap and yet more creamy skin.

I wanted to tell her to get a fucking sweatshirt that fitted properly but I didn't. I shouldn't have been noticing in the first place, still less getting annoyed by it.

"Yeah, okay, but you know this is ridiculous though," she said, as if repeating herself for the tenth time was going to make me change my mind. "Moving me out of my own home because of some stupid family stuff."

I thrust my hands in my pockets. “Being the potential target for a powerful family’s enemies is ‘stupid family stuff’. Right. Got it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I did know what she meant. But she wasn’t listening to me, and she needed to. “Do you have any idea of the type of people who might see you as a ticket to easy money? And what they might do to you? They’re people like Old Nick, who once wiped out a family of five because the father who worked for him made the mistake of skimming off a bit of extra cash from a deal.”

Isabel’s jaw didn’t get any less stubborn. “What’s this got to do with me?”

“Be quiet and listen. The father found out that Old Nick knew what he’d done, and he knew that his family was dead since Old Nick was merciless when it came to people stealing from him. So, the father took matters into his own hands.”

She paled. She hadn’t heard this story before, because I hadn’t told her the darker details of my past. That it was my father who’d once worked for Old Nick. My father who’d killed his entire family. All except me.

“What do you mean ‘he took matters into his own hands’?” she asked.

“He turned on the gas and everyone died of carbon-monoxide poisoning.” I lifted a shoulder. “A much easier and peaceful way for everyone to go than the hail of bullets Old Nick usually used.”

She went even paler and glanced away. I didn’t know what expression was on my face, but clearly, she didn’t like it. So she shouldn’t. I didn’t talk about my family and what my father had done to my mother and my sister, still less to her. But sometimes it was a useful example.

“Is that a lesson?” she asked, staring out the window. “Or an autobiography?”

Little idiot. Did she think I was telling her this for fun? Shit, she had no idea.

“Fine,” I said flatly. “You can stay here for the rest of your fucking life, I don’t care.”

She let out a breath. “Okay, okay, I get it. There are evil monsters out there.”

“Then maybe do what the fuck you’re told and stop acting like a sulky teenager.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Do you fucking understand?”

There was a moment’s tense silence.

She stood there, back straight, chin at that angle I remembered from way back that indicated pure mule. Clearly readying herself for an argument. Then, like the tide going out, all the tension bled out of her, and she turned to face me. Her expression was so determinedly neutral I almost laughed. She couldn’t hide her true feelings, not from me. She’d never been able to.

“Okay fine,” she said carefully. “So how is all this bullshit going to work?”

“This bullshit being staying in a luxury penthouse apartment looking over Central Park?”

This time her blush was a flare of deep, lovely pink. “Look, I’m sorry. I know I’m privileged to be staying here, but...it still feels like I’m being punished. Like this is a prison. Surely you can understand that?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Do you see any bars?”

“Caleb—”

“I know. You’ve had your father’s security curtailing your entire life from the time you were thirteen years old, and before that, Sir George’s. It’s not what a twenty-three-year-old wants from her life. But the shit with the Hamiltons won’t be for long. We’re going sort it out and then your life will go back to normal.”

She gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Normal? What’s that? I’ve never had it.”

“No. You just had a billionaire father who only wanted what was best for you.”

Unmistakeable hurt flickered over her face, and she quickly turned back to the windows, obviously trying to hide it.

A grudging sympathy shifted inside me. I was being hard on her — maybe too hard. But someone needed to be. Someone she’d listen to and not simply disregard the way she disregarded Ten. She didn’t understand how serious this was, and she might never understand, which would actually be the best outcome all round.

The world was a shitty place and she had plenty of time to discover exactly how shitty. She didn’t need a lesson from the Hamiltons just yet.

Still, that didn’t mean I didn’t empathize. It also didn’t mean I’d go any easier on her, either.

The lights coming through the glass gilded the bare skin of her shoulder and my attention was drawn yet again to its slender curve and the green scrap of fabric that was her bra strap.

Jesus Christ. I’d seen a woman’s bare shoulder before. Why I was looking at Isabel’s I had no idea.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “You haven’t—”

“If I wanted to hear some teenage whining, I would have asked.” I shouldn’t have said it, but irritation burned inside me, for what reason I didn’t know. Perhaps it was her constant pushing at me. Or perhaps it had something to do with that bare shoulder I couldn’t stop looking at.

Whatever, it was making me impatient and pissy, and I was very aware that I was taking it out on her. Which wasn’t fair. Then again, she was going to have to learn how to deal with people being pissy with her, especially if she wanted to work with Ten at Fox.

“And if I wanted a second Dad,” Isabel said, deliberately mimicking me. “I would have asked.” She hadn’t turned, but I could see her face reflected in the window.

Red hair, white shoulder, green eyes full of sparks.

Something tightened inside me. Something I didn't want.

"I'm not your fucking dad," I growled.

She glared back. All challenge. Testing me. And for a moment electricity hummed in the air between us, sharp and hot like lightning on a summer day.

The same electricity that had been there the day she'd knelt on the floor of my office, cleaning up the coffee she'd spilled on the carpet. And I'd looked down to where she was on her knees at my feet, wisps of red hair curling against the white skin of her vulnerable nape.

Fuck.

Looking away would have been the smart thing to do, because I couldn't have that electricity between us. I couldn't, not with her. But I'd never been a man who backed down and she needed to learn that challenging me was a mistake. I was the one in charge here and the sooner she understood that the better.

So, I held her gaze and even in the glass I could see her blush, a tide of red moving up her neck and over her face. Her gaze flickered under the pressure of mine, yet that stubborn jaw of hers firmed and her shoulders squared.

Silly girl. She didn't want to get into a staring contest with me.

I'd always tried to go easy on her in the past, because Ten could be so rigid. I'd certainly never wanted to frighten her. But she wasn't a ten-year-old anymore, and a little fear wouldn't do her any harm.

She should be scared of me. Perhaps if she was then she'd do what she was told.

I let the wolf show, my gaze boring into hers, yet she didn't look down the way she should have. Her green eyes flickered once again, but her jaw remained set, the mule in her fighting back.

A mistake. A real fucking mistake. Because then I caught a glimpse of it, the steel inside her. The steel she was already growing into and making her own. In ten years, she'd be a force to be reckoned with, one hell of a CEO.

Perhaps that's when I felt it, the spark of challenge, of curiosity. Of attraction. I'd always liked strong women and Isabel was nothing if not strong. She was all fire and fury, and fuck...I liked that. I liked it a lot.

She held my gaze a long time. Longer than any other person had ever done so. But in the end, hers flickered yet again and this time, she looked away.

Satisfaction kicked hard in my gut. I shouldn't have enjoyed how she'd surrendered to me, but I did.

There was another long, tense silence that I made no move to break.

Isabel shifted restlessly and then turned around to face me. Her cheeks were still pink, and she directed her gaze very carefully at a point over my shoulder. "So now you've beaten me into submission, what's the next step?"

She has no idea, does she?

No. She did not. And it was probably best for her never to know. Submission was a word you should never use lightly and certainly never with me.

"Nothing much will change," I said. "You'll have your security detail as usual, but you'll stay here at night until we've figured out what the Hamiltons are doing." I paused. "You will tell us if anyone contacts you, won't you?"

Her gaze remained fixed to the point over my shoulder. "Of course."

I did not trust that 'of course'. Not one little bit.

There were things I could do to check up on her, such as monitoring her calls and any electronic communications she might make, but I didn't want to do that. Invading her privacy to such an extent was hardly conducive to building trust and for all of this to work, she had to trust me.

Then again, I'd break that trust in an instant if it meant keeping her safe. Trust was something that could be rebuilt, but there were other things that couldn't.

For a second, she remained silent then moved over to the cabinet where I kept my most expensive booze. I didn't stop her as she pulled it open and reached for the bottle of Glenfiddich — distilled in 1937 and only sixty-one bottles were ever produced, so it was rare. She took the top off and grabbed a glass. "Look," she said a little hesitantly as she poured herself a nip. "I'm sorry for being so...weird about all of this. I really do get what you and Dad are trying to do and I... Well, I appreciate it." She lifted the bottle and gave me a questioning look.

"Yes," I said dryly. "I think I will have a nip of my hundred- and twenty-thousand-dollar bottle of scotch."

Isabel blinked, glanced down at the bottle then shrugged. "If you didn't want anyone to drink it, you shouldn't have put it in the drinks cabinet." She poured a tumbler for me then put down the bottle. Picking up both glasses, she came over to where I stood and held one out to me. "I am sorry, Cal," she said. "I'm not actively trying to be difficult."

Isabel had never been good at lying. I'd always been able to tell when she was, and she wasn't lying now. She meant this. Yet... All that fire inside her, all her frustration and stubborn anger didn't just disappear. It had to go somewhere.

When she'd been a kid and I'd been promoted to 'manager' at Old Nick's club AKA being his right-hand man, she'd been desperate to see inside the club itself, because I'd never allowed it. It was Old Nick's 'office', crime central in other words, and I didn't want her anywhere near it. She'd been pissy with me for days after I'd told her no, glaring and refusing to speak to me. At the time, it had been cute, though it had taken her a week to let go of her shitty mood.

She sometimes held on to stuff, did Isabel, so I was suspicious of this sudden apology. But since it was going to make my life easier and I had a shitload of work to do, I took the glass from her and nodded. "Okay. I get this is difficult and

you're angry, but I promise it won't be for long. And maybe I can talk to Ten about him being less of a protective asshole."

Her mouth curved into a full-on Isabel smile, the one she'd always had, even as a kid, genuine and full of warmth and affection. That smile used to wrap itself around the void where my heart had been, making me feel as if I was walking in sunlight.

It felt that way now.

"Thanks, Cal. That means a lot to me." She lifted her tumbler. "*Slainte.*"

For a man who'd given himself to the darkness long ago, that smile of hers was a heady drug, and I hadn't seen it in far too long. Things had been...difficult between us lately. And looking at her, with her smile like summer sunlight, I regretted it. Because while her rages were intense, they blew themselves out quickly. She was also fiercely loyal, funny, empathetic, and when she tried, she could coax a smile from a stone.

But that was why I had to be so hard with her. She was precious to Ten and she was precious to me, and I couldn't allow any empathy to undermine what I needed to do to keep her safe.

I raised my tumbler in response. "*Slainte,*" I said.

But I didn't smile back.

Isabel

I knew Caleb wasn't convinced, not for a second. He was a suspicious bastard and, in this instance, he had every right to be. I'd been straight with him. I'd told him that I was grateful he'd given me a place to stay and that I appreciated him, and Dad being concerned for my safety. And I *was* appreciative. I'd meant every word of that.

But nothing could change the fact that they were being overprotective assholes and I didn't like it.

I stayed Thursday night in his ridiculously luxurious penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park, and I couldn't say I didn't like all the dark, charcoal carpeting and low-slung white leather sectional sofas. The white walls with the horrifically expensive abstracts on them and the ridiculously amazing sound system. The industrial-esque kitchen gleaming so brightly it looked as if no one had ever cooked in it before. And the master bedroom with the biggest bed in creation and white sheets of a thread count so high it must have been in the millions.

Annoyingly, I slept like a log.

Friday, I woke to zero texts or calls from the mysterious person who'd contacted me before, which was frustrating. What was even more frustrating was that I couldn't get out of my head what Caleb had told me the night before about the

Hamiltons enemies, most especially that story about the man who'd turned the gas on and killed his family.

It had sounded horrific, and I might have dismissed it as Caleb trying to scare me if he hadn't said it all in a in such a matter-of-fact tone. And the look on his face.... Hard. Set. You didn't make something like that up, surely. Not even to scare someone.

He'd never told me about his past before he'd met and become friends with Dad, though of course I was desperate to know more. I'd asked him once or twice, but he hadn't answered, and trying to get information out of Dad had been as successful as you might expect. Which was not at all.

Once, when Atlas had joined us for dinner one night, I'd tried to ask him, see if he knew anything, but he'd only given me his trademark charming smile, and told me he'd once heard that Caleb was the devil himself and lived in a castle in the Ninth Circle of Hell.

Atlas was also a card-carrying member of the asshole club.

Anyway, when Caleb had told me about the man who'd killed his family, I'd made some sarcastic comment because at the time I hadn't believed him. But later, I kept replaying what he'd said over and over in my head. It had the ring of personal experience to it, I couldn't help thinking. Though, that wasn't the only moment I kept replaying.

There'd been that other moment, when I'd stared at his reflection in the window, and he'd stared back. And I'd wanted desperately to look away because there had been something in his black eyes, something darkly ferocious that I'd found both frightening and unbearably exciting both at once.

An electric feeling had hung in the air, sending delicious chills through me, and I'd had the impression that if I moved, I'd have generated sparks.

But that wasn't me and I knew it. It was all him. Him standing not far away, all six foot five of hard, heavy muscle wrapped in one of those perfectly tailored suits of dark

charcoal wool. He'd been wearing a black shirt with a blue silk tie, and he was just... oh my God, so fucking hot. Dark and dangerous, and the epitome of every fantasy I've ever had. And the way he was looking at me. Almost as if he—

But no, I couldn't think that. I couldn't think about how the force of his will, the sheer intensity of it glittering in his eyes, had made me finally drop my gaze. Or about how the moment I had, something inside me had relaxed.

I didn't understand it, not at all, and I really needed to stop thinking about him. Fixating on a man I could never have was a great way to ensure I'd stay a virgin for life and there was no way I was going to do that.

I also needed to convince him that I was a good girl who never put a foot out of line and who'd never had one single call from some mysterious person who was going to reveal all about my mother. Who definitely wasn't planning on ditching her security so she could go to a secret sex club with her best friend from work.

Dad texted me as I went diligently to work that morning, with J, J, and M flanking me like border collies shepherding a recalcitrant sheep. It was only a 'hi, how are you doing, not sorry for putting you in the equivalent of a prison btw' text and so I treated it the way it deserved, with a cheery 'it's okay, love you'. I only just stopped myself from adding a kiss emoji, which would have made him deeply suspicious.

There was no point arguing with him, not given how inflexible as he was, though I'd debated telling him what Caleb had told me about mom. In the end I'd decided against it since I couldn't be bothered dealing with any fallout. Dad was nothing but dramatic when it came to her and if he discovered Caleb had told me about her, he'd almost certainly turn it into a massive deal.

Not that it was Dad I should have been worried about.

No, what I was really worried about was Caleb.

He knew me too well and he could read me like a book, and I was sure that my apologetic speech to him the night

before hadn't convinced him of anything, no matter how much I'd meant it.

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate his talk about enemies and danger and how I'd be a target. I knew that already. I'd been a target for Dad's enemies ever since I was a day old. But there *had* to be a better way that didn't involve me being treated like a newborn chick who had to be protected at all costs from basically the entire world.

Anyway, I knew that if I was going to go out with Zara and lose my security sheepdogs, I was going to need a *very* good plan indeed.

I went into Cross International that morning as per usual, making sure to be on time since drawing any Caleb attention wasn't what I wanted, especially today. But the eye of Sauron was clearly somewhere else since I spent the morning working in my cubicle without a single royal summons.

Zara put her head over the top of my cubicle mid-morning and jerked her chin in the direction of the kitchenette, so I finished up what I was doing and met her there.

"You still on for tonight?" she asked, as I came in. She'd already gotten out my favorite mug and it was currently sitting in the coffee machine, waiting for my usual latte to fill it.

"Absolutely." I leaned against the counter and gave her a concerned look. "You're still going to....you know....?"

"Auction off my virginity?" Zara grinned. "Hell, yeah."

"Your virginity?" I echoed dumbly. "*That's* what you're auctioning off?"

She regarded me with some amusement. "What did you think I was auctioning?"

I couldn't hide my shock. "I don't know, like a striptease or something."

"Uh no. If all I wanted was to take my clothes off, I could get a job in a strip club."

"Zara—"

“Look, I know you’re worried,” she interrupted, before I could list all the reasons why this was a very bad idea. “And I appreciate it, but it’s all good. The club is legit with the application process and all the prospective bidders have been vetted. It’s safe, okay?”

A secret sex club where people could auction off their virginity to the highest bidder? Safe?

“If you need money, I can—”

“We’ve already had this conversation and I believe I was clear.” She gave me a very direct look. “I know what I’m doing, Izzy, okay?”

I didn’t like it, not one bit, but I could hardly stop her. “I didn’t even know you were a virgin,” I muttered, trying not to scowl.

“I guess you learn something new every day.”

“Well,” I said finally, wanting her to know that while I supported her, I was also deeply skeptical of her choices. “I’m not happy about it, but okay.”

Zara took my mug out of the machine and handed it to me. “Luckily, your happiness isn’t what’s important here. Or at least, not when it comes to me and my virginity auction. But I do want you to come as moral support, so really, the most important thing is how to separate you from your security entourage.”

“True.” I sipped at my coffee. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yep.” She pushed the button for her cappuccino. “I need you to meet me at Stan’s tonight after work. It’s a bar in Hell’s Kitchen. We’ll lose your minders there.”

I’d never been to Stan’s and wasn’t sure why that particular bar had to be the one, but if Zara thought we could lose them there then I wasn’t going to question it. “Okay. How is that going to happen?”

“It’ll involve a friend of mine, a clothing change, and a getaway car.” Zara gave me a sly look “Hope you’re up for some excitement.”

Excitement? Who was she kidding? I couldn't wait. The idea of an evening out without my security detail following my every move seemed like heaven. There would, of course, be consequences, and I was fully aware of that. Caleb had made his expectations pretty clear, after all. Then again, if this night turned out to be as good as I'd hoped then perhaps it would be worth it.

"I am definitely up for some excitement," I said, raising my mug for a toast. "Bring on the getaway shenanigans."

The rest of the day passed way too slowly, and I had difficulty focusing on work. It wasn't just the prospect of a night out that was the issue. I kept checking my phone too on the off chance I had any texts or calls from whichever Hamilton contact it was that had reached out to me, because it had to have been a Hamilton contact. And if they were going to give me another meeting time, tonight would be the most convenient.

But of course, I heard nothing. How annoying of them not to consider my timetable.

Five o'clock rolled around and Zara left. She told me to wait for ten minutes before leaving to give her some time to organize whatever she was going to organize, so I sat at my desk pretending to fiddle with an email as the seconds went by.

Then at five ten on the dot, I got my purse and my jacket, shut down my computer and headed out of the building. J, J, and M were their usual impassive selves when I told them I was going for an after-work drink at Stan's. The traffic was a nightmare, as it always was at rush hour, but I didn't insist on the subway. No point rocking the boat at this delicate stage of the evening.

Stan's, when we finally got there, turned out to be a kinda sketchy looking place. Inside, it was dimly lit, a TV with some baseball on blaring above the bar, and a rundown pool table down the back. There were booths and tables, mostly full of what looked like old drunks, but there were people in nice

suits scattered here and there, obviously having an after-work drink.

Zara was sitting at the bar, and I headed straight over there, J, J, and M following at my heels. They took some chairs at the bar too, not quite next to me, but not too far away, their attention on the room at large and scanning for threats like three large, ugly Terminators.

Zara pushed a Cosmo in my direction and as I sat down, leaned in to murmur, “In ten minutes pretend like you’re not feeling well, and head to the ladies. I’ll follow you.”

I picked up my Cosmo and raised it in a silent acknowledgement, then sipped, trying to give no hint of the excitement fluttering away inside me. “I didn’t bring anything to change into,” I murmured back. I hadn’t been able to bring a party dress to work since that would have looked suspicious. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“It’s handled,” Zara said. “I got you. Don’t worry.”

But I was worrying all the same, despite my excitement. Anxious that whatever plan she’d come up with wasn’t going to work and that my sheepdogs would bust me, and I’d end up being ignominiously escorted back to Caleb’s apartment to face the consequences.

I forced the anxiety down as Zara and I chatted about nothing, though I barely paid any attention to what she was saying. However, the Cosmo did wonders to take the edge off, so by the time she gave me an almost imperceptible nod that ten minutes was up, I was able to put a hand over my stomach and groan without being too over the top and dramatic about it.

“Oh, Izzy,” Zara said, just loud enough for my minders to hear. “Are you okay?”

“Cramps,” I said and then, still clutching my gut, I slid off the bar stool and glanced at J, J, and M. “Period,” I added meaningfully. “I’m going to the ladies.”

Instantly they slid off their barstools too and because they were dicks and clearly not embarrassed by period talk, they

escorted me right to the door. I was desperately racking my brains to think of some way to stop them from hanging around, because how I was going to escape, I had no idea. But Zara didn't seem worried. She took my elbow, ostensibly to help me, and smiled as she pushed open the bathroom door. "We'll only be a moment," she assured them, before dragging me inside.

"How are we going to get out without them seeing?" I asked as the door closed.

"Relax," Zara said. "I've got it covered."

She headed for the toilet cubicle at the end of the row and pushed it open. Which was when I realized it wasn't a toilet cubicle at all since it didn't have a toilet in it. There were a whole lot of shelves stacked with cleaning items instead, and miracle of miracles, a tiny, narrow door in the back wall.

Zara pulled out a bag that had been sitting on a shelf and handed it to me, grinning like a maniac. "Okay, here are your clothes. Put them on and leave what you're wearing in the bag. We'll collect it later. Hurry."

I swallowed the fifty million questions I had and took the bag, ducked into the nearest cubicle, and began tearing my boring work clothes off. Then I pulled out what I'd be wearing that night, which turned out to be the flimsiest dress I'd ever seen. It was very simple, of gold satin cut on the bias with barely-there straps, and it was immediately obvious that wearing a bra with it wasn't happening.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said loudly as I held it up and stared at it, aghast. "You got me this?"

"It'll fit you," Zara said from the other side of the cubicle door.

"There's not enough room in it for me and my bra," I complained. "I'm not even sure panties are going to work."

"Don't wear them then," Zara said cheerfully, as if it was an easy enough decision. "You'd better hurry, though. Your security is going to start getting antsy and I don't want them doing so until we've gotten a good head start."

I sighed. I could handle not wearing a bra, but ditching my panties was a bridge too far. And if that meant some serious VPL then so be it.

I scrambled into the gold dress, and Zara was as good as her word, it did fit, and it fitted well. It was, in fact, the sexiest, most provocative dress I'd ever worn, and my father would no doubt have been horrified, which was an exceptionally pleasing thought.

There were some strappy gold sandals and a tiny gold mesh purse in the bag, too, and I put the sandals on before stuffing the rest of my work clothing back into the bag and transferring my wallet and phone to the purse. Then, feeling self-conscious, I opened the cubicle door and stepped out.

Zara had changed too and was now swathed in a very long, voluminous, not to mention incongruous, red cloak. Her silver blonde hair was loose, flowing down over her shoulders from beneath the hood that she'd drawn up.

"Wow," I said, staring at her. "Red Riding Hood?"

"Indeed." She gave a little bow. "I'm now ready for my wolf." She straightened then gave me a critical survey, nodding in approval. "I knew it. The dress is perfect. You look fabulous."

I felt fabulous too, though I wasn't brave enough to glance in the mirror above the sink. Not that I had a chance since Zara had already turned away and was heading to the cleaning cubicle again.

"Where did you get the dress?" I asked as I followed her. "I hope you didn't spend any money on it."

"No, don't worry. It's mine. I thought we'd be the same size." She knocked on the narrow door in the cubicle since it didn't look as if it could be opened from this side, then glanced back at me. "Follow me out. I've got an Uber waiting."

A second later the door opened, and Zara stepped through it. I followed her into a very narrow back hallway. She was

talking to a man who'd opened the door, giving him a smile and a "Thanks, Jay. I owe you."

He nodded but said nothing as we quickly went past him and out another door that opened into a narrow alley. The Uber was waiting, and Zara headed straight to it.

We got in and then a minute later we were headed back into Manhattan's traffic.

I sat in the back seat, my heartbeat thumping, glancing out the back window, almost expecting J, J, and M to come charging along the street after me, but there was nothing.

"I...can't believe it," I said after I'd checked for the umpteenth time. "I think we did it."

Zara sat beside me, wrapped in her red cloak, and looking very smug. "Yep. Never doubted for a second."

"How did you know about that door?" I asked curiously.

"I used to work at Stan's a couple of years back." She shrugged. "I always knew that door would come in handy one day."

I finally relaxed, allowing the nervous tension that had been building all day to bleed out of me. "Zara, you're a goddess. You know that right?"

She inclined her head regally, accepting her due.

It was a heady feeling, freedom. Which sounds dramatic, but when you'd been followed by no less than three men the entirety of your teenage and adult life, your every move under intense scrutiny, questioned constantly about where you were and what you were doing, the feeling of being on your own for once was...amazing.

For the first time in years, no one knew where I was. No one knew where I was going, or with who, or why.

I could do anything I wanted. Anything at all. Such as going out to a secret sex club and maybe — *maybe* — finding a man I liked and who liked me and something more than just kissing would happen. Though I'd settle for just kissing. Ridiculous to be twenty-three and never kissed anyone before,

but when you had a dad like Tennyson Fox the only way it was going to happen was if no one knew who I was.

Tonight, I was going to leave Isabel Fox at the door.

Tonight, I was going to be someone totally different.

“If you’re Red Riding Hood,” I said, “what should I be?”

Zara gave me a considering look. “Scarlet,” she said after a moment. “Either that or Little Orphan Annie.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t have to have anything to do with my hair you know.”

“Fair enough. Angel then.”

Angel. I liked that. Though, it was Zara who looked like an angel, with her silver blonde hair and gray eyes. She was still wrapped very securely in her cloak.

“What are you wearing under that by the way?” I asked.

This time the look she directed at me was slightly wicked. “You’ll see.”

Huh.

Biting back my curiosity I settled back in the seat, this time allowing my excitement free rein. I wasn’t going to think about Caleb tonight, or Dad, or about any of the goddamn patriarchy currently ruining my life. I was going to have too many cocktails and flirt inappropriately and enjoy having my night of freedom.

A sudden idea struck me, and I pulled my phone from the purse and glanced down at my text messages, scrolling through them until I reached the one from the unknown number, the one that was likely to be a Hamilton. I quickly typed *I’m definitely interested and I’m free tonight. Time and place. Let me know.*

For a second, I stared down at the message, the beat of my heart getting faster, Caleb’s deep voice echoing in my head telling me stories about enemies and what they might do to me. Perhaps contacting the Hamiltons was a mistake. Perhaps I was being naive. They *would* have enemies and it wasn’t as

if Dad and Caleb didn't have any enemies themselves. I could be making this a thousand times worse for myself.

Then again, perhaps I'd finally learn about the mother who'd died having me.

The mother you killed.

It was a shocking thought. A terrible thought and one I never allowed myself. A creeping doubt I tried hard to ignore. I didn't know the exact details of my birth because Dad had never bothered to tell me, but I knew she'd died having me.

She sacrificed her life for you, and you didn't even know she was a Hamilton up until a couple of days ago.

Dammit. I wanted to know about her. I owed her that.

Before I could think better of it, I hit send then slipped my phone back into my purse.

There, that was done. It was in the lap of the gods now.

Pretty soon the Uber pulled up outside a stately brownstone on the Upper East side. I stared at it, all wrought iron balustrades and roses spilling through the palings. It looked like a Pre-War, three storied house not some secret sex club.

"This is it?" I muttered as Zara reached for the door handle to get out.

She only threw a mysterious smile over her shoulder then slid out of the car, going up the stairs to the door, the cloak she wore flapping open to reveal silver sandals with ties that crisscrossed up her calves.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting, maybe something dark and seedy, with throbbing bass-heavy sounds and a line of people in front of the door wearing leather fetish gear. Or some neon-soaked Queens brothel or a flashy Vegas party palace.

I didn't expect a multimillion-dollar house that looked like something Dad would own.

Zara had already pressed the button beside the discreet brass plaque with *Arcadia* engraved on it, and she glanced at me as I came to stand beside her.

“Ready?” she asked.

I took a deep breath, the excitement inside me tipping into nervousness then back again. “Yes,” I said. “Absolutely.”

She grinned and then the door swung open, a dark-haired man standing in the doorway. He was tall and handsome and wore an exquisitely tailored black suit. He smiled. “Miss Bishop, so lovely to have you here tonight.” He glanced at me. “And is this your guest?”

Zara nodded. “Yes, this is Angel.”

The man didn’t bat an eyelid at the ridiculous nickname. “Nice to meet you, Angel. Please come in. And welcome to Arcadia.”

We stepped inside, the door shutting with a heavy thunk behind us.

The entrance hallway was large and carpeted in dark, inky blue. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the high vaulted ceiling, sunlight from the last rays of the day catching in the crystal drops and sending prism glitters everywhere.

The walls were papered in crimson and the effect, with the carpeting, should have been a bit much, but it wasn’t. It was rich, dark. Luxurious.

Silence hung over the place, the kind of silence that only extreme amounts of money can buy.

I swallowed.

I definitely wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

Caleb

I came in from my last meeting of the day to find Ten sitting in my chair with his feet up on my desk, giving me the disapproving stare he'd perfected over the twenty or so years we'd known each other.

It was the same one he'd directed my way when we first met, at fifteen. I'd been starving and had sneaked into a church to try my hand at stealing from the collection plate, because God didn't need the money but I sure as hell did. I'd been on the streets for six months after the day I'd come home from school to find my father had killed everyone I'd ever loved and who'd loved me, and I was still full of rage.

Ten he been sitting in the same pew, looking like he'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth since his clothes weren't filthy like mine and his hair was neat, and he was clean. I'd assumed the woman he was sitting next to was his mother, so when the plate came to me and I palmed some of the cash, and he gave me the most disapproving stare in the world. I'd mouthed 'fuck you' in his direction.

It had been a measly take that day, enough for a hot dog and a can of soda, but not much else. Afterward, I'd hung around the church doors, trying to find a mark to perfect my pick-pocketing skills.

That's when I'd spotted Ten in his clean clothes, smiling charmingly at the woman I thought was his mom as she handed him a fat roll of notes. Instantly I'd seen my opportunity. A couple of punches and the clean little rich asshole would go down easy, because already I'd learned that if I wanted to survive, I had to fight and fight dirty.

Except he didn't go down easy. He didn't go down at all, and half an hour later, both of us bleeding and bruised, we decided on a detente. Another half an hour and we were friends, because he wasn't some clean rich little asshole after all. He was a street kid just like me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I asked him now, going over to my desk and dumping the files I'd been holding on top of it. "Weren't we supposed to be meeting at Arcadia?"

Ten's icy blue gaze didn't waver, serrated as a bread knife. "Is she safe?"

I didn't need to ask who he was talking about. "You meant you haven't been tracking her phone twenty-four seven?" It was a dig. He'd wanted to do that, but I'd talked him out of it, telling him he was her father, not her parole officer.

He ignored that. "Answer the question."

I sighed. "Yes, of course she's safe."

"What security have you got on her?"

"Three operatives, ex black ops. Nothing gets past them. They'll stop a fucking tank. And as for the apartment, the only way anyone's getting inside that is if they blow it up and even the Hamiltons aren't that stupid."

He stared at me, his expression hard. I stared back.

Both of us knew what was at stake and I didn't blame him for being a paranoid prick about his own daughter's safety. But he also should know by now that nothing got past me unless I wanted it to and in this case, I didn't want it to.

"I've handled it, Ten," I said. "You've known me for over twenty years. Have I ever let you down? Even once?"

A muscle in his jaw leapt. “No,” he said at last, the word grudging.

“No,” I agreed. “So quit being a suspicious motherfucker and trust me.”

Are you sure he can trust you?

The thought slithered through my head, bringing with it the memory of Isabel’s hot green gaze reflected in the window, the sparks and steel in it. Her will matched to mine. The electricity in the air, and the kick of attraction. Her smooth, bare shoulder...

I gritted my teeth and forced that thought from my head.

Of course, he could trust me. I’d saved his life so many times when we were on the streets together and he’d saved mine. And even though we didn’t play well with other people, our moral compasses were diametrically opposed, and we liked our own way far too much, we were friends.

No, not friends. We were brothers.

Brothers who wanted to beat the shit out of each other now and then, but still brothers.

Abruptly, Ten took his feet off my desk, got out of my chair, and stood up. “I’m not used to having no control over this,” he muttered, which was unlike him. He never explained himself and he hated admitting he was worried, so obviously this shit with Isabel was eating him up. “If you have any information, I want it.”

“Sure,” I said soothingly. “And you’ll have it.”

“Don’t give me that tone, Caleb. If there’s something—”

“There’s nothing. I’m getting an update tonight about any bullshit the Hamiltons are planning. All you need to do is a keep an eye on Fox.”

I’d spent the past couple of days reaching out to a few of my less...legal sources. Even though I was legit now, I kept an eye on the empire I used to own, that I’d dismantled years earlier when I put that life behind me.

But since bad shit like that doesn't stay dismantled and whenever there's a power vacuum there's always some prick who wants to fill it, I stayed in command. A silent partner, making sure Old Nick's old guard stayed down where I put them.

All except Livia, one of Old Nick's exes, whom I'm put in charge of what was left of his empire. What she had was a mere shadow of the world I'd once ruled, and even though everyone else thought she was the boss now, she knew who the real boss was. Me.

I'd contacted her to give me any details on the Hamiltons current plans, because she had an inside contact, and if anyone knew their movements or their intentions it was her.

"What update?" Ten demanded. "From who?"

"Livia," I said. "She's got a couple of contacts. She'll have an idea of what they're up to if anything."

He stood there, his whole posture rigid, his gaze narrowed. He knew Livia.

She'd been nice to us the day we'd been hauled before Old Nick because I'd tried pickpocketing one of his men and failed. I hadn't known back then my dad had worked for him, that he was part of the reason my mother and sister were dead, and maybe if I had known, I wouldn't have tried stealing from him. I certainly would have tried killing him.

Anyway, at that point we were just two sixteen-year-olds, trying not to shit themselves with fear as they were dragged by the scruff of their necks by two enforcers into that club that was Old Nick's office.

Old Nick had been a hardliner and we would have been beaten within an inch of our lives if not for Livia. She'd tutted and fussed around us like a mother hen, making Old Nick let us off with a warning. Then she'd slipped us some money for food. She had a good heart, did Livia.

"I see." Ten's voice was absolutely neutral. He disapproved of me still holding the reins of my old empire. Then again, he'd always disapproved since his morality was

less fluid than mine. But mine had had to be fluid back then. When you were in survival mode, morality was a luxury you couldn't afford.

We'd had many a discussion over the years about it, and I'd told him that I couldn't leave a power vacuum and better the devil you know, etcetera, but he didn't understand why I had to take responsibility for it.

He wouldn't. He hadn't taken that empire by force, and he hadn't expanded it. He hadn't turned it into the biggest crime network in New York, and reigned supreme over it for years.

But I had. I'd built it and when I'd gone legit, I'd taken it down. And it was my responsibility to make sure it stayed down. Plus, retaining those old contacts had come in handy on several occasions, this being one of them.

"Yeah, I'm sure you do," I said. "She's got a man in with some of Hamilton's inner circle. If he's got designs on Fox, she'll know about it."

That muscle in the side of Ten's jaw leapt again, and he put a hand on the back of my chair, gripping it tight. "They must know she's in your pocket. What makes you think they'll tell her anything?"

"They don't know," I corrected. Livia and I had always been very careful to make sure no one knew that she regularly passed on information to me. "No one does. Jesus, Ten, do you really think I'm that stupid?"

His expression didn't even flicker. "I'm trusting you with ___"

"I know what you're trusting me with. Believe me, I'm well aware." I held his gaze, let him see the conviction in it. "She's safe. Nothing's going to touch her, I promise you."

The knuckles of Ten's hand were white where he gripped the back of my chair. "I should be looking after her myself."

So that was his problem. He was feeling guilty. Well, I got it — he was her father after all and protecting her was his job — but in this instance, having me be responsible for keeping her safe had been the right call.

His relationship with Isabel was already fractious and she didn't need his worry making him even more of a rigid prick than he already was. Better to have her pissed off with me than with him.

"I understand," I said flatly. "But you know letting me handle this is the best way. It's better for Isabel and it's better for you."

Finally, Ten let out a breath and his hand dropped from the chair. "I suppose it is. But I must kept in the loop."

"And you will. Tonight though, you need to relax."

He scowled. "About tonight. I don't—"

"Yeah, and I'm not taking no for an answer." I folded my arms. "You're wound tighter than fucking piano wire and not only is that not good for father daughter relationships, it's also not good for you." I eyed him critically. "When was the last time you got laid, for example?"

His blue gaze became distinctly chilly. "My sex life is none of your business."

I ignored him. "You have had sex since Juliana, right?"

"Of course, I've had sex since then," he snapped.

Juliana had died over twenty years ago, and I'd assumed he had, so it was more of a dig than anything else. But it was interesting that even after so many years had passed, he still couldn't bring himself to say her name.

I raised a brow. "So, we can safely say sometime in the last ten years?"

"Caleb," Ten growled.

"Relax, asshole," I said mildly. "Tonight, you're going to go to Arcadia and you're going to attend this auction, and maybe you'll even put in a bid on the virgin. At the very least you're going to get very drunk on horrifically expensive scotch. Which by the way, you owe me about thirty thousand for since your daughter drank most of the rest of my 1937 Glenfiddich."

“She has excellent taste,” Ten said stiffly. “What can I say?”

At that moment, the doors of my office opened, and Atlas strolled in, the third of our triumvirate.

He was as tall as I was and built like the proverbial brick shithouse, but unlike Ten and I, he never wore a suit. He was always in jeans, T-shirts, and a worn, black leather jacket. He had tawny gold hair, eyes almost the same color, and he absolutely did not give one single fuck about anything. Which naturally made him one of the most dangerous men I knew.

He came over to the chair in front of my desk and sprawled down onto it, then glanced first at me, then Ten. “We ready to go or what?”

Ten gave him a narrow look. “Don’t tell me you’re attending this ridiculous auction as well.”

“The virginity auction?” Atlas gave him back a slow smile. “Fuck, yes. Who doesn’t love a virginity auction?”

“The virgin, perhaps?” Ten snapped.

“Like I told you,” I said, “everyone who signs up to an auction, whether as a seller or a buyer, is vetted thoroughly. It’s all above board, Ten.”

“She’s clearly selling herself for a reason, though,” Ten said. “And if she’s doing this then it’s obvious she’s desperate.”

“Why don’t you buy her and ask her?” Atlas suggested. “I’m sure she’d love to hear a lecture from you about it.”

Ten scowled. “And you don’t have a problem with it? At all?”

Atlas who very much didn’t have a problem with anything sex related, rolled his eyes then glanced at me. “What’s this bullshit about?”

It was clear he meant Ten and ‘this bullshit’ being Ten’s increasingly thinning temper.

“Isabel,” I said. “And the Hamiltons.”

“Ah, right.”

“Do you know anything?” Ten asked him sharply.

A decent question considering Atlas’s family links. But I’d already been over this with Atlas and he hadn’t been aware of anything happening with regards to Isabel. Not that he had much to do with his family these days. The only person he still kept in touch with was his brother, North.

Atlas leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Nothing new, no. But I’ve asked North. If anyone in my family knows anything, he’ll tell me.”

Ten turned away from the desk and strode over to the windows, running an uncharacteristically restless hand through his black hair.

Atlas and I knew him well enough to know that hassling him further about tonight would only piss him off even more, especially when he was in this mood, so we didn’t say anything. He could make up his own mind.

“Fine,” he said after a moment, still staring out at New York beyond the glass. “I’ll come. But I’m not going to that damn auction.”

“Sure, you will,” I said easily. “If only to rescue some poor woman who doesn’t know any better and thinks selling herself is her only option.”

Ten’s head whipped round, that blue gaze of his scalpel sharp. “Don’t make light of—”

“You need a distraction. Also, taking your worry about Isabel out on your two oldest and best friends is getting fucking old.”

That muscle in his jaw jumped yet again and I wondered idly if he was going to storm from the room in a fit of pique. Ten was a locked box to most people and he could disassemble with the best of them. But I knew him too well and he was always pissed when he was worried, and when he was pissed, he needed to let off steam somehow. No surprises where Isabel got her temper from. Everyone thought it was from Juliana, and fair, she’d had a temper on her. But really, Isabel had

gotten most of it from Ten. They were very similar in many ways, and it was no wonder they butted heads so frequently.

Ten let out a breath. “Apologies,” he said in his usual stiff way. “You’re probably right about the distraction.”

“Excellent.” Atlas pushed himself out of the chair. “Bring on the fucking virgins.”

“But I’m not going to the auction,” Ten said flatly. “And that’s final.”

Isabel

Arcadia was something else.

Zara and I were immediately shown into the bar and it was quite frankly the most amazing bar I'd ever been in.

The walls were wood paneled, the bar itself polished oak. The bottles behind it were on tiered glass shelves and lit up with golden lights. There was a magnificent chandelier over the bar, the light glossing the worn, comfortable looking leather bar stools that lined it. Scattered around the room were groups of Art Deco-style club armchairs and couches upholstered in dark blue velvet, while along one wall were a series of deep booths. The whole place was dimly lit by wall lamps that cast small pools of warm golden light.

The bar oozed luxury and a discreet old-world charm, conjuring up visions of women in sleek nineteen-thirties style gowns sipping on martinis, and men in tuxes with slicked back hair, smoking cigars.

I loved it immediately.

There were people there already, sitting together on the couches or on the stools, while a couple of groups were in the booths. Not too many people though, enough that the low hum of conversation was restful, not deafening. A couple of glances were flicked our way, but no one was gauche enough to stare.

The man showed us to one of the booth seats and said he'd be right back with some drinks. They were complimentary, he said. Champagne to welcome new guests to Arcadia.

"This is amazing," I hissed, leaning over the booth's table toward Zara, who sat opposite me.

She was grinning as madly as I was. "I know, isn't it? I came here for the auction interview, and I loved it."

A couple of minutes later, our handsome friend returned with two crystal flutes of champagne, which he put on the table with an 'enjoy,' before disappearing off to wait on another group.

Zara and I picked up our flutes, toasted each other, then sipped. The champagne fizzed on my tongue, cold and dry and yeasty, and delicious. It definitely wasn't the cheap stuff, that was for sure. Had to be vintage. Dad didn't drink much, but he had a weakness for expensive scotch and champagne, so when we had alcohol, it was either one or the other, and I'd grown up with an appreciation of both.

This was just as good as Caleb's Glenfiddich.

I took another appreciative sip then put my glass down. "Okay," I said. "So, tell me about this auction. Where is it and how does it work?"

"It's held in a special room down there." Zara nodded her head toward a curtained door toward the back of the bar. "Only people who've registered as a buyer can attend. I don't have to be there if I don't want to, but apparently you get a better price if you're physically present."

I pulled a face, not liking that idea one bit. "So, what? You just sit there while they bid on you?"

Zara sipped slowly at her champagne, her expression very serene for a woman about to auction off her virginity. "Yes."

"Why are you so calm?" I demanded, anxiety on her behalf twisting in my gut "I'd be freaking out."

"I'm calm because I'm going to have money," she said. "It's the having no money and a mountain of debt that freaks

me out. And anyway, it's only sex."

I couldn't speak to the having no money part, because obviously growing up with a billionaire for a father made that slightly different for me than everyone else, but I could imagine. It would be damn scary.

"But what if you have to do some weird sex stuff?" I was morbidly fascinated. "Like, what if whoever buys you has a foot fetish? Or wants you to dress up as a nurse and change a diaper?"

Zara laughed. "Honestly? I don't care. You have a contract you sign that details all the things you're willing to do and all the things you're not. Then that's given to the prospective buyers so that they know what they can and can't ask you to do."

Well, that sounded a lot more civilized than I'd imagined. "Oh. That's not so bad, I guess. I hope you specified no diaper changing."

She shrugged. "If you have a lot of hard restrictions then you don't get as much money. So, I opted for an unrestricted contract."

My mouth fell open. "No restrictions? Are you insane? That means they can get you to do *anything*."

Her eyes gleamed suddenly from the depths of her hood, and I couldn't tell if it was excitement or something else. "Probably."

"Zara, what if you—"

"I need the money, Izzy."

Her voice held an edge that hadn't been there before, and instantly, I felt bad. Putting my champagne down, I gave her a very level look. "I know I said this before, but I'll help, you know I will. Dad's fucking loaded and I—"

"No," Zara interrupted, gentle but very firm. "No. Again, thanks for the offer and I mean that. But I'm not taking money from anyone. That won't help me."

I wanted to ask why, but something in her expression warned me off. Which was fine. If she didn't want to talk about it, she didn't want to talk about it, and it wasn't my place to push anyway. Not when we'd only known each other a few months.

Still, I didn't like that she felt she had to do this. It seemed wrong, and no matter how calm about it she was herself, I still worried.

"Okay," I said. "I hear you. But can I go into the room with you?"

Zara shook her head. "Only registered buyers alas, no support people. But we can have a drink now and you can tell me what red flags I need to watch out for."

"Right, from my wide experience of men?" My tone was as dry as dust. "The only thing I know is if some guy turns up in a dark charcoal suit looking like the devil himself, run in the opposite direction."

Zara took another meditative sip of her champagne. "You've really got it bad for him, haven't you?"

"He's fine." I couldn't pretend I didn't know who she was talking about, not when the blush I could feel staining my cheeks gave it away and not when I was the one who'd brought him up. "Could take or leave, to be honest."

"Uh huh. Sounds more like take to me."

I busied myself by picking up my glass again and fussing with it before taking a sip, all the while trying to pay no attention to the way my pulse always accelerated whenever the subject of Caleb came up. "Um, no. There are a whole lot of reasons why *that* is a bad idea. Anyway, apart from anything else, he's not even interested in me. I'm still just a kid to him."

Oh really? He wasn't looking at you like that last night.

Caleb's gaze reflected in the window, staring at me. Eyes darker than the night sky outside and blazing with all the force of his considerable will. I'd felt almost crushed by that will and yet there had also been something exhilarating about

holding it. Something exciting. And all that electricity in the air...

“Something tells me that’s a lie,” Zara murmured.

“It isn’t.” I firmly shoved the thoughts away. “So come on. What *are* you wearing under that cloak?”

As a subject change it wasn’t very subtle, but Zara let me have it.

She grinned then mouthed ‘nothing.’

I shrieked and demanded to know what she was thinking, and we had a rousing discussion about what a power move it was going to be for her to go into that room of no doubt elderly billionaires or whoever was going to bid on her, drop that cloak and shock the pants off all of them with the glory of her naked female form.

After that, we had another round of champagne, courtesy of the handsome guy who’d greeted us at the door — perks of being a seller with an upcoming auction apparently.

The champagne sanded the edges off my anxiety and by the time the guy came back, told Zara it was showtime, and held out an arm to escort her, I wished her good luck and to slay queen, and also to tell me *all* about it in the morning.

I was even feeling fine enough to get my phone out and check my messages, ignoring the approximately three thousand texts and calls from my security detail. I wondered abruptly if I’d been silly to have kept my phone since it was trackable. But Dad had promised he wouldn’t do that to me, and he’d always been a man of his word. Besides, I needed it in case I got another message from the Hamiltons.

The bar meanwhile had filled up. Lots of men in expensive suits and women in beautiful gowns, a few actors, a politician or two, and I was sure one of the guys by the bar was the lead singer of some famous band. The age range was all sorts, from my age up to an elderly couple sitting on one of the couches and enjoying some cocktails. I liked the vibe. There was nothing seedy about it, nothing that felt wrong or dirty, and everyone looked like they were having a good time. There was

also none of that freneticism you sometimes got on a Friday night, when everyone had just been let out of work and were desperate to forget their week by drinking as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

I'd drained the last of my second champagne and was contemplating a cocktail — the handsome guy had left me a drinks menu when he'd escorted Zara away — when a ripple went through the crowd in the bar. A kind of whispering and rustling, people turning to give discreet glances over their shoulders. As if a major celebrity had come into the room.

I was about to look myself, but then got distracted by the vibration of my phone. I glanced at it, expecting another text from my no doubt increasingly worried minders, but it wasn't. The number was blocked.

Excitement fluttered inside me, along with a healthy dose of nervousness. I picked up my phone and hit the message notification.

11pm. Carousel. Come alone.

I stared down at the text, my heart beating uncomfortably fast. This was the invitation I'd been waiting for, and I couldn't believe they'd responded to my earlier ballsy text.

But eleven PM. That was late. Very late. Caleb would have found out by then that I'd escaped my detail and would have mobilized half the city trying to find me.

My hands were shaking as I picked up the phone and typed: *Too late. Earlier?*

There was no response. None. Which I took to mean take it or leave it.

Shit.

No, maybe that was a good thing. Late meant I had some time here to enjoy my night of freedom. Caleb had no idea where I was and if he didn't know this place existed then I was safe for the meantime. I'd just have to be careful going into Central Park at night.

Going alone is a dumb idea and you shouldn't drink anything more.

Yeah, it was. But while I had a choice about drinking, I had no choice about going alone. Even if I'd had someone to ask, I was sure that turning up with a friend would mean a no show by the person I was supposed to be meeting. Not that I had anyone to ask, which made the whole question moot.

And if I didn't go? Then I'd never find out about Mom. I'd never know what kind of person she was or what her hopes and dreams were. I'd never know whether I looked like her and if that was the reason sometimes Dad couldn't look at me. I'd never know if she'd been happy.

No, it wasn't a choice. I had to go.

Putting my phone back down, I picked up the menu again — one cocktail, I could surely have one, couldn't I? — then glanced toward the bar.

And every part of my entire being went cold.

Standing at the bar were Caleb, Atlas, and my goddamn father.

Instantly I pressed myself to the back of the booth, desperately hoping the dimness of the bar would hide me.

Fucking hell. What were they doing here?

My palms had gone clammy, adrenaline spiking in my blood.

The back of the booth was only partially hidden, and unfortunately that was where the lamp was, the light from it bathing me in a 'here she is, your idiot daughter, come and get her' glow.

I eased away from it, picking up the menu instead and holding it directly in front of my face, hopefully hiding me.

This was insane, and if I'd been thinking straight, it would have been perfectly obvious why they were here. Because this was a club for the extremely rich and powerful, and they were the three richest and most powerful men in Manhattan. Of course, they'd be here.

At a secret sex club that really doesn't look like a secret sex club.

Yeah, and that wasn't a thought I wanted in my head. Especially not with my father standing almost directly across the room from me.

My dad. At a secret sex club. Ugh.

I lowered the menu slightly to see what was happening.

To give him credit, Dad was not looking pleased to be there. He was glaring around while Caleb lounged beside him, looking sexy as hell in one of those dark charcoal suits I'd muttered darkly about to Zara, and a black shirt.

His tie tonight was dark red silk, like a splash of blood or spilled red wine, and even now, even when the risk of me being discovered was high, I couldn't take my eyes off him.

If there had been a law against men looking that hot, Caleb would have been downright illegal.

I was still peering at them over the top of my menu when the handsome guy that had initially greeted us began moving through the crowd. He touched a shoulder here, leaned in to murmur there, ushering people to the back of the bar where the curtains surrounding the doorway had been pushed back and the door opened.

Zara's auction was starting.

I swallowed. Then watched in horror as Atlas clapped Dad on the back and the three of them moved with the rest of the crowd, disappearing through the curtained doorway.

Shock echoed through me, freezing me in place.

They were going to a virginity auction. All three of them. Holy hell, were they here to bid on Zara?

I went cold, then hot as the weirdest surge of jealousy hit.

Caleb had gone in there. Was he bidding? Did he want a virgin? Was he going to want Zara? Christ's sake if he wanted a virgin, didn't he know that I was right here?

Then just as these thoughts were stampeding through my shocked brain, Caleb came back out again and this time on his own. He walked with that easy, predatory stride, all lethal grace, and no fucks to give, making straight for the bar. Then he leaned casually against it and gave the very pretty bartender the sexiest smile I'd ever seen. She lit up like a candle at the sight of him, and that jealousy lodged hard and sharp behind my breastbone.

I should have been relieved he wasn't in that room with Zara, and I should certainly have been concerned that he'd see me sitting in this booth.

But I wasn't either of those things, because apparently, I was an idiot, painfully jealous that he was flirting with the woman behind the bar.

She was lovely, with long, glossy black hair and dark eyes, and she certainly knew what to say to him, because he laughed.

I could never make him laugh. All I made him was exasperated and angry.

A very small part of my brain yelled at me that my jealousy was ridiculous, and that I had no claim on him. He wasn't mine and never would be, and I had no call being jealous of that bartender just for smiling at him. But that didn't stop the feeling from coiling through me like poison.

Except, I couldn't indulge myself because holy fuck, I was in trouble.

Judging from Caleb's relaxed posture and the way he was smiling at the bartender, it was obvious that my minders hadn't contacted him about my apparent disappearance. Which was surprising yet understandable. He'd no doubt go volcanic when he found out they'd lost me, so they were probably doing everything to track me down themselves.

But that couldn't last forever. Eventually they were going to have to tell him, and then he'd turn the entire city upside down looking for me.

You fucking idiot. Look what you've gotten yourself into.

Okay, I was a fucking idiot. And maybe my break for freedom had been ill advised. But what was done, was done. My only choices now were getting out or getting caught, and if I got caught, he might *actually* lock me in my bedroom and throw away the key. I'd certainly never get to the carousel, that was for sure.

Which left me with only one choice. I had to get out and now, before he spotted me.

I kept the menu up over my face and checked the bar one last time. He was still there, chatting to the bartender.

Okay. Now or never.

Slowly, I put down the menu and grabbed my purse. Then unhurriedly I slid out of the booth and began to walk to the bar exit. I wanted to run but someone sprinting out of a bar would have drawn attention, so I made myself walk with measured steps.

All he needed to do was glance in my direction and he'd have seen me, and I expected him to. But the bartender must have been amazing, because he didn't look away from her the whole time.

Fulminating, I took my temper in both hands and held onto it, and as I approached the bar exit, I risked a quick look in his direction to make sure he hadn't moved.

Naturally, that was the moment that I *had* to bump into someone, causing a mini fuss in the doorway. Cursing silently, the back of my neck prickling, I didn't stop to apologize, not caring if I came across as rude. I only wanted to extricate myself as quickly as possible.

I couldn't risk another look back as I left the bar, so I didn't, heading into the short hallway that led to Arcadia's grand entrance. Every part of me was tense, waiting for the sound of Caleb's deep voice calling my name, bracing myself for the impact of his fury. Because he would be furious. He'd be so very, *very* angry.

You idiot. Was it worth it? Was any of this worth how angry he'll be with you?

But I didn't want to think about that. I didn't want to examine how painful that thought felt. I just wanted to get to the front door and out as quickly as possible.

The door had opened to admit another small group of people, and the handsome man was there to greet them. I heard nothing behind me, not that I would have heard anything over the deafening thump of my own heartbeat.

It took a minute for the entrance to clear, and nothing grabbed me, and I was full of relief, because thank God, I hadn't been spotted. I was going to get out without being seen.

I was already striding to the door as the party that had just entered made their way toward the bar, thinking about what my next step was going to be, when a strong hand closed around my arm, bringing me up short.

Then a deep, horribly familiar voice demanded in my ear, "Where the fuck do you think you're going, Isabel?"

Caleb

Isabel froze, still facing the front door, her entire body rigid. Which was a good thing given the fury that had turned every drop of blood in my veins to lava.

I wasn't a man who lost control of himself. Not ever. My furies burned hot, but I measured out that heat bit by bit. Old Nick had been the same, and he'd taught me how to feel it, how to let it burn, yet also how to keep it contained. Uncontrolled fury was a sure way to lose your grip on both yourself and your command of other people, which was always a bad thing when those other people were waiting for a slip in order to drag you down.

Anger was useful when it came to keeping people in line, he'd said. Especially controlled anger. It made people afraid, and fear was an extremely useful tool when it came to ruling the kind of organization I'd once ruled.

Old Nick had been wrong about a great many things, but that wasn't one of them, and so I kept control of my temper.

But only just.

I'd been at the bar, chatting with Soraya, the bartender, when I'd seen a flurry of movement by the door. I wouldn't have thought twice about it if it hadn't been for that flash of red hair.

Automatically, I'd glanced over at the doorway, because red hair for some reason set all my senses on high alert, just in time to see a woman in a gold dress, already turning away and heading for the exit.

For a split-second I'd thought it was nothing. Then instinct had kicked in, because there was no mistaking the red curls spilling down her back. No mistaking them at all.

It was Isabel and for some reason instead of being safely ensconced in my Central Park apartment, she was here. At Arcadia. My high-end bar/sex club. And her security detail was nowhere in sight.

I'd moved without thought, striding after her, and thank fuck for the group coming through the front door, and Andre taking his time to greet them, because she'd had to wait for them to disperse. But by the time I'd got there, she was already reaching for the front door to pull it open, and she would have been out of there like a shot if I hadn't reached out and grabbed her arm, holding her fast.

Fury was fire in my veins.

After everything I'd told her, after all the warnings I'd given her, here she was. On her own. Without any protection. Fuck knew what happened to her detail, but they were already fired.

"Come with me," I ordered in her ear, and before she had a chance to react, I tightened my grip, turned, and marched her over to the stairs that led up to the private rooms on the next level.

She'd gone stiff with resistance, and it was clear that I wasn't the only one who was angry; I could feel the fury pouring off her too.

"Walk." It required no effort at all to sound hard and cold, leaving no room for protest. "Because if you don't, I'll throw you over my shoulder and carry you. And don't think for a second I won't do that."

"Fuck you," she said through gritted teeth.

But she stopped resisting and walked with me as I hustled her up the stairs and down the hallway at the top.

There were mostly private rooms up here, studies and libraries for conversations, plus a few themed playrooms for when people wanted their conversations to be more intimate. But the one I paused outside of was my own personal study, that I often retreated to when I wanted some private time.

I opened the door and pushed her inside. Instantly she whirled around, her face bright red, green eyes spitting sparks, opening her mouth no doubt to call me all the names under the sun, but I shut the door in her face. Then I pulled a key from my pocket and locked the door.

She wasn't coming out of there unless I wanted her to.

I stood in the hallway and took a few moments to force my temper into the deep freeze, before pulling out my phone and calling the head of her detail.

"Boss," he said as soon as he answered. "I was going to—"

"All of you are fired," I said then ended the call.

There was no need to explain, no second chances. Those three ex black ops operatives had let a twenty-three-year-old get away from them, the useless fuckers. Clearly, I'd failed in my vetting of them, a fact which did not help my temper. Neither did the thought of Ten finding out that his silly little daughter had somehow ditched her minders and had been wandering through the city on her own for the past couple of hours, a sitting duck for the Hamiltons and God only knew who else. And fuck only knew how she'd managed to find her way here.

He'd trusted me to look after Isabel and I'd failed.

I *never* failed.

I turned and stared at the study door. She could have been screaming blue murder in there and no one would know — the whole building had top-notch soundproofing.

Well, if she was, I didn't care. I had a few choice things to say, and she wasn't going to like any of them. Neither was she

going to like the lock and key she was now staring down the barrel of.

I'd always told Ten he held her too tight, that she needed freedom not a cage, but abruptly I could see the wisdom of a cage for Isabel Fox. Shit, if I'd had one within reach, I would have stuffed her into it immediately and locked the fucking door myself.

Good Christ, what had she been thinking? Had she not been listening to me *at all* when we'd had that little chat about her safety? Did she think that all the enemies Ten and I had, had magically disappeared somehow and she was safe ditching her minders and gallivanting around the goddamn city?

You're afraid for her.

Of course, I was afraid for her. I was supposed to protect her. She was my responsibility and if anything happened to her on my watch....

I gritted my teeth, forcing down my temper that had somehow risen again. Then, making every movement measured and deliberate, I unlocked the study door and stepped back into the room. I shut the door behind me and locked it again for good measure.

It was a small room lined with bookcases, big enough for a fireplace and a couple of wing-backed armchairs upholstered in soft, worn brown leather. There were rugs on the dark blue carpet, expensive and hand-knotted silk, a few side tables here and there, but no other furniture.

A room for sitting in and discussing things.

A room for disciplining recalcitrant little girls.

Except the little girl standing in the middle of it with her arms folded, her jaw set, her mouth in a firm line, every inch of her posture rigid and defensive, was clearly not in the mood for either discussion or discipline.

Pity. Because tonight she was going to get both.

Her red hair fell all over her pale shoulders, and she wore a slip dress of gold silk, a little scrap of nothing that clung to her

curves, making it very obvious she was not wearing a bra. Ten would have had fifty fucking fits if he'd seen her wearing that, and for some reason the damn dress scraped at my own temper like the point of a nail over cracked glass.

A thick, seething quiet settled over the room.

I stared at her, not bothering to hide my fury. Hoping it would cow her, or at the very least instill a little healthy fear, maybe force her into a confession as to just what the fuck she was doing without me having to browbeat her. But there was no fear in her glittering emerald eyes. If anything, her chin lifted, her jaw becoming even more set.

Jesus, if she'd had any sense the first thing she should have done as soon as she saw me was to apologize for ditching her security. Yet there was nothing apologetic about her. In fact, it was very clear she didn't intend to be the one to break first come hell or high water.

Sadly, for her, hell would be coming sooner than she thought.

I continued to say nothing, moving over to the cabinet where I kept a bottle of twenty-one-year-old Lagavulin, an Islay malt. It wasn't as old or as expensive as the Glenfiddich, but it was one of my favorites.

Taking out the bottle and a tumbler from the cupboard, I poured myself a dram. I did not offer her one. I could sense her still seething at my back so I took my time; it would give us both a chance to calm down.

I sipped slowly, deliberately ignoring her, and to give her credit, she lasted the whole tumbler. It wasn't until I'd poured myself a second nip, that she finally broke the silence and demanded, "So, what? You're just going to stand there drinking whiskey?"

I didn't answer immediately, taking another sip and letting the smoky, salty liquor sit warmly in my gut, taking the explosive edge off my temper.

"Well," I said, at last. "I was considering turning you over my knee and giving you the spanking you so richly deserve." I

glanced at her. “But I thought I’d have a drink first.”

Her face was flushed, and it had the unfortunate effect of making her eyes seem even greener. The flush went down her neck and over her collarbones, creeping under the neckline of her pretty golden dress and it drew my attention.

I did not fucking want it to draw my attention.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she had the gall to demand, as if I was the one in the wrong place.

“Really? That’s the first thing you want to say to me?”

But she didn’t back down. “This is a sex club, Caleb. A high-end sex club. And they have a virginity auction going on downstairs. Did you know that?”

“Of course, I know that.” I took another calming sip of scotch. “I own it. Arcadia is my club.”

Shock rippled across her face, swiftly followed by yet more anger. “Yours? Fuck’s sake, Caleb. Why the hell are you running a virginity—”

“The real question,” I interrupted. “The question I’d very much like the answer to, is what the actual fuck are *you* doing here?” I aimed the word like a stone, hard and sharp, and I saw her gaze flicker as it hit.

She folded her arms and shifted on her high-heeled gold sandals, going into full-on defensive mode. “It’s Friday night. And I wanted to go out to a bar. Like any twenty-three-year-old would.”

That was not, of course, the whole of the truth and we both knew it.

“Don’t lie to me, Isabel.” I gave her the full force of my stare.

But there was no give in her. “I’m not lying. I wanted to have a night—”

“Be quiet,” I said, hard and cold, losing what little patience I had left. She’d never lied to me before. Never. So why she

was now, I had no idea. But I knew one thing: I didn't like it. I wasn't going to have it.

Proving she'd made at least one good decision tonight, Isabel stayed quiet. But those sparks in her eyes could have ignited all of Manhattan.

Another tense silence descended, and I let it sit there, the air thickening with static and electricity, building like a storm front.

Silence was a good technique when it came to getting people to do what I wanted, and it was working on her. She shifted again, breathing fast.

"Did you listen to anything I said to you last night?" I asked eventually. "Anything at all?"

"Yes, but I was—"

"Because if you had," I continued on over the top of her. "You wouldn't be standing here right now with the door locked, your security detail fired, and me contemplating shutting you in my apartment for the next ten fucking years."

She blinked. "Fired? What the hell?"

Naturally, she'd focus on that part of the sentence.

"If they can't keep track of one idiot girl, they're worse than useless," I said dismissively.

"They didn't know there was a door at Stan's," she shot back, her arms dropping as she took a few impulsive steps forward. "You can't fire them for—"

"I can fire them for whatever I fucking like. They're my employees."

"It was my fault I ran away, not theirs."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you ran away then, shouldn't you?" Somehow, I'd taken a step forward too, even though I hadn't meant to, my whiskey still in my hand and my patience in tatters. "You're a silly, *silly* little girl, Isabel. And you don't listen. And you don't think. You—"

“And you’re not listening to me, Caleb,” she interrupted furiously. “You never do and not Dad either. The pair of you treat me like I’m stupid, like I’m a kid who doesn’t know anything and I’m sick of it!”

She was trembling, yet not with fear. There was only fury in her eyes. But I knew where that fury was coming from, because Isabel always got angry when she was hurt. And she was hurt now, though I had no idea why.

Perhaps if I’d been a different man, a kinder man, I’d have backed off. But I wasn’t a different man and I’d certainly never been kind. She’d done nothing but test me since she came to work at Cross, making a nuisance of herself, and kicking against all the boundaries Ten and I had set. Boundaries that were there for her own safety. She hadn’t listened. She’d done what she always did and went off half-cocked like badly packed powder in an antique rifle. And now it was blowing up in all our faces.

But the worst thing about this, the thing that made me extremely fucking furious, was that she’d lied to me. Something was going on with her and it was something serious because she was refusing to tell me about it.

I couldn’t have that. I couldn’t have her not listening, I couldn’t have her not doing what she was told, I couldn’t have her not trusting me. Not when her safety was at stake and not when I’d promised Ten I’d protect her.

“If you want me to treat you like an adult then start acting like one.” I knocked back the rest of my scotch and put the glass down on a nearby side table with a precise click. “You could tell me the truth, for example.”

She took a breath, the material of that golden dress pulling over her breasts, and I found myself glancing at the round, full shape of them.

Shit.

“So, that’s it?” She was too angry to notice my split-second glance down. “I’m supposed to tell you whatever you want to know, whenever you ask for it? When you tell me

nothing at all about you? What's being an adult got to do with that?"

Tell her about me? What the hell was she talking about? She knew all about me. She'd grown up around me. Sure, there were some things she didn't know, details I kept to myself, because she didn't need to know them. No one did.

I decided to ignore that. "In this instance, when it's about your safety, being an adult is called putting what you want aside for one goddamned minute."

For the briefest second, hurt flickered across her face, and then it was gone, yet more fury taking its place. She took another step toward me, her anger pouring into the space between us, along with something else, something bright and sharp and electric. "What if I don't want to?" Her hands were clenched tightly. "What if doing what you say is that last thing in the world I want to do?"

I hadn't meant to take another step, to get close to her, so close that there was almost no distance between us, yet that's exactly what I did. She needed to learn to listen to me. She needed to learn boundaries. She needed to respect me. But most of all she needed to trust me, and I was going to fucking teach her.

Because it was suddenly very clear to me what lay at the heart of her issues, and it was something I'd known for weeks. Yet I hadn't taken action. I'd thought that by leaving it alone, it would eventually sort itself out, but that hadn't happened. And now it was undermining our relationship at a time when it needed to be rock solid.

It was that crush of hers. The fact that she wanted me, and couldn't handle it, and so she was using her claws on me. Kicking against me. Deliberately disobeying me and being a brat, and all to get my attention.

Which would have been something I could have handled easily in the normal run of things. But this behavior was putting her at risk at a time when risk was something she couldn't afford, and that was unacceptable.

So, I closed that gap, I took that step, getting close to her, looming over her. “Don’t be such a fucking liar, Isabel.” I stared down at her. “Doing what I say is exactly what you want to do.”

Her pretty green eyes flared, the flush in her skin deepening, giving her away. “I don’t. Don’t be so fucking stupid, Caleb.”

But I locked my gaze with hers and took another step so that we were mere inches apart. “Really? Tell me you’re not desperate to follow my orders. That if I told you to go down on your knees right now, you wouldn’t do it.”

“No!” She didn’t move. Not an inch. “No, I fucking wouldn’t.”

“No?” I took another step, getting even closer, the tips of her breasts almost brushing my chest, and I heard her indrawn breath. “The way you didn’t like kneeling at my feet the day you spilled coffee in my office?”

A tide of rose crept down her throat, moving under the neckline of her dress, and this time I was very deliberate about where I looked. I allowed my gaze to drift down over the curves of those perfect breasts, where the fabric molded to her, giving me a very clear view of her hardening nipples.

She took another breath. “No. Absolutely not.”

“You’re a liar, little girl.” I lifted my gaze back to hers again and then I took another step, calling her bluff. “That’s the reason you’ve been a bitch to me for the past couple of weeks, isn’t it?”

She couldn’t go forward since I was right in front of her. All she could do was take a helpless, half-step back, which was exactly what she did. “N-no....”

“Yes, it is.” I took another step and again she stepped back. “You want me, Isabel. You want my attention. That’s what this little escapade of yours tonight was all about, wasn’t it?”

She was breathing very fast, all determination and defiance. And she held my gaze, but I knew it was only by the

skin of her teeth. “Stop it,” she said shakily. “I don’t. You’re the liar, not me.”

“Don’t think I haven’t seen the way you look at me,” I went on relentlessly, walking her backwards. “You’re hungry for me, it’s obvious. But you don’t know how to handle it, do you? And you don’t know how to handle me.”

“Yes, I do. I just keep calling you out like the asshole you are.”

“Really? But that’s not going to get you what you want, is it?” I forced her steadily across the room. “If you want my attention, little girl, you don’t need your claws. You only have to ask for it.”

She stopped then, and I could see the moment she decided to dig in and stand her ground. “And if I did?” That insolent chin of hers came up. “What would you do?”

The air around us crackled. I could smell her now, the sweet, rose scent of her perfume. She’d been wearing it ever since she came back from college, and I liked it. It reminded me of a summer garden. But now there was a delicate, musky edge to it.

This is a mistake.

Maybe. But ignoring her crush hadn’t helped.

“Why?” I said. “You think you’d be able to handle it?”

Her eyes darkened. “I can handle anything you throw at me.”

No, she couldn’t. She was Ten’s daughter. She was only twenty-three, and I was over forty. I’d done everything there was to do and I had no boundaries. My moral compass was severely fucked and my tastes complex.

I liked my own way, and I made sure I got it, and there was no way this pretty little virgin would be able to handle anything about me.

And she needed to understand that.

“Then get on your knees.” I stared right into those dark green eyes of hers. “Do it, little girl. Show me you can deal.”

She hesitated only a moment, because of course she wanted to prove me wrong. She always had. She was a brat through and through, and what she really wanted, even though she probably wasn't aware of it herself, was for someone to take her in hand.

And that's you?

Something shifted inside me, a decision being made. A line being crossed.

Her crush on me was going to undermine any efforts I took to keep her safe, so maybe it was time to bring that out in the open. Give her a taste of what she wanted, confront her with the reality. Once she knew she couldn't handle it she'd back off, because Isabel might have been many things, but stupid wasn't one of them.

And Ten? It's his daughter you're talking about. Ω

Yeah, but Ten was busy downstairs rescuing a virgin and what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. If it kept Isabel out of the Hamiltons hands then fuck, it would be worth crossing a few lines for.

She went down gracefully, and she kept her gaze on mine the whole way. Even when her knees hit the carpet she didn't look away.

She was pretty there, kneeling in front of me, with her red hair loose and that revealing golden dress, a perfect picture of submission. At least, it would have been if there hadn't been fury in her gaze.

If she'd been another woman, I'd have given my appetites free rein, but she wasn't another woman. She was my best friend's daughter, and I couldn't allow any mistakes. No matter how many lines I was crossing to do this, I had to stay in control.

“Now,” I said. “Let's see exactly what you can and can't handle, Isabel Fox.”

Isabel

My heart was beating so fast and hard it felt like it was going to come out of my chest, and I was shaking like the idiot virgin I was.

I could barely believe what was happening, that I was kneeling at Caleb's feet, anticipation, anger and yeah, okay, maybe some fear too, all coiling and knotting inside me.

I'd been nothing but furious when he'd grabbed my arm downstairs, both at myself for not being fast enough to the door, and at him for being where I'd never expected him to be.

Though mainly I was furious at him. Him, and his fucking security, and his fucking warnings, and his fucking insistence on me doing what he said. Him, and the way he kept getting all up in my grille at work for the slightest thing, needling me for absolutely no reason at all.

Him, for being who he was and so fucking hot and how I hated myself for wanting him as badly as I did, because there was no way — *no way* — that anything would ever happen between us.

He'd gripped me hard just before I'd gotten to the door, then he'd hauled me up the stairs before locking me in this room, and even though I'd been beside myself with rage at my own stupidity, I'd also been afraid.

Because I wasn't the only one who was angry.

Caleb had come back into the room and stood there, all six foot five of him, radiating a steady, measured fury that made his black eyes glitter like shards of obsidian.

I'd never seen him so furious. I knew he'd never hurt me, but I was afraid of his anger because I hated the thought of his disappointment. It wasn't only fear, though. There was a healthy amount of fascination mixed in there, too. Not to mention pleasure, because *I* was the one who'd roused the beast in him. *I* was the one who'd somehow gotten beneath his hard, smooth surface and shaken it.

Then he'd said all those things about me not listening, and not thinking, and I'd forgotten all about being pleased, my emotions shuttling back to hurt. Because okay, maybe I *had* made a mistake tonight and hadn't really thought it through. But, Jesus Christ, I'd only wanted to feel normal for one goddamn night, and he didn't understand. He didn't understand how suffocated I felt. How the lack of freedom, the lack of privacy, the lack of control over my own life was getting to me. And I was hurt that for all his talk of me not listening to him, he hadn't bothered to listen to me, and he clearly wasn't interested.

So, me being me, I'd pushed back. I'd wanted to hurt him somehow, make him even more furious. Make him break entirely. See what would happen if I really got to him, poke that fucking tiger with a stick.

And I had.

When he'd stalked toward me, closing the gap between us, I'd felt the purest bolt of electricity pin me to the floor. I hadn't been able to move as he'd come close, so very, *very* close. Burning with that steady, hot fury.

The last time I'd been this close to him had been that stupid dance at that stupid gala, but we'd been in a ballroom full of people, and I hadn't known until he'd taken me in his arms that that was where I'd always wanted to be.

Now, we were alone in a room that felt way too small to contain the caustic emotions that filled it. The burning

attraction I felt for him and my own fury and hurt. His anger and the hurricane blast of his will.

He was so tall, looming over me. The hard muscled expanse of his chest and wide shoulders blocking out the rest of the room. I could feel his heat, smell the warm, spicy scent of his aftershave, the one that made my mouth water, and my knees go weak. The pressure of his black stare had been like a hand pressing down on the back of my head, making me want to lower my gaze before his and then maybe bare my neck in submission.

Which was confusing, because that's exactly what I'd told him I didn't want, not doing everything he said like an obedient little kid.

The sheer masculine energy of him had made me step back, and he'd followed, stalking me until we were nearly at the windows. But I'd been desperate not to give in, so I'd forced myself to hold my ground.

Yet he hadn't stopped. He'd closed the gap between us again and said the words that I couldn't bring myself to say.

That I wanted him. That I'd always wanted him.

Part of me had died of embarrassment as soon as the words were out of his mouth because I'd thought I'd kept it hidden from him. While another part had felt nothing but relief, because finally it was all out in the open, and yes. Yes, doing what he told me was exactly what I wanted.

Which was why I was here right now, on my knees on the carpet, a low throb gathering deep inside me, an ache between my legs, a tension pulling tight.

He towered above me and I flashed back to that moment by his desk at work, cleaning up the spilled coffee while he stood over me, watching. Seeing inside me, his gaze a storm tide, powerful currents pulling me in and dragging me under.

He hadn't said anything about what I felt for him back then, but he had now. It was in the open and no matter how painfully embarrassing it was, I couldn't deny it. I didn't want to deny it.

I stared up into his eyes, caught by that tide and the powerful currents that moved in it. Powerless to swim against it. Not that I wanted to. All that seemed important now was that I show him that I could, indeed, handle it.

That I could handle him, no matter what he said.

He reached down and casually took my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my head back. The press of his fingers against my skin made my breath catch.

“You really don’t know what you’re doing, do you, Isabel?” The dark, textured velvet of his voice made me shiver helplessly. “You’ve got no fucking idea.”

I hated it when he treated me like I was a kid who knew nothing, so I stared back at him defiantly, not willing to give an inch. “Show me, then. Show me what I should be scared of, Caleb. Or perhaps you’re the one who can’t handle it?”

The expression on his harsh, handsome face was unreadable, but his gaze was full of black fire drawing me in.

He said nothing, but then his thumb moved, pressing lightly on my lower lip as if testing it. And every part of me gathered tight, the ache inside me deepening, relief rippling through me. Because finally — *finally* — it was happening. He was touching me as if I was a woman, proving quite categorically that I wasn’t a child to him any longer.

His thumb pressed with more insistence, his gaze impossibly dark and just as impossible to look away from. And he kept on looking as he slowly eased his thumb into my mouth.

Electricity crackled through me, and I shuddered as I tasted his skin, a burst of salt and heat on my tongue. He was silent, watching me so intently I felt as if I was going to burst into flames.

Did he think I couldn’t handle this? That I didn’t want this? Was he watching for signs of fear or disgust? Because if so, he’d be waiting all fucking night. I might have been a virgin, but I wasn’t stupid. I knew what I wanted. I knew what I could handle, and it was time to show him.

I closed my lips around his thumb and held his gaze as I sucked it.

Something ignited in his eyes then. Something that hadn't been there before, I was sure of it. A flame.

It hypnotized me. I couldn't look away as it leapt, burning brighter. That was me, wasn't it? He was responding to me. I was affecting him. I was getting to him.

A hot thrill flickered through me, intensifying the ache between my thighs, a heady sense of power making me feel dizzy.

I'd thought he'd never want me, that I was too much of a child to him, and even him putting me on my knees was more about scaring me than anything he wanted for himself.

But that flame said otherwise. That was desire. Desire for me.

So, I closed my teeth around the tip of his thumb and bit him. Not hard, just a nip. Enough to test him, push him, watch that flame burn even brighter. And it did, heat igniting like a solar flare.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he said roughly.

I nipped him again, because apparently, he hadn't understood and I couldn't answer him since his thumb was in my mouth.

The black currents in his eyes shifted and changed, and before I could figure out what they meant, he eased his thumb deeper. "Bite me again and I'll spank you," he murmured. "Suck it instead."

The heat in his eyes felt as if it was burning me too, my skin far too hot and far too tight. I probably wasn't supposed to like the idea of him spanking me. I was probably supposed to find that scary. Except, I'd already had illicit fantasies about him in that direction, so instead of making me afraid, it only turned me on. Oh, okay, so maybe there *was* a bit of fear mixed in, but that only added a further edge.

Fuck, my feelings were so confused. I liked all this stuff I wasn't supposed to like and about a man twice my age. A man I'd known most of my life. All of this was wrong, and yet, now, at his feet, it was the wrongness that was making me feel so good. I couldn't make sense of it.

Bite him again. See what he'll do.

As if I needed that thought in my head. Then again... He'd accused me of testing him, of playing up, of purposefully irritating him just to get his attention, and maybe he was right. Maybe that's exactly what I was doing. Because I *did* want his attention. I always had. Except this time, it wasn't only a smile or the way he'd muss my hair, or the conversations we used to have back when I was a teenager. This time it was his sexual attention I wanted.

So yeah, of course I bit him again.

More flames blazed in his eyes. "Brat," he said in a low, rough voice that sent a streak of heat right through me. "That's what you are, Isabel. A fucking brat. And you know what I do with brats? I teach them a lesson."

He moved so fast I had no time to get away, pulling his thumb from my mouth and reaching to pull me to my feet. Then there was a weird moment of disorientation as I was tossed over his shoulder. I barely had enough time to appreciate the hard, muscled warmth of him beneath my stomach, before he stalked over to one of the armchairs in front of the fire, sat down, then slid me into his lap, turning me with firm hands so I ended up face down over his knees.

I panted, unable able to comprehend what the hell had happened as I stared at the carpet beneath me, my thoughts tumbling over themselves. He'd picked me up and...what? He was really going to do what he threatened and spank me?

You know that's exactly what he's going to do.

Oh shit.

His powerful thighs were beneath my hips, his heat burning through my dress, making me feel as if I was naked.

I shivered.

The room was so quiet, the sound of my ragged breathing almost too loud. But not louder than my heartbeat which was threatening to deafen me.

He was actually going to do it. He was actually going to spank me.

My entire body tightened, the ache of desire between my thighs becoming demanding. Every nerve ending, every inch of skin, felt sensitized.

God, all he'd have to do was touch me and I'd go up in flames. How humiliating was that? To be so desperate for his attention — any attention — that all he'd have to do was breathe on me and I'd come.

It was agonizing. I didn't want to feel this way. I didn't want to be that desperate. What I wanted was for *him* to be that desperate for *me*.

“Caleb,” I began, twisting on his lap.

“Be still.” His voice was full of a dark authority that had me freezing place before I'd even consciously thought of doing it.

Then his hand settled on the back of my neck, gripping me, holding me still like a kitten taken by the scruff. And before I could say anything, before I could even think, he took a handful of my dress and yanked it up to my hips.

Cool air moved over my hot skin. But then the same hand jerked the lacy little thong I'd been wearing down, exposing me completely.

He didn't give me a moment to adjust or brace myself. The flat of his hand came down on my butt with hard crack and he didn't hold back. It hurt. It fucking hurt.

Tears sprang instantly into my eyes, and I gasped aloud.

My skin was on fire, and I'd barely had time to adjust to that when his palm came down once more, sending another shot of pain through me, then a third time, hard and fast.

I bit my lip, tasting blood, stifling my involuntary cry of pain because there was no way I was going to give him the

satisfaction of hearing it. Then I stared at the carpet, my vision swimming with tears, barely able to think, panting like I'd run fifty miles.

My butt was hot and sore, yet beneath it was that throb that wouldn't leave me alone. The ache that had intensified. That made me want to put my hand between my thighs and touch myself, make myself come because I was so fucking close, I was almost squirming in his lap.

I didn't understand how pain and pleasure could twine around each other, knotting together so I couldn't see where one ended and the other began. I couldn't understand either, how the humiliation I felt wasn't from being spanked like a child, but from how badly I wanted him to keep going.

And I badly — badly — wanted him to keep going.

I blinked my tears back, furious with myself. Furious that I'd ended up over his knee because I wanted to show him I could handle it. That I could handle whatever he threw at me, and yet here I was, very obviously not handling it.

“What did I tell you to do?” Caleb ordered harshly. “Say it, Isabel.”

My shocked brain stumbled, trying to make sense of it. “I... I...”

His hand came down on my butt yet again and I flinched automatically. But it wasn't to spank me this time. Instead, his large, hot palm cupped one ass cheek and squeezed it. Hard.

“Oh my God,” I whispered as a burst of pleasure and pain so intense I could hardly breathe rushed through me.

“Say it.”

Even now some part of me didn't want to give in. It wanted to tell him that he could go fuck himself, and then maybe he'd spank me again, and it would feel so damn good. But despite all my protestations, I didn't think I could handle that quite yet, so I clawed my way through the fog of pleasure/pain, and stammered, “You t-told me to s-suck it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I told you to do.” Then, again so fast, I didn’t know what was happening, he shifted me off his lap, sliding me down to the floor so I was kneeling between his spread thighs, my underwear still pulled down and one strap of my dress half-off my shoulder.

He leaned over me and again I was drawn into the black storm of his gaze. His heat was surrounding me, the scent of him like a drug I couldn’t get enough of, and all there was in the world was that flame in his eyes.

Like a shock it hit me. He looked...hungry. As if he’d enjoyed spanking me. As if he’d got off on it.

I swallowed, my butt still warm from his palm, the pressure of my arousal almost unbearable.

He didn’t look away. He took my hand and drew it slowly between his legs, holding my palm down over his fly.

I gasped like the little virgin I was, because that’s when I felt him through the wool of his pants, long and thick and hard. And so hot and holy shit, so big.

I thought I’d combust on the spot.

He wanted me. He did. There was the evidence under my hand. The evidence that I affected him as badly as he affected me and that he most definitely didn’t see me as a little girl anymore.

“C-Cal—” I stuttered.

“Be silent.” The words were hard and authoritative, crushing mine under their weight. “I gave you an order, Isabel. I told you what to do. I told you to suck it, didn’t I?”

Oh, God. Was he really going to—

Then all thought stopped dead as he dragged my hand away and undid his belt with ruthless efficiency, popping the buttons on his pants and pulling down the zipper of his fly.

My fingers curled and I couldn’t look away as he let go of the tab and I could see the length of his cock pushing against the black cotton of his underwear.

God. He was as big as I'd thought.

He reached down, sliding his hand into his underwear and drawing his cock out, and I went hot, staring at it like a fool.

It was long and thick, with an aggressive curve up to his flat abdomen. An iron bar covered in smooth, velvety-looking skin. I'd seen men's dicks online — hey, I might be a virgin, but I wasn't exactly innocent — and I never thought one could be beautiful, but Caleb's was.

“You know what to do.” His voice had gotten deeper, rougher. “So do it.”

He was expecting me to balk, I knew. To find this too much to handle and far too frightening. To find *him* too frightening. But I'd never been afraid of Caleb. Of his anger, sure, but not him. Never him. He'd never hurt me. Never in a million years.

So, I didn't hesitate, reaching for him, conscious of the pressure of his gaze on me as I curled my fingers around him. He was as hard and felt as velvety as I'd imagined, his skin scorching my fingers.

I trembled a little because I wanted this to be good for him. I *needed* this to be good for him, but I had no idea what to do and no idea where to start.

He must have known exactly what was going through my head, though, because he said, “Don't overthink it, little girl. It's not difficult. Just put it in your mouth and suck. Do it now.”

The order was irresistible. I gripped the base of his cock in one hand, and I leaned forward, my heartbeat drumming in my head as I opened my mouth to take him.

His taste hit me first, musky and salty, then the heat of his skin. And I couldn't stop the moan that escaped me. He tasted *so good*.

I tried to take more, tried to swallow him down. But his fingers tangled in my hair, and he gripped me tight, stopping me.

“No,” he murmured. “Not all of it, not yet. Here. I’ll show you.” His hips flexed and his cock pushed in a slow, gradual slide deeper into my mouth.

Little prickles of pain erupted all over my scalp from where he held tight to my hair, but it wasn’t a bad feeling. It combined with the stinging burn of where he’d spanked me, another sensation layered on top of his flavor and his heat and his scent, making everything more intense. More real.

I trembled, my lips stretching wide to take him as he pushed deeper. He tugged my head back, forcing me to look up at him, the lines of his strong, brutally handsome face stark and harsh, his eyes glittering.

“Is this what you wanted?” His voice gotten even rougher. “Is this what you thought it would be like?”

I wanted to tell him no, it wasn’t anything like what I’d expected. It was more erotic. More intense. More physical. More wrong and forbidden, and ten thousand times hotter than anything I’d ever fantasized about.

But I couldn’t have answered even if I’d wanted to, because my mouth was full of him and he was brushing the back of my throat, making my eyes water.

He drew back then slid in again, slowly, lazily, his salty, musky taste of filling my mouth, the feel of his skin against my tongue smooth and velvety.

I couldn’t tear my gaze from his, fascinated by the shifting currents in his eyes and the heat that burned there, the undeniable signs of the pleasure I was giving him. And, yes, he was getting off. Because of me.

His hips flexed, another deep slow glide across my tongue. “Suck harder, Isabel.”

So, I sucked and sucked harder, the thick length of him gliding in and out in a lazy rhythm. He smelled spicy, along with a dark musk that turned me on even more, making me aware that the pulsing heat between my thighs was becoming more and more acute.

He must have seen the look on my face because his eyes gleamed suddenly. “One more minute, Isabel. One more minute to make me come.”

It was a challenge, a dare, and I was desperate to take it.

I wanted to make him come more than life itself.

I lifted my hands to his powerful thighs, holding on to brace myself as I sucked him harder.

He made a purring sound deep in his throat as if he was enjoying what I was doing, enjoying it very much, and I felt a thrill of pride that I was able to please him. Me, the know nothing virgin was getting this powerful man off.

One minute he'd said. I could do that.

I ran my tongue along the length of his cock, and I sucked him as hard as I could. My jaw began to ache, and my eyes were watering and I must have looked a mess, because my eye makeup wasn't waterproof. My scalp hurt where he was holding my hair and my knees ached, and I could feel that long, lazy rhythm deep in my sex, in my heartbeat.

He began to move faster, going deeper. Not rough, only insistent.

His eyes glittered like black jewels. “I'm going to come now. And you're going to swallow it all like the good girl you are.”

Of course, I would. I couldn't wait.

I stared at him, desperate to see the moment his orgasm unfurled over his strongly carved face. The orgasm *I* was going to give him.

His lips peeled back as it hit, a growl starting right down low in his chest, his hips shoving hard, his cock thrusting deep. Then he was coming down the back of my throat and I was swallowing him. Taking everything he gave me without thought. Without protest.

For a moment afterward silence filled in the room, broken only by his slowing breathing and the thunder of my own heartbeat in my ears.

The salty, rich taste of him was heavy in my mouth, and I couldn't move, held still by those powerful fingers wound into my hair. In fact, I suspected they were the only things keeping me upright.

You just gave Caleb Cross a blow job. And you loved every second of it.

Slowly, he unwound his fingers from my hair and pulled his cock free, tucking himself away. Then he brought a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and leaned forward, taking my chin in one hand. Gently, he cleaned away the tears and ruined makeup on my face, wiping my lips too.

I let him do it, too dazed to do anything else. My mouth felt deliciously sensitized, my jaw aching, the low pressure between my legs making it almost impossible for me to keep still.

When he'd finished, he continued to grip my chin, his black gaze boring into mine. Then at last he said, "Touch yourself, little girl. Make yourself come. And let Daddy watch."

Daddy.

The word was like an electric shock delivered straight to my aching clit and I didn't question it.

I wasn't thinking straight. I wasn't thinking at all. All I was conscious of was that terrible pressure between my legs and how I could relieve it.

He was still holding my chin and I didn't pull away. Instead, I yanked my dress up with one shaking hand, and pushed the other between my thighs. I didn't care that he was holding me. I didn't care that he was watching me.

All I wanted was to come.

It all it took was one tiny brush of my finger on my clit and the orgasm hit me like an atomic bomb, annihilating every conscious thought in my head.

I screamed as it hit and the last thing I remembered before I fell off the edge of the world, was Caleb's black eyes.

Watching me.

Caleb

I'd wanted to teach her a lesson. Confront her with what she apparently wanted so badly. Show her that she couldn't handle it, that she wasn't ready for it, and that what she should be doing was running for the hills instead of running straight to me.

I wasn't for little girls like her.

There was a darkness in me that ran deep, and she wasn't ready for that, no matter what she told herself.

Except Isabel Fox hadn't known what was good for her and she hadn't run for the hills. She hadn't baulked and she hadn't protested, not even when I'd turned her over my knee. Not even when I'd laid my hand on her pretty ass without holding back. And when I'd made her suck my cock, she'd sucked me as if I was her favorite treat, as if she couldn't think of anything she wanted to do more than give me head.

It was a problem. It was just a fucking problem. Because instead of recognizing I'd made a mistake in pushing her, I'd leaned into it. I'd spanked her, let her suck my dick, and then I'd had her touch herself and watched as the orgasm rippled over her pretty face. I'd even called myself 'daddy'.

And I'd liked it. I'd fucking *liked* it.

But that was the darkness talking. That was the devil on my shoulder, whispering that Isabel Fox was gorgeous, and

didn't I want a gorgeous twenty-three-year-old on her knees, ready to do anything I wanted? Didn't I want my best friend's daughter sucking my dick and touching her pussy on my command? All with a side order of daddy kink?

Perhaps it was the wrongness of it that had gotten to me, the lure of the forbidden that I'd always been attracted to. That seam of darkness running straight through the center of my soul. The same darkness Old Nick had seen in me and nurtured for years. The same darkness my father had.

Or maybe doing all of this had been purposeful, and I'd been lying to myself from the moment I'd walked back into the room and seen her standing there in that golden dress, all fire and fury and smelling of fucking summer.

Telling myself that I didn't want her. That I wasn't attracted to her. That she was too young, and Ten's daughter, and she wasn't actually a beautiful young woman and I wasn't the cliched older man wanting to relive my youth.

Whatever it had been that had led me here, with her leaning against my leg, her cheek resting against my thigh, her red hair spread over the dark wool of my pants, I couldn't allow it to continue.

I'd crossed a line. A line that was supposed to have remained sacred.

She was that line, because she was the one who'd provided a glimmer of light in the power struggle with Old Nick, when I'd slipped the knife meant for me in between his ribs instead. I'd been waiting for the moment I could take my revenge on him for what he'd made my father do, and I didn't regret for a second that I'd taken his life.

Back then I'd relished the power I'd had, and I'd enjoyed doing the bad things, the violent things I'd had to do in order to stay on top. But she was the one, even as a child, who'd kept me from heading down the same path as Old Nick, the path of bloodshed and death. She'd shown me that there were still good things in this world, still innocence. Still joy. And she was the one who'd made me realize that I had to have

some point of true north in my moral compass, otherwise what the fuck was the point of life?

She'd been that true north. The reason I'd given up my empire and gone legit, was her and without her presence in my life I might as well have stayed on Old Nick's throne until some other motherfucker decided to take me down.

I couldn't cross that line. I had to keep that compass point.

But you didn't did you?

I'd let it go further than it should have, sure, and nothing was going to change what I'd done in the last half hour — the past was always set in stone. Yet the future was still mutable and what happened in Arcadia stayed in Arcadia, and that was the only way forward. What had happened between us could not and would not happen again.

No matter how much you want it to, right?

I stared down at her kneeling on the carpet, slumped against my leg, her flushed cheek pressed against my thigh. The strap of her dress had come off her shoulder and the fabric had half fallen down, revealing the curve of one full breast.

She'd been nineteen when I'd first noticed how she'd blossomed. It had been a gala for Fox Tech, some new product launch that Ten had insisted on me attending, and I'd seen Isabel standing alone and awkward in the ballroom. She'd looked like she'd needed rescuing, so I hadn't thought twice. I'd headed over there and pulled her onto the dance floor.

She'd worn a strapless gown of green taffeta, with voluminous skirts and her hair had been piled on top of her head in a glorious confection of red curls. Her eyes had been green as grass, and her shoulders white as cream and dotted with little freckles. Some part of me had recognized even then what a beautiful woman she'd grown into.

I'd forced that part of me, the dark part, aside, and I'd refused to see it since. But now there were other images in my head, of her over my knees, squirming as I'd spanked her and watched her pale skin flush red. Of that lush mouth wrapping itself around my cock. Of that pretty thatch of fiery curls

between her thighs as she'd yanked her dress up and run a shaking finger over her slick pussy.

I couldn't unsee that and I couldn't unsee what was staring me in the face now. Long hair to tangle my fingers into and grip. Curves for days, enough to fill my hands and hold onto. A biteable mouth made for kissing and sucking cock. The most perfect, heart-shaped ass.

My dick hardened despite the frankly magnificent blow job she'd only just given me, but I ignored it. Because while my body might think Isabel Fox was sexy as fuck, nothing would be happening between us, not again, and for too many reasons to count.

I'd done what I'd set out to do and given her a taste of what she wanted, and if she'd handled that far better than I'd thought, it didn't mean anything else was going to happen.

You want it to though.

My brain was still lazy with scotch and post blow job satisfaction and that thought slid through it far too easily. And before I knew what I was doing, I'd tangled my fingers in the red hair spread out on my thigh, relishing the soft, silky feel of it.

Isabel sighed but didn't move. As if she was content to keep leaning against my leg, her cheek pressed to the wool of my pants, for once staying quiet instead of giving me snarky comments and bullshit and fighting me all the way.

It was peaceful like this, with her at my feet and a comfortable silence settling over the room. Her warmth was sweet, the feel of her hair between my fingers soothing.

Things between us had been difficult for so long that I'd forgotten what it was like when we weren't fighting. To have her presence without all the other crap getting in the way. It had been like this years ago, when I'd used to look after her in my tiny, shitty little apartment while Ten was off doing something for Sir George. Old Nick had taught me how to play chess and I'd loved the strategy of it, so I'd taught Isabel as a way to pass the time.

She'd gotten into it in a big way, always pestering me for a game. So, we'd sit in my dark kitchen, at my rickety old wooden dining table, silently staring at the board and trying to outwit each other. I'd have a beer and she'd have a soda, and mostly it was me outwitting her, since she was only six. She didn't start being a serious threat until she'd turned fourteen, and by then, I didn't have much time for chess.

But in those early days, those hours I'd spent with her had been the few genuinely happy moments in my life and I'd never forgotten them.

Maybe that was why I didn't want to move. Why I wanted to sit like this with her, a quiet peace settling over us. But peace didn't solve the problem of the Hamiltons and it certainly wasn't something a man like me could allow himself, so after a moment, I forced my fingers from her hair then reached to gather her up in my arms. I stood then turned, putting her down in the chair I'd just vacated, before moving over to the drinks cabinet and getting out another tumbler. I poured her two nips of scotch to take the edge off any shit she was planning on giving me, then I went back over to the chair and held the glass out.

She'd curled herself up, looking all sleepy and warm and sensual, giving me a smoldering look from underneath silky red lashes. My cock was all for that, the traitorous bastard, but I ignored it as she took the tumbler.

"Don't look at me like that, Isabel," I said, because it was best she knew straight up. "It's not going to happen."

One red brow lifted. "What's not going to happen?" Her clear voice was husky, a caress of soft fingers trailing over my chest. "As I recall, you wanted to show me what I could and couldn't handle, and so far, all I've done is handle it. Did you miss something, maybe?"

Jesus, she was such a fucking brat.

There was an edge to her challenge now, a sensual edge that hadn't been there before, that had everything male in me gathering tight, wanting to show her exactly what I'd missed.

But I'd decided nothing else was going to happen and so nothing would. She wasn't in charge of this, I was, and I'd had twenty years of staying in control. I wasn't going to let her goad me into doing anything else. After all, she'd never beaten me at chess. Not once.

"I'm done teaching stubborn children lessons." I kept my tone deliberately dismissive. "Drink your scotch. You're going back to the penthouse apartment for the night and then tomorrow we'll have a little chat about your extra security needs."

Her eyes narrowed, the glitter in them going from smoldering to sharp in seconds flat. "I see. So, you spank me, get me to suck your cock, and now you've taken what you wanted, you're getting rid of me."

So, we were back to fighting again, we were? A part of me regretted that, but not enough to change my mind. It had to be this way and the sooner she understood that the better.

"Don't pretend for a second that you didn't want me spanking that ass of yours." I kept my tone devoid of expression. "And don't pretend you didn't enjoy sucking my dick, before coming hard the instant you touched your clit. We both took what we wanted, Isabel. But it ends here and you being sulky about it isn't going to make me change my mind."

She flushed but didn't say anything immediately. Instead, she took a slow sip of her scotch and after a couple of moments asked, "Why does it have to end now? Because if you're worried about anyone finding out, no one knows I'm here, Caleb. Only you. We could do whatever we wanted and no one else would know."

It was true, but I didn't need that thought in my head, not when my cock was busy trying to convince me otherwise.

"No," I said. "And don't ask again. I don't like having to repeat myself."

She leaned back in the chair, the movement making the fabric of her dress slide down further over the curve of one

breast, and she made no move to adjust it. She didn't look the slightest bit cowed either. "Or what?"

"What do you mean 'or what'?"

That sensual edge glinted in her eyes again. "I mean what will you do if I ask again?"

Fuck. Somehow, she knew, didn't she? Somehow, she knew I liked it when she'd challenged me. It had been obvious that I'd enjoyed spanking the hell out of her too, since I'd made her deal with the consequences.

Still, if she thought she could manipulate me, she had another think coming.

It had been fifteen years since Old Nick's betrayal. I'd taken his throne and the minute I had I'd stopped being the weapon he turned on other people who didn't do what he said. I'd become the one who wielded it instead. No one used me and no manipulated me, still less some little girl annoyed at not getting her way.

I met her gaze and let her see the will in mine. "Then I'll get security to deal with you."

"Why? Not man enough to deal with me yourself?"

It was a clumsy strike, and she probably knew it, My masculinity wasn't so fragile that her scorn could crack it. So, I didn't rise to the bait, looking at her instead, seeing beyond her sullen anger to the hurt that lay beneath it. Because of course she was hurt. I'd rejected her.

But that was too bad. Everything about this was wrong and if I had to hurt her in order to frighten her away, to make her reconsider this ill-advised crush, then I'd do it. I'd never shied away from doing the difficult things.

"Put your claws away, Isabel," I said without heat. "You know they don't work on me."

She stared back and I should have known then that she wouldn't let this go, because Isabel never did. She had a will on her that could have rivaled my own, especially when she wanted something.

Abruptly, she knocked back the rest of her scotch, then put the tumbler down on the table beside her. And before I could say a word, she slid both straps of her dress off, giving her shoulders a little wriggle so the fabric slipped down. Then she pushed it down further, over her hips and off, taking her thong along with it.

She sat back in the armchair, completely naked save for those strappy golden sandals, chin lifted high. “How about now?”

Brat. Fucking *gorgeous* little brat.

She was all flushed creamy skin and the prettiest freckles everywhere, like a scattering of golden stars. Breasts just as full and round as I’d suspected with delicate, shell pink nipples. And as I already knew, the curls between her thighs were as red as her hair.

I’d seen too many naked women to count so the naked body of this one shouldn’t have affected me. Tits were tits and a pussy was a pussy, nice to touch and to taste, and to get me hard, but if I didn’t want to get hard, then I wouldn’t.

Yet looking at Isabel Fox sitting in the armchair, naked as the day she was born, sent an arrow of pure, unadulterated lust straight through me.

As if she knew, as if she was well aware of her effect on me, she leaned back and parted her thighs slightly, giving me a glimpse of the pink, tender flesh between them.

Nothing about her was different. Nothing should have gotten my cock as instantly hard as it did. She was just another woman who wanted me and yet...

I couldn’t tear my gaze away. The dark part of me, the devil on my shoulder, whispered in my ear that she was right, no one would know if I decided to take her after all. If I pulled her down onto the floor and showed her exactly why her crush on me was a bad idea. And perhaps if I did, she’d never want me again. She’d never even want to look at me.

I’d never shown her the devil in me, that part of me Old Nick had seen that had made me his right-hand man. I’d

always kept her protected, because that world had never touched her, and I'd never wanted it to.

But maybe the time had come for her to see it. Maybe if she did, if she saw who I truly was, she'd run for those hills and she'd never look back.

I shouldn't have let her get to me. I shouldn't have let her affect me. I should have turned my back on her and walked away.

But I didn't. My decision was already made as I strolled toward her, taking my time.

She wanted me and so I'd give her what she wanted. But it was going to be on my terms. I'd show her what I truly was, not anyone's protector, and certainly not any young girl's fucking crush.

I was the devil and the sooner she understood that the better.

She watched me as I came closer and when I put my hands on the arms of her chair and leaned down, caging her where she sat, she took a sharp, indrawn breath.

Her eyes had gone wide and dark, the kind of green only found in the depths of the ocean, and the pulse at the base of her throat was beating fast.

"Do you know what you're asking for, Isabel?" I let her see the devil in my gaze. "Do you really understand?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly, proving that of course she didn't. "I want more, Caleb. I want you."

"But you don't know me, little girl. You don't know anything about me."

"I do." Her gaze searched mine as if whatever she could see in it didn't faze her for a second. "I've known you all my life."

"No," I corrected gently. "You only know what I wanted you to know."

Perhaps she understood then, because for a moment uncertainty flickered in her expression. Then it was gone, leaving behind it only the stubborn determination that she was made of. “So?” she said. “Show me the rest then.”

I ignored that, leaning in a little closer, so her face was inches from mine. She smelled like a summer garden with a delicate, musky edge, and that combined with the sweet heat of her body was getting me even harder.

Her breathing was getting faster, goosebumps rippling all over her skin.

Delicious little brat.

“Tell me,” I said. “Are you a virgin, Isabel?” I knew the answer already, but I wanted to hear her to say it.

“No,” she whispered.

“Don’t lie to me.”

She took another breath, shifting in the chair. Her nipples were hard and that pulse at the base of her throat was now racing. “Okay, okay. Y-Yes.”

You like that. You like the thought of being her first lover.

Something shifted in my gut, a raw intensity I hadn’t felt for decades, not since my teens when sex was still new, and I hadn’t been able to get enough of it.

I *did* like that thought. I liked it too much, and that was a bad thing. I was possessive of what I considered mine, but Isabel Fox wasn’t mine and I couldn’t start seeing her that way.

I shoved the feeling aside, though. There could be nothing emotional about this. It was about sex. It was about showing her that she didn’t understand what she was asking for, that she should have listened to my warnings.

“I’m not any woman’s first lover,” I told her, watching the dark green shift and flicker in her eyes. “I like it rough and dirty, and if it’s romance and kindness and tenderness you want, you won’t find it with me.”

“I don’t care.” Challenge and heat glowed in her eyes and my cock pressed insistently against my fly, wanting a piece of that heat.

It could wait.

“You’d better be sure you,” I said. “If you want me, you’ll take me as I am, and that’s not some kind of romantic fucking ideal.”

“You? A romantic ideal? Come on, I’m not stupid.”

“Then if you’re going to say no, then say no now. Because once you’re in it, you’re in it for the duration.”

“Oh, my God,” she murmured, bratty till the last. “So much talking. Will you shut the fuck up?” Then she lifted her hands, took my face between her palms, leaned forward and pressed her mouth to mine.

Every muscle in my body went rigid, that hot, raw feeling shifting inside me again. Her lips were so fucking soft and there was a sweet hesitancy to the kiss, as if she didn’t quite know what she was doing. And maybe she didn’t. Maybe she hadn’t kissed many men. She was a virgin after all.

Her hands on my cheeks were light, the press of her lips warm.

The kisses I gave and the kisses I received had always been rough and raw, because that’s the way I preferred my sex. Dark and dirty, with some pain to make it interesting. It had never been light and gentle, or soft and exploratory. Never tender and never affectionate.

But Isabel’s kiss was all of those rolled into one and I didn’t know why it hit me like a gut punch, making me unable to move a muscle while she pressed kiss after kiss along my mouth. I’d never had a woman kiss me that way before and for some reason it made my cock even harder than it already was, as if I’d never had a kiss at all, let alone from one twenty-three-year-old virgin.

It got under my skin and I didn’t like it, and before I was fully conscious of doing so, I’d thrust one hand into her red hair and gathered it tight in my fist, dragging her head back.

“One other thing,” I growled. “I’m in charge and all of this is on *my* terms, not yours.”

Then I covered her mouth with mine and gave her a taste of the devil.

A hot, raw kiss. My tongue pushing into her mouth, tasting the sweetness of the scotch she’d been drinking and the saltiness of my own flavor. It made me possessive, and I kissed her harder, deeper, pressing her back into the seat, my fingers clenched tight in her hair.

It was a mistake to indulge myself like this, but I didn’t stop.

I’d made my decision.

She gasped against my mouth, her hands dropping from my face to my chest and pressing hard, half pushing me away, yet half not, as if she couldn’t make up her mind about what she wanted.

Good. She should push me away. She shouldn’t want this.

She shouldn’t want me.

I pulled her away by her hair and looked into her eyes. All the green had gone, leaving only black, her face deeply flushed, her mouth slick and swollen. She was panting, her expression dazed.

“If you want this to stop, say it now,” I ordered roughly.

“I don’t. I don’t want this to stop.” Her fingers curled in my shirt. “I just...I haven’t kissed a m-man before.”

Jesus, what the fuck are you doing with her? You should be walking right the hell away.

But it was too late for that. And I liked it more than I should have that the first man she should kiss was me. The first cock she’d ever tasted was mine.

All her firsts would be mine.

“Then you’re in for quite an education.” I tightened my grip on her hair, looking into her eyes. “Last chance, little girl.”

Her answer was to pull me closer, clearly wanting another kiss.

Except she'd forgotten who was in charge and it wasn't her.

“First things first.” I let go of her hair and took her hands away. “You don't get to touch me until I say.” I shrugged off my jacket and let it fall, reaching to undo my tie. “And I think you're going to need help remembering that.” Pulling out the silk from underneath my collar, I bound it quickly around her wrists, making sure it was tight enough that she couldn't get free, but not so tight it would cut off her circulation.

There was a hook on the back of the chair — there were other hooks too, all very useful for certain purposes — and before she had a chance to figure out what was going on, I grabbed her bound wrists, took them above her head and over the back of the chair, and slipped the silk into the hook just behind her head.

She gasped, pulling against her bonds in an instinctive movement.

I raised a brow and she stopped, leaning back in the seat, still breathing fast.

The red silk around her pale wrists glowed.

I checked for signs that she was afraid, but there were none. The silly girl was still looking at me as if I was the fucking second coming.

“Here's the deal.” I leaned in close again. “You need to learn a few lessons and the first one is doing what I say when I say it.”

She was breathing even faster, the scent of her arousal filling the space between us. It was delicious.

“So, no talking,” I went on. “And no touching. And you can't come until I tell you to.”

She blinked. “What do you mean no—”

“What did I say, Isabel?”

She swallowed and shut her mouth.

“If you come before I tell you to, I’m going to be very disappointed. And you don’t want to disappoint me, do you?”

There was a mutinous look on her face, defiant sparks in her eyes, and I could see how torn she was, part of her desperate to defy me, to match her will against mine. And I wanted her to. She was a fighter and so was I, and the battle would be fucking magnificent.

But she wasn’t ready for that, and she must have known it, because after a couple of tense moments, she shook her head.

“Good,” I murmured. “Then let’s get started.”

Isabel

I almost couldn't breathe. My skin was so tight and hot I could feel every movement of the air over it, and my heartbeat so loud the whole of Arcadia could probably hear it. I was shaking too, but it wasn't from fear.

No, that was a lie. Fear was there. Not of him, but of myself and what I wanted. Which was everything. In fact, I had a horrible suspicion that there was nothing he could do that I wouldn't want.

It was terrifying to realize that you had no boundaries when it came to another person. That you'd do anything for them. Anything at all.

Even take off your dress and expose your naked body just to convince them not to leave. Even let them bind their red silk tie around your wrists and hook them behind your head so you couldn't use your hands.

Even accept — though everything in you rebelled against it — that you wanted their approval. That the thought of disappointing them was like acid in your soul. That you'd crawl naked over broken glass just for a pat on the head.

Caleb might get me to do that. And I'd do it, too.

Perhaps I'd made a mistake in not taking the out he'd given me. Perhaps I should have turned tail and run out the door.

But I'd known — don't ask me how, I just did — that if I'd finished the scotch he'd poured for me like a good girl and walked away, it would be done between us. He'd act as if none of this had ever happened and I'd be left with only the smallest taste of him, forever wanting more and never getting it.

I hadn't been able to stand the thought of it. He was here *now*, and the line between us had been crossed, and if I didn't do something drastic to bring him over with me, I'd never get the opportunity again.

No one knew I was here. No one.

So, I'd done the drastic thing. I'd never been naked in front of a man, but I hadn't even hesitated, slipping my dress down and off, taking my thong with it.

I hadn't been afraid of being naked. No, the thing that had terrified me most was that it wouldn't be enough. That he'd see my body, merely shrug his shoulders and leave. I didn't want to be just another naked woman to him. I wanted to be special. I wanted him to see me and not be able to leave the room because he wanted me so much.

I wanted him to want me as badly as I wanted him.

That moment he'd looked at me and the black flame had ignited in his eyes had been the most intoxicating moment in my life. Then as he'd stalked toward me.... Holy shit, I'd nearly combusted on the spot.

I still felt that way, sitting naked in the armchair with him bent over me, my wrists tied and hooked over my head, arching my back, and lifting my breasts. Prepared like a feast for him to sit down and eat.

My mouth was swollen and sensitized from the kiss he'd taken charge of, and my scalp too, from the way he'd pulled my hair. More sensations layered over the top of one another combining into a raw need that pulsed between my legs like another heartbeat.

His shirt was undone at the neck, the glimpse of his skin making me feel like a Victorian gentleman catching a glimpse of an ankle beneath a gown. I wanted to rip open his shirt, run

my fingers over his muscled chest, trace the tattoos I knew lay beneath the cotton. Lick them even.

I was so hungry for him. His spicy, earthy masculine scent was making my mouth dry, and the heat of his body was a fire I wanted to warm myself against.

No, scratch that. I didn't want to warm myself. I wanted to throw myself into that fire and burn to ashes in the flames.

'Let's get started', he'd said. But all he'd done was push himself away from the chair and was now standing silent in his shirtsleeves, staring down at me with all the predatory intent of a bird of prey.

He often did that. Letting the silence sit until it got uncomfortable. I'd always hated it since I hated uncomfortable silences, and no matter how many times I tried to wait it out, I always failed. I could never keep my mouth shut long enough.

I couldn't keep it shut now.

"You're just going to stand there?" I couldn't help myself, the throb between my thighs becoming intense.

"At the moment, yes." With slow, deliberate motions, he undid his cufflinks. "I'm in charge, remember?"

As if I could forget. He was always in charge of everything else so why wouldn't he be in charge of this? Perhaps that was just as well, since I didn't know what the hell I was doing. But he'd also said it was a lesson, so I'd learn how to do what he said, and I hadn't liked that, not at all. Except I couldn't do anything about it, not if I wanted him. And I did. So much.

Still feeling pleased with myself that I'd gotten him to stay, I stared up into his night black eyes, looking for hunger there and seeing it.

He wanted me. Oh yes, he did.

He dropped his cufflinks on the small table beside the chair then began to roll up his sleeves with leisurely motions, as if he had all the time in the world. As he did so, his gaze drifted down my throat to my breasts, lingering there for a

moment before moving further down, over my stomach and between my thighs, and staying there even longer.

I shifted restlessly, needing some relief, because the way he looked at me was an aphrodisiac of epic proportions.

“Also,” he murmured, not taking his gaze from between my thighs as he finished with his sleeves. “I told you not to speak.”

Oh shit, that’s right, he had.

“Unless you’re losing the feeling in your hands or you want to stop,” he added. “If you want to stop, I’ll stop. But that’ll be it. We won’t be doing this again. Are we clear?”

I nodded then bit my lip, trembling. I didn’t want to stop, not at all, but what if I forgot and said something? Would he spank me again? I found myself half hoping, half dreading that he would.

“And...” He reached down and slipped one large, warm hand beneath one of my knees, lifting it up and hooking it over one of the chair arms, making every muscle in my entire body tense. “I told you not to come until I said.”

A gasp escaped me before I could stop it, the feeling of being spread open and exposed winding the tension inside me even tighter. The material around my wrists tightened too, and I realized I must have been pulling on it again.

I took a shuddering breath, Caleb’s gaze fixed between my thighs. It was such an insane turn on, I almost couldn’t stand it. A plea nearly escaped, but I remembered at the last minute that I wasn’t supposed to speak, so I bit down on it hard.

But he wasn’t going to make this easy for me.

He put one hand on the arm of the chair, leaning over me, then he let the fingertips of his other hand brush lightly over my stomach before sliding over the slick folds of my pussy to my clit. Then he pressed down. Not hard, but hard enough to make it feel as if he’d just delivered a short, sharp electric shock direct to my central nervous system.

I jerked, the binding around my wrists pulling tight, the strangled cry I couldn't keep inside escaping. And he kept his finger there, a constant, light pressure that I found utterly maddening. I wanted friction, I wanted that finger to move, to stroke me, to slide inside me, do anything but just be *there*, giving me something, yet not enough.

"I told you not to come, little girl." His deep voice was a caress all on its own. "So, I'd do what your daddy says and keep still if I were you."

Daddy? He'd said that before and Jesus Christ, why was it so fucking hot? I had no idea, but it was.

My head pressed against the back of the armchair, my whole body trembling. He hadn't moved his finger, he only kept up the light pressure against my clit, and he stared at me, his gaze boring into mine.

The pleasure was agonizing, resisting it impossible. I was never going to be able to hold out. He was finally touching me right where I wanted him to, but it wasn't enough. I wanted his mouth, his hands on me, his skin next to mine, him inside me, and yet all I got was his fingertip on my clit and it...

Fuck, it was driving me out of my mind.

I wanted to come but he'd told me not to and now half of me wanted to ignore his stupid rules, while the other half was desperate to hold out just to prove that I could. Especially since he was very obviously trying to push me into disobeying him.

His fingertip pressed a little harder, then he leaned in and covered my mouth with his, delivering another of those hot, raw, deep kisses that made every part of me shake. I wanted to put my arms around his neck. I wanted to press my palms against his chest. I just wanted to touch him, for God's sake, but I couldn't.

All I could do was glory in that fierce kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth. I tried to return it, tried to kiss him back, but then his finger slid slowly over my clit then around and around, teasing me unmercifully.

I moaned against his mouth, my body arching, my hips lifting helplessly, searching for the friction I needed. The pressure was unbelievable, holding out impossible.

“You’re not allowed to come, little girl,” he warned. “Not under any circumstances.”

Then stop touching me, I wanted to scream. But that’s what he wanted. He wanted me to disobey him. He wanted me to break. And me, being me, I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

I tried. Lord knows, I tried.

But when his finger moved again, sliding through the slick folds of my pussy, and pushing inside me, I was lost. He did it slowly, one finger sliding in deep and then another, and he fucked me with them as he kissed me.

And the pleasure inside me broke like a storm, the orgasm rushing inexorably over me and crushing me beneath it.

I screamed, I couldn’t help it, lost in the relentless tide of pleasure. But some part of me was conscious enough to let him know that I wasn’t totally giving in, because I sunk my teeth into his lower lip and bit him. Hard.

He laughed, the bastard, low and deep as I shook and shook with the aftershocks. “What did I say about claws?” He slid his fingers out of me then pressed them against my lips. Too dazed to realize what he was doing, I opened my mouth automatically and he eased them in. “Suck,” he ordered. “I’m disappointed. You didn’t do what I said. So now you’ll be cleaning up the mess you made.”

I’m sorry, the idiot in me wanted to say. I’m so sorry I disappointed you. There were even tears in my eyes. But I couldn’t say anything because his fingers were in my mouth and I could taste myself on them, the proof of how I’d broken.

But there was some spark of defiance left alive in me and I bit him again, because whatever he’d said about claws and lessons, and doing what he said, I still wasn’t going to give in.

He cursed, pulling his fingers out of my mouth, and as soon as I was able, I said hoarsely, “You cheated.”

He didn't look even the remotest bit ashamed. "I told you I was in charge, Isabel. And that if you didn't like it, you were quite welcome to leave."

I couldn't get over the unfairness of it. "But you...you still cheated."

He tilted his head, looking down at me. "You're upset at disappointing me, I get that. You'll have a chance to make it up to me, though. I promise."

Yet more heat swept through me, and the aftershocks of the previous orgasm hadn't even finished with me yet. Upset at disappointing him? Was he kidding?

You were, don't lie. You nearly cried.

I didn't want to admit that it mattered so much, but of course it did. I *had* wanted to do what he said. I'd wanted to prove myself to him and I'd failed, and it hurt. It was such a stupid thing to be hurt about that naturally I was filled with rage.

I wanted to push him too, shock him, get under his skin the way he got under mine, prove to him that though he might think he was in charge, I had some power here as well. I wanted to make him lose control.

But how did I do that? How did I, a virgin with exactly zero experience, make a man twice my age, who'd done and seen everything, lose it?

He liked my body, I'd seen it in his eyes when I'd taken my dress off. I'd surprised him and I was pretty sure he liked that. He'd also liked spanking me — he'd been so hard afterward — and he liked fighting me too, because every time I kicked against him, he responded.

He got off on it just like I did, and it came to me in a flash of insight why: I wasn't afraid of him. He could cow just about every person who crossed his path, but he couldn't cow me.

A brat he'd called me. He liked me being a brat, I knew he did, and it made sense. He liked being challenged and I guess if everyone was afraid of him, not many people did. Which

meant that if I wanted to rattle him, he needed to be challenged and I had to be the one who challenged him.

I looked up into his inky gaze, so close to mine. “I’m not afraid of you, you know,” I whispered. “You don’t scare me, Cal.”

For a split-second something flickered in his eyes, then it was gone. But it was too late. I knew now.

He’d been trying to scare me and was surprised it hadn’t worked.

Stupid man. Didn’t he know me *at all*?

He pushed himself away from the chair, standing at his full height. “I guess we’ll see, won’t we?” He gave me another long, leisurely survey. “I’m going to give you a chance to redeem yourself. You can’t come unless I say, hmm?” Then he dropped to his knees in front of me and leaned in, putting his hands on my spread thighs, and holding them down. Then he bent his head and covered my pussy with his mouth.

Lightning shocked me, pure electricity sizzling along my nerve endings as his tongue pressed against my clit. I went rigid in the chair, all the breath leaving my lungs in an explosive gasp.

The heat of his hands on my thighs and his breath on my skin, the sight of his dark head between my legs, everything about this moment combined to make it the most intensely erotic thing I’d ever experienced.

I’d had a lot of fantasies about Caleb, and in the deepest, darkest part of the night where absolutely no one could see my fierce blushes, this had been one of them. It had felt wrong to imagine it, and yet I almost never needed to touch myself when I did. I would come just by thinking hard.

Now it was happening, and I was desperate to give myself up to the moment, yet I’d already decided I wasn’t going to give in. He was pushing me, expecting me to fail, to come before he told me to, but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

Because I knew — *I knew* — if I wanted to not be just another woman he slept with, I had to surprise him, challenge

him. Show him I wasn't afraid. That I could match him in every way there was. A big ask. But I was a stubborn woman.

I shut my eyes, blocking out the sight of him, conjuring up every unsexy image I could. Spreadsheets. Algebra. Slightly-off milk. Cheese that had been too long in the fridge. My father telling me when I was fourteen that it was time I had a security detail because he had lots of enemies.

But Caleb was merciless. His tongue circled my clit, teasing, licking, tasting. He increased the pressure of his hands on my thighs, pressing them down harder, making that delicious stretching feeling more intense. Then he pushed that wicked tongue of his inside me.

I couldn't keep still, my hips shifting, my back arching, pulling against the tie wrapped around my wrists. I gasped out loud, fighting the onslaught of pleasure that threatened to drag me under.

I wasn't going to give in. I wasn't.

I bit my lip again, harder, using the pain to clear my head and every bit of my will to stop myself from going over the edge. I called on my anger to help, replaying Caleb catching me tonight, him calling me a silly little girl, telling me I didn't know what I was doing. That I didn't listen.

The pleasure became agonizing, the feeling of his mouth on me, licking and circling and using the edge of his teeth, almost unbearable. I could have told him to stop, and I knew he would if I'd truly been serious, but that would have been a surrender, that would have meant I couldn't handle it or him, and I just wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

I'd come, but only when he told me to and not a second before.

Time began to slip away and dissolve, my world narrowing to the agonizing, relentless build of pleasure that I couldn't escape. But I fought and fought, tasting blood from my bit lip.

Then eventually his mouth lifted away and when I opened my eyes, he was kneeling on the floor, between my thighs, the

expression on his face utterly unreadable. But the ferocity in his eyes was a hurricane.

The only sound in the room was my harsh, panting breaths and I was shaking. I couldn't stop. I couldn't look away from him either. There was a faint wash of color on his sharp, carved cheekbones and the fact that he was hard as a rock was immediately obvious.

Beneath the pain of unresolved pleasure, I could feel satisfaction. Yes, I was the one who'd done that. I'd made him hard. I'd put that look in his eyes.

He hadn't been expecting me to hold out, that was clear.

Shivering, I met his gaze and held it. Let him see that I was as stubborn as he was and just as determined not to give in.

"Well," he said, his voice roughened and gravelly. "Aren't you full of surprises?" Then he smiled, but it wasn't an amused smile. There was something hungry and sharp in it. A shark's smile.

Oh shit. You're in trouble.

Maybe. But I wasn't going to give in and that was the beginning and end of it.

Still kneeling, Caleb reached up to unhook my hands, examining them carefully then chafing my fingers to get the blood running into them. I could see a red mark around my wrists where the tie had pulled against my skin, and it thrilled me. I hoped it would still be there tomorrow.

Once he was satisfied with the state of my hands, he rose to his feet and looked down at me. "Let's take things up a notch," he murmured. Then he reached for me, pulling me from the chair and down onto the floor.

He hadn't untied my wrists, but I lifted them above my head, letting him know that he had me helpless, that I wasn't going anywhere. But I was afraid. Afraid I wasn't going to hold out, because he'd dropped to his knees between my thighs, and his hand was on the buttons of his pants, undoing them. Tugging down the zipper. Reaching into his underwear and getting his cock out.

Oh, holy shit...

I was trembling now, trembling hard, because his mouth on my pussy was one thing, but him actually being inside me... losing my virginity to him...

I didn't know if I could hold out against that and he clearly knew it, because that flame in his gaze was blazing hot.

It made me even more determined to prove him wrong.

With unhurried movements, he tore open the condom packet he'd gotten from somewhere and casually rolled the condom down over his cock. I couldn't take my eyes off him. The movements of his hand, the way he rolled it down, sheathing himself, were just so unspeakably sexy.

I wanted him naked though, as naked as I was. I wanted his skin on mine and it didn't seem fair that he was still dressed. Then it occurred to me that perhaps he wanted to keep some kind of barrier between us, and his clothing was it. Interesting that he felt the need to keep some separation. Was that because I was getting to him? Because I was shaking him?

I stared at him, expecting him to stretch himself over the top of me, but he didn't. He simply knelt there then grabbed my hips and hauled me up his thighs, watching me as he slowly but surely pushed his cock inside me.

I had to shut my eyes again. Had to bite my lip as I felt myself part around him. I was so wet there wasn't much resistance, but he was big. The burn of soft sensitive tissues stretching tore a groan from me, but there was no other pain. A good thing too because the pleasure just about crushed me.

I couldn't stop the whimper that broke from me, or the way I shivered and shook. He pushed deeper, the pressure of his fingers on my hips adding to the sensations and making everything more real, more intense.

He was inside me. He was where I'd fantasized him being for so long.

I was his now, the way I'd always wanted to be.

Something wet rolled down the sides of my face and I could taste salt. But it couldn't be tears, because why would I be crying? It was just him and it was so amazing, and yet so intense, and also painful and...and God. God, just everything.

I bit my lip again to stop the tears, and the pain helped clear my head, but not for long. Because he began to slide out of me, then back in, a long, slow glide that tore yet more incoherent sounds from me.

My grip on my determination began to slip. I couldn't fight any more. I couldn't hold out, not against this. Not against him.

Rage at my own weakness caught in my throat. I'd wanted to prove to him that I was different, that I wasn't just another woman he'd fucked. Get to him the way he got to me, but I *was* just the same, wasn't I?

This wasn't special to him. *I* wasn't special. I'd made him hard, but that wasn't *me*. That was just sex.

I'd failed.

I swallowed, desperately holding back the pressure from all those emotions and physical sensations, then he said, in a voice so deep and rough I hardly recognized it, "Open your eyes, Isabel."

Helpless to resist, I opened them. His gaze was blacker than space, fierce and hungry. The look on his face was taut, every muscle in his body rigid with tension.

"Now," he ordered roughly. "Come for me, little girl. Come for me, *now*."

Oh, Jesus, finally...

I let go, screaming as the relentless, agonizing pleasure rolled over me. And just before it ground me into dust, I caught a glimpse of him, his lips peeling back, his face tightening, his hips moving faster, harder, a roar escaping him as it caught him too, and buried him in the dust with me.

Caleb

I felt as if someone had crept up behind me and hit me over the head hard with an iron bar. My head was ringing like a bell, the effects of the orgasm echoing and resounding through my body.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had sex that intense, and I'd had a lot of sex.

It was long minutes before I could move, so I held onto Isabel's hips, struggling to get my breath back, my cock still buried deep inside her.

She was lying on her back in front of me, her hands thrown above her head, her wrists till tied. Her hair was spread all over the carpet, some curls stuck to her damp forehead and neck like little tongues of fire.

Her cheeks were just as red, and shiny from the tears that leaked slowly from beneath her red lashes. Her mouth was swollen and bitten, blood on her lower lip. The sheen of sweat was on her skin, and it was deeply flushed everywhere. She looked ravaged.

What the fuck have you done to her?

I'd pushed her. I'd pushed her to the limit. I'd pushed her so fucking hard, and because she was Isabel, she'd given me the fight of her life, determined to hold out. And I'd lost myself.

I'd always known she'd had a will on her. So fucking fierce, so fucking strong. I'd made it as difficult as I could for her to obey me, because that's what I did when I played this game. When I had a little brat who needed a lesson.

I'd given her plenty of chances to stop, to run, to say no, but she hadn't.

She hadn't given in, either.

She must have been in agony because pleasure could turn to pain in an instant. But she hadn't told me to stop, and she hadn't begged for relief. She'd held out. And in the end, it was me who'd given in. She'd needed the release and so did I.

I hadn't expected it to be so intense, annihilating almost. It had been a long time since an orgasm had left me so I couldn't move. A long time since I'd wanted to fuck a woman again within seconds of coming the first time.

You sick motherfucker. Look at what you've done to her.

I didn't have to look. I knew. I'd pushed her too hard, perhaps broken her. I'd certainly killed stone dead whatever relationship we'd had before tonight and that I'd never get back.

An unfamiliar ache tightened in my chest, but I ignored it.

That's what I'd wanted right from the start, to kill her crush on me. To make it so she'd never look at me with hunger in her eyes again, and if that meant destroying what connection we did have, then so be it.

It was for her protection.

Sure, tell yourself it was all for her, that you didn't take anything for yourself, you selfish prick.

I forced the thought away, then finally brought myself to move.

Isabel with trembling with the aftershocks and shivered violently as I pulled out of her swollen pussy, a soft gasp escaping her.

I dealt with the condom, tucked myself away, then got to my feet and moved over to the cupboard next to the drinks cabinet where I kept a few things for after-care situations. I took out some soft wipes and a blanket, then I carried them over to where Isabel was still lying sprawled on the carpet.

‘I’m not afraid of you’, she’d said. And she hadn’t been. Not once.

Something else shifted in my chest, but again, I refused to acknowledge it, busying myself instead with cleaning her up, wiping away the blood on her lip, and the tears, and running makeup.

Then I wrapped her up in the blanket and carried her back to the other armchair and sat down, holding her in my arms and letting my body heat warm her up. Gradually her shaking stopped and she relaxed against me.

It felt good to take care of her. Better than it should have.

“You know what this means, don’t you, Caleb?” Her voice was scratchy and husky, yet full of feminine satisfaction. “It means I’m yours now.”

Every muscle in my body tightened. I glanced down.

She had her head on my shoulder, her eyes full of triumph. Not at all the trembling, weeping girl she’d been not five minutes earlier.

So. Apparently, she was *not* broken. Apparently, I’d underestimated her. Again. Jesus Christ.

“No, Isabel,” I said flatly. “No, it does not.”

“Yes, it does.” She sounded exceptionally pleased with herself. “You took my virginity that makes me yours.”

I did not like the direction this conversation was heading in one bit. “This isn’t the Middle Ages. I don’t give a shit about your virginity.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Hmmm. If you didn’t give a shit about my virginity, why did you ask me if I was a virgin then?”

“Isabel—”

“You’re a liar, Cal. You do give a shit. But that’s beside the point. I’ve decided that since you’re my first lover, I’m yours.” Her gaze was very direct, very clear. “It also means that you’re mine.”

That ache shifted in my chest once again. The only person who’d ever laid a claim on me was Old Nick. That day when Ten and I had been hauled before him, after I’d failed to pickpocket one of his men and Livia had saved us from a beating. That night he and a couple of his enforcers had found the alley Ten and I had been living in and had told me that he’d seen some potential in us and that there was a place with him if we wanted it. He’d known who I was, the son of a thief who’d once worked for him, but I’d had no idea about him, not then.

Ten had refused – he’d met Sir George by then – but I’d decided I was tired of being on the streets. Ten had his mentor — Sir George hadn’t wanted a bar of me, I was too far gone down the wrong path in his opinion, the darkness inside me too obvious for his liking — so I’d go with Old Nick.

I’d been his man from that day on, but no one else had ever told me I was theirs. Certainly not a young woman with more courage than sense.

She’d said it with such conviction, as if it was a foregone conclusion, but she was wrong. She couldn’t claim me. No one could.

I was no one’s but my own.

“Keep telling yourself that,” I said mildly, not wanting to get into an argument about it. “How are you feeling?”

Her head shifted on my shoulder and her eyelashes fluttered, her mouth curving in the most satiated, sensual smile I’d ever seen. “I’m feeling fucking fantastic, thanks for asking.”

“That’s the adrenaline high talking.” I brushed back some curls from her forehead, trying to ignore the way my dick

hardened at the sight of that smile. “I’ll get you another scotch and then you can get dressed.”

“Adrenaline high, huh? That could get addictive. Perhaps I’ll come here tomorrow night, too.”

I tensed. “Isabel.”

“What?” Her eyes were wide, guileless. “If you won’t give it to me, perhaps I’ll get it from someone else.”

For a second we stared at one another, the tension building between us again, hot possessiveness tightening its grip around my throat.

The thought of another man doing this to her was...

Not happening.

“Stop it.” I didn’t bother to hide edge in my voice. “This is one fight you’re not going to win. You fucked up with your security tonight, which means you’re going back to my apartment, and you won’t be leaving it without fifteen armed guards. Understand me?”

She didn’t even blink. “Will you be joining me there?”

“No. I will not.”

“Hmmm.” Her gaze searched my face, though was she was looking for I didn’t know. Not that it mattered. Whatever it was, she wouldn’t find it. “I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

I didn’t what she meant by that either, but I didn’t have the patience to find out. The warm weight of her body in my lap was distracting and I needed to get her off me.

She’s getting to you.

I didn’t like that thought, but I couldn’t keep denying it. Not now, because, yes, she was getting to me, and I needed some distance to get myself the fuck together.

I shifted, reversing our positions so she was sitting in the armchair, still wrapped in the blanket, while I stood up. Then I went to the drinks cabinet once again, poured her another nip of scotch and carried that back to her, putting the tumbler down on the side table beside the armchair. “Finish your

scotch and get dressed,” I ordered. Without sparing her another glance, I turned, got my phone out of my pocket, and made some calls.

I didn’t want to hang around here. I didn’t want to be with her here, in this room, with the scent of her and me, the scent of sex hanging in air, along with the memory of what I’d done to her.

Regret had always been a pointless indulgence and I’d certainly never second-guessed myself. But I was doing both now.

I’d never permitted myself any weakness – I couldn’t, not if I wanted to stay on top – and if I had any vulnerability at all, it was Isabel. No one could know that. Already as the daughter of my best friend, she had a target on her back and if it became known that she was special to me...

Jesus.

It wasn’t only the Hamiltons who had enemies. I did too. Many, many enemies. And no doubt I’d make a whole lot more on my way to making Cross the biggest company in the country, and if any of them knew what she was to me...

It’s not your enemies you need to be afraid of. The darkness inside you will eat her alive.

Regrets... I couldn’t afford them and yet here they were, sharp splinters, digging into me.

I knew what I was deep down. I was what Old Nick had made me, his enforcer. His right hand man. Relentless. Pitiless. Impervious to bribes or pleading. I’d taken the rage that had lived inside me since my father had killed my family, and turned it hard and cold, turned it into ambition, an icy fuel that drove me. A darkness inside me.

Isabel had to be kept safe from that darkness, which meant that turning our relationship physical had been a mistake, no two ways about it. It had made things needlessly complicated and me distancing her — which I was going to have to do — would hurt her a lot more than it should.

The regrets dug deeper, the barbs hooking into me. But there was nothing to be done about it now. All I could do was keep going forward.

I made a last call then slipped my phone into my pocket and turned around just in time to see Isabel slide out of the armchair and let her blanket fall. She didn't bother to hide her nakedness as she bent to grab her thong and step delicately into it.

It was quite the performance, and for my benefit of course.

She didn't look at me, easing the black lace up her thighs, and I should have turned away since she obviously wanted me to watch. But what the hell, I'd already made a mistake here and there was no changing it. And though it wouldn't be a mistake I'd ever make again, there wasn't much point in pretending I didn't like what I saw. Or that I didn't want to take one last look at all those golden freckles, that creamy skin, that pretty little pussy with its red curls that had tasted so fucking sweet.

My cock, naturally, was interested and when she turned around to face me, pulling up the gold silk of her dress, she looked pointedly at my groin. "Are you sure you don't want ___"

"The car will be here in five minutes." I thrust my hands into my pockets, ignoring my idiot dick. "But by all means take your time."

"Oh, that's right." She eased one strap up over her shoulder, leaving one perfect, rounded breast bare. "I guess older men need some time to gather their strength."

Naughty girl. Goading me, flirting with me.

It's working, too.

Yeah, it was working, and I couldn't say I wasn't already thinking of turning her over my knee again, smacking that ass and then taking it with my cock. Making her break again. And again. And again. Until she was screaming my name the way she'd screamed it when I finally told her that she could come.

But I also needed to get some goddamn control back and so none of that would be happening no matter how much she goaded me.

In fact, it was more than time to put her firmly back in her place as Ten's daughter, remind her of what we were to each other and that wasn't lovers, no matter how much she wanted it to be.

Ignoring her comment, I held my hand out. "Give me your phone."

"What?" Her eyes widened and she paused lifting the other strap of her dress over her shoulder. "What do you mean give you my phone?"

"You heard. I'm confiscating it for the night."

The smoldering look in her eyes became sharp like glass, in one of her quicksilver changes of mood. "What the hell? I'm not giving you my phone."

"Don't fuck with me, Isabel. Not tonight." I stared hard at her. "Not when you've already proven that you can't be trusted."

She glared furiously back, and I could see her debating the merits of flat out refusing me.

"Give it to me or I'll take it," I said, helping the process along. And I would take it. I wouldn't hurt her, but I'd get her phone from her one way or another.

She let out a breath, a certain amount of calculation crossing her pretty features. Then her jaw firmed, and her shoulders squared. She went over to where she'd left her purse, beside the armchair I'd tied her to, and bent, picking it up and taking her phone out. She came over to me and presented the phone. "Fine. Here it is. I assume you're going to check my messages so would you like my password to save you the trouble of breaking into it?"

I almost laughed. She was far too sharp for her own good and I couldn't resist a dig back. "Is your password my name?"

She flushed, then crooked a finger at me. "I'll whisper it."

Like a fucking idiot, I lowered my head, but her mouth didn't get near my ear. Instead that beckoning finger touched my cheek and her lips found mine, and she kissed me, soft and sweet.

I should have pulled away, I really should. But I didn't. I let her kiss me, because that kiss, like the one she'd given me earlier, hesitant, and gentle and warm, like summer rain.... Christ, I'd never had anything like it.

I almost touched her then. I almost cupped her face between my hands and kissed her back. Kissed her the way she was kissing me.

But she was the one who pulled away, looking up at me, wickedness dancing in her eyes. "Thank you, Caleb," she said. "For the sex, I mean. And of course, it's your name. What else would it be?"

Then she turned and headed straight for the door, leaving me standing there, staring after her.

Isabel

I knew Monday was going to be a bitch.

I spent the whole weekend trapped in Caleb's apartment, restless and not sleeping, unable to stop thinking about what had happened between us on Friday night.

The sex had been a whole thing, but he'd also taken my phone, knew my dumb password, and now probably also knew that I'd been in contact with whichever Hamilton had been texting me, and that I'd lied to him when I told him I hadn't. Also, that I'd missed that meeting because, well.... I'd been with him.

I could only assume what he thought about all of this since after delivering me back to the apartment on Friday night, I hadn't heard from him. Not a single fucking thing.

He hadn't said so explicitly but given his silence it seemed clear that he didn't want to talk about what had happened between us that night in Arcadia, and I was furious about it.

After I'd handed him my phone and kissed him, I'd already decided it wasn't going to end here. He'd wrecked me. He'd wrecked me utterly and then stomped on the pieces and I couldn't let that go.

He wanted me, he did, and maybe it was only physical, but I didn't care about that. Now I knew he wasn't indifferent, I

wanted to wreck him the way he'd wrecked me. Because it wasn't just physical for me. It was more. *He'd* made it more.

He'd given me a taste of him and one night wouldn't be enough. Perhaps it would never be enough. I just had to figure out how to get more.

Then there was the issue of the meeting and what my failure to turn up for it meant. Would they bother to contact me again? Or had I blown my only chance to find out about my mother? Since Caleb had confiscated my phone, I had no way of knowing, and since he'd also cut the WiFi, I couldn't go online to find out.

It was enraging.

As I'd predicted, Monday did indeed turn out to be a bitch.

My clothes had been delivered from my apartment and I took a bit more time than usual putting together my work outfit. I wore my usual pencil skirt of light grey, but this time I paired it with a silky, slightly transparent black blouse with a little bow at the neck. I also wore the most ridiculous of my high heels, black patent stilettos.

I paid attention to my make up with an extra red lip, and I put my hair into my usual bun, with a few little curls here and there to soften it. I wanted to look sexy and sensual, because I assumed the first thing Caleb would do would be to call me into his office and yell at me about the messages he'd found on my phone.

Except he didn't do that.

I was escorted to work by a four man detail that made me feel bad about the loss of J, J, and M, not to mention also like a prisoner being escorted to the dock, and then I waited in my cubicle, worrying about why Zara wasn't there and realizing all of a sudden that because I didn't have my phone, I wouldn't know how her virginity auction had gone or who'd bought her or what had happened. And because I'd spent my entire weekend going over my night with Caleb, I'd completely forgotten about her.

So now not only was I worried about her, but I was also furious at myself for being so self-centered. Then to make matters worse, I still heard nothing from Caleb.

The whole morning ticked away, and I wasn't called into his office once.

I called Zara's mobile from my desk phone, but there was no response, so I sat there, getting angrier and angrier.

Okay, perhaps he was ignoring what had happened between us on Friday night in the hope that I'd forget about it too, which, fat chance. But surely, I was up for some kind of blowback about the mysterious texts I'd been receiving and hiding from all and sundry?

Was it deliberate? Some kind of elaborate psych-out? Did he want me to stew about this a lesson? Because he was very fond of his lessons and didn't I know it.

As the time ticked by and lunchtime came and went, I found myself staring down at my wrists as I typed, working on a bullshit PowerPoint for HR. The red line from where he'd tied me had disappeared, but I could still feel the silk binding me. Could still feel his hand on my butt, his tongue between my thighs and his cock sliding into me.

I'd been bitterly disappointed that none of the marks he'd left had lasted, as if that night between us had never happened. In fact, the whole weekend I'd been second guessing myself, thinking that maybe it hadn't. Maybe it had all been a product of my own fevered imagination.

But it wasn't and it *had* happened, and I needed a plan. If he wasn't going to come to me, I'd go to him. Confront him, maybe seduce him. I could do that, couldn't I? Seduce him so thoroughly that another night with me would be all he could think of. Perhaps I'd also convince him to give me some info about my mother. He'd known her after all.

Some part of me must have thought that surely, he couldn't pretend all day and yet as four PM hit, and I still hadn't been called into his office, I finally lost what little patience I had left.

Shoving back my chair, I stormed out of my cubicle and headed to the elevators, stabbing at the button for his lordship level. It went out of its way to descend in the slowest time possible, aggravating me even more, and on the way up, it apparently had to stop at every single floor.

By the time we were at Mt Olympus, I was ready to blow my top.

I strode out of the elevator into Caleb's reception area, Sally already giving me the evil eye as I approached.

"You can't go in, Miss Fox," she said icily. "He's in a meeting."

I didn't even look at her as I went past her desk.

"Miss Fox," Sally said sternly, half getting up from her chair. "You can't go—"

"I don't care," I said furiously and headed straight for the doors.

I probably should have thought things through a little more. I probably should have at least taken a couple of breaths and calmed down before I pushed open the doors.

But I didn't. I slammed them open, full of fury, and walked in to find not only Caleb standing behind his desk, but Atlas sprawled on the couch at the other end of the room, and my goddamn father standing by the windows.

A stunning silence fell as all three looked at me, making me very conscious of the fact that I was red faced and sweaty with fury, and breathing hard. Not to mention that the events of Friday night — Caleb spanking me, Caleb with his head between my legs, Caleb fucking me on the floor — were replaying themselves in glorious Technicolor in my head, even as Dad's cold blue gaze fixed on me.

Oh shit. I'd clearly made the world's most grievous error.

The silence became thicker, denser, and I opened my mouth, no doubt to say something stupid that I'd regret, when Caleb said in an expressionless voice, "Ah, Isabel. Just the person we want to see."

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't even turn my head. Because I knew that if I did, if I met his gaze, every single thing I'd been thinking about him for the past two days would be there on my face for everyone to read.

Dad is going to be furious if he finds out.

Oh, and didn't I know it. I hadn't thought about *his* reaction at all, not once over the entirety of the weekend. But now that he was standing here, right in front of me, I was very, *very* aware that if he knew he'd scream at me then probably kill Caleb. It would hopefully be a metaphorical killing, but with Dad you could never tell.

So, I didn't look at Caleb, even though the brief glimpse that I'd had as I'd come through the doors was marked with fire in my head.

So tall, so broad. In one of his CEO bot suits that were tailored so perfectly for him. White shirt and...oh, holy fuck.... a red tie. Why did it have to be a red tie?

I could feel the pressure of his gaze like a storm front approaching, making the air crackle with electricity. I could barely get a breath.

"Um...hi," I forced out, my voice fracturing. "S-sorry, I didn't know—"

"It doesn't matter." Dad's blue gaze was colder than ice. "Caleb told me what happened on Friday night."

My brain reeled. What? About Caleb and me? About him taking my virginity on the floor of that room in Arcadia? But no, no that couldn't be right. Caleb wouldn't have said anything, he wouldn't. Except he might have told Dad about me escaping my security detail, that he definitely would have said, the prick.

I swallowed hard, keeping my gaze on Dad's. "About the.... uh....about the...."

"About you somehow escaping your detail. He found you in a bar in the Village." The sharp planes and angles of Dad's face grew somehow sharper. "You were by yourself,

apparently with plans to..." A muscle in his jaw jumped. "Meet some *person* at the carousel."

Part of me exhaled in relief, while another part tensed.

So, Caleb *had* told him about the meeting.

"If you two want some privacy," Atlas began.

"What *the fuck* were you thinking, Isabel." Dad's voice was so cold it might as well have come direct from Antarctica.

Obviously, he was angry, I knew the signs. His tall figure was tense, that muscle in his jaw jumping, his blue eyes like knives.

He was the most furiously controlled man I'd ever met. We were like fire and ice, and sometimes I used to wonder if he was even my father since I didn't look like him and I was the opposite of him temperamentally in every way.

Over the years we'd grown apart — he'd never been able to handle my teenage rages and I'd never been able to handle his coldness.

I didn't really blame him. He'd had me so young and had lost the great love of his life when I was born, and if there were times where I wondered if perhaps, he blamed me for Mom's death, I tried not to dwell on them.

I'd probably blame me too if I was him.

But I still couldn't stand it when he looked at me that way, as if I was nothing but a nuisance. As if all life's minor inconveniences and irritations were my fault and he was just so tired of them.

It hurt, and when I was hurt, I got angry. And considering I was already furious, not to mention thrown off balance by his presence and Atlas's when I thought it was going to just be Caleb, I wasn't thinking straight.

"I was *trying* to find out about my mother," I said hotly. "Oddly enough, I don't know a single thing about her, because you tell me jack shit."

Dad's hands clenched at his sides — another a warning sign. “So, you thought that meeting some complete stranger, on your own was—”

“You can't even say her name!” I shouted, already halfway across the room, ready to scream in his face. “Her name was Juliana Hamilton, Dad. Say it!”

He'd gone white. “Sit down, Isabel. You know nothing about—”

“It's okay,” I went on heedlessly. “I know you blame me for her death. I know you hate me because I killed her. I can see it every time you look at me. That's why you won't tell me isn't it?” Then, because obviously I'd lost all semblance of common sense, I added. “And while we're at it, what were *you* doing on Friday night? Going to a—”

“Enough, Isabel.” Caleb's voice fell like anvil over my tirade, crushing it flat, and preventing me from giving the whole game away.

He was close too, just behind me, I could feel his heat, smell the exotic masculine spice of his aftershave.

Dad had gone even whiter, his blue eyes stark and blazing in his face.

The silence was deafening.

A strong, warm hand gripped my arm. “Come and sit down,” Caleb murmured in my ear.

“Ah, kids, eh?” Atlas rose in his usual predatory grace from the couch and strolled over to where Dad stood. “Come on, Ten.” His tone was mild, but the look on his face was not. “You need a drink.”

Dad straightened, his gaze going to Atlas then Caleb. “That's not what I need.” Then before either of them could react, he strode past me without even a glance, and went out.

“That went well.” Atlas looked at Caleb then at me. “Give him some time, Isabel. He'll come round.”

“I don't care,” I spat.

“No,” Atlas said mildly. “But he does.”

I was still shaking with rage. “Are you here for any particular reason, Atlas? Or just to be a fucking pain in the ass?”

He only shrugged. “You know it’s always to be in a fucking pain in the ass.” He glanced at Caleb, standing behind me. “Looks like you’ve got your hands full here.”

“Stay.” Caleb’s voice was impossible to read. “There’s still lots of fun to be had.”

“Thanks, but no.” Atlas sounded amused. “I’ve got shit to do.”

Then he left too, leaving Caleb and me alone in his office.

I turned around sharply, but he’d already let go of my arm and by the time I was facing him, he’d gone back to his desk and was standing behind it, his hands in his pockets.

“I see.” I nodded at the desk. “You need some protection?”

He ignored me. “Is there ever a time when you don’t blow everything the fuck up, Isabel?”

Yet more heat raced into my cheeks. “I didn’t,” I began furiously.

“You came barging in here without considering whether that would be a good idea,” he said before I could go on. “Then you make the situation with Ten even worse, before nearly giving away where you actually were on Friday.”

I’d already mangled my lip pretty badly on Friday and it really didn’t appreciate the teeth I sunk into it again now. But the pain was a hard, bright shock that cleared my head.

“I wouldn’t have had to come barging in here if you’d deigned to talk to me at all today or indeed, at any point over the weekend,” I shot back. “Also, I want my phone back. And by the way, what exactly was Dad doing in Arcadia?” I wanted to ask him who’d bid on my friend too, but I managed to stop myself in time. Perhaps he knew of Zara’s existence, perhaps he didn’t, but I didn’t want to let on that she’d been the virgin

his club had been auctioning off. That was her secret, not mine.

“That’s none of your business,” he said. “And I was planning on coming by the apartment tonight to talk to you about your goddamn phone.”

I tried to get a hold of my temper, I really tried. “You didn’t think to mention that to me?” I said through gritted teeth.

“You could have tried patience for a change instead of exploding everywhere.”

“You know how patient I am. And as for exploding, I only do that when I’m pushed.”

His black eyes glittered as he got my meaning, a reminder to him of what had happened two days ago.

He had his jacket off, his shirt sleeves rolled up, the black of his tattoos following the muscular line of bone and sinew on his forearms. The brutal planes and angles of his face were set and harsh. Everything about him was uncompromising.

“I’m not here for your double entendres, Isabel,” he said in that dismissive tone I hated so much. “If you want this conversation now, we’ll have it fucking now. Tell me about those text messages. And don’t pretend you don’t know which ones I’m talking about.”

For all his casual posture, the tension was radiating from him and there was a dark undertone in his voice. And I realized suddenly that I knew exactly what he was feeling. It was no mystery.

He was furious. As furious as I was.

Perhaps it wasn’t any wonder why. He probably hadn’t expected me to come sailing in here, right where Dad was, and nearly giving away the fact that I’d been at Arcadia that night too.

That wasn’t even going into how he knew now that I’d lied to him about the contact I’d had with the Hamiltons, and I

hadn't ever lied to Caleb before, not about something that mattered.

A thread of shame wound through me, but I ignored it. Okay, so I'd lied. But I wouldn't have had to if my goddamn father had talked to me like a normal person. If *anyone* had given me *any* information about my mother at all. And they hadn't. No wonder I'd had to go to outside sources.

"What about them?" I lifted my chin and met his gaze head on.

"You lied to me," Caleb said.

"Yes. I did. And I'd lie to you again if I meant I got to meet my family."

A muscle flicked in Caleb's jaw. "The Hamiltons are *not* your family."

"But they are, Caleb. They *are*. Whether you like it or not."

"They didn't raise you. They didn't do shit for you." There was a growl in his deep voice now. "They wanted to kill Ten and they would have if he hadn't hidden from them. And they would have taken you from him too."

"Maybe that would have been a good thing," I shot back unwisely. "Maybe I would have gotten a better childhood."

As soon as the words came out, I wished I hadn't said them. They echoed in the office, petulant and angry sounding, like a little kid's temper tantrum.

Caleb was silent, letting those words sit there, letting me hear how awful they sounded. Letting me see how furious he was.

Dad had been eighteen when he'd had me. A boy, living on the streets. He'd been rescued by Sir George, the rich man who'd found him with a baby and had offered him a home and protection. But Dad had been mistrustful and the only other person in the entire world he'd trusted was Caleb, and so when he couldn't be around to look after me, he'd gotten Caleb do it.

Caleb, who'd babysat me in his run-down apartment more nights than I could count. Who'd taught me how to play chess. Who'd let me sit beside him outside the club he used to be a bouncer at, and then, once he wasn't a bouncer anymore, he used to take me out to do other things. The movies. Skating at Rockefeller Center. Trips to the Met. Central Park. Art galleries. Wherever I wanted to go, he'd take me.

It hadn't been a normal childhood in any, way shape or form, and it had left its mark on me. I had a Dad I didn't connect with, who'd distanced me for years, and had imprinted on a man who was wrong on just about every level for me. But...it hadn't been a bad childhood.

I'd been warm and fed and clothed. I'd had a roof over my head. I'd been educated. And I'd had people who loved me, who cared about my existence.

It hadn't been terrible, and it had been wrong of me to say that it had. It negated everything that Caleb and Dad had tried to do for me.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out, flushing even redder. "I...didn't mean that."

Caleb said nothing. Abruptly, he turned and pulled open a drawer in his desk and got something out of it, before tossing it negligently onto his desktop. "Your phone." He reached for his jacket hanging off the back of his chair and picked it up. "I'll talk to you later."

He didn't wait for me to speak, heading straight toward the doors.

"Wait," I said. "I thought you wanted to talk about it now?"

He paused and glanced back at me. "No. I don't have adult conversations with children."

Then he walked out without another word.

Caleb

I leaned against the decaying brickwork of the alley, ignoring the light fall of rain and the two junkies down one end, shooting up in the middle of a pile of empty cardboard boxes and other refuse. One of them was probably going to think of mugging me given that he kept looking in my direction, but I had a Glock — my favorite pistol — in a holster at the small of my back.

I was a real boy scout when I visited The Castle, the club Old Nick used to run his empire from. I always came prepared.

Livia was going to meet me tonight and she was already late, which did not help my fraying temper.

The shit with Isabel that afternoon in my office had gotten to me more than I wanted it to. I'd been briefing Ten and Atlas on the message I'd found on her phone, and we were supposed to be deciding on a plan for dealing with it, when Isabel had come storming in like a red-headed hurricane, laying waste to everything the way she always did.

I should have predicted it and perhaps part of it was my fault. But Ten had been even more uptight than he normally was and Isabel screaming at him hadn't helped. It was something to do with that virginity auction and the virgin he'd bought in order to save her or some such bullshit. He wouldn't say more than that and Atlas hadn't known much more either.

Apparently after the auction, Ten had gone to meet his new purchase and hadn't come back.

Whatever, Ten had been pissed about the message on Isabel's phone and well, join the fucking club. I was pissed too.

She'd lied to me. She'd told me she hadn't had contact with the Hamiltons but she had. Worse, she'd been going to meet someone at the carousel in Central Park at eleven PM. *Alone.*

Who knew what the fuck would have happened if I hadn't distracted her in Arcadia? Maybe the sex had been a good thing after all.

Then again, considering my reaction to her the moment she'd come into my office, trailing sparks and fury, maybe not. Getting an instant hard-on with Ten standing not a couple of feet away from me was certainly a physical reaction I'd neither looked for, nor wanted. Yet my dick didn't care what I wanted.

Isabel in a sexy little pencil skirt with a see-through black blouse that had a little bow at the neck, black patent stilettos, and her red hair falling in sensual little curls around her neck...

I shouldn't have gotten hard. I'd already told myself a thousand times over the course of the weekend that what I'd done with her was a mistake and that it wouldn't happen again. That she would go back to being Ten's daughter and the kid I'd once looked after, not the beautiful young woman I'd wrecked on the floor in Arcadia.

The beautiful young woman who wrecked you in return.

Perhaps, she had. Because none of the excuses I gave myself for why I shouldn't want her again changed the intensity of the desire that had coursed through me the moment she'd come into my office.

I *did* want her again. Badly. I wanted her all night, so I could take the time to do all the things that my brain had spent the better part of the weekend going over and over.

I wanted her naked at my feet, taking my cock in her mouth. I wanted her on her front, ass in the air, so I could take her pussy from behind, then maybe take her ass as well. I'd make her scream. I'd make her beg. I'd ruin her for any other man.

It was as if she'd woken something up in me, the teenage boy obsessed with sex that I'd once been, and now that part of me was awake, it wouldn't go the fuck back to sleep.

I'd always liked doing forbidden things. I got a thrill out of it. But Isabel wasn't supposed to be one of those things. She was supposed to be untouchable, and I was pissed that all I wanted to do now was touch her.

Her saying what she had about her childhood had gotten under my skin too, though I shouldn't have let it. She'd said it in anger, and I knew her well enough to know that she often said things when she was angry that she didn't mean. She'd recognized it herself and apologized.

But still...what she'd said had stuck inside me like a thorn.

Hers hadn't been a normal childhood. It had been fucked up in a lot of ways, none of them her fault. Ten had done the best he could, but he wasn't perfect, and he'd been far too young to have kid let alone a kid whose mother had been American royalty.

I should certainly never have been her damn babysitter. But Ten had had to hide her in the least likely place the Hamiltons would look and that was with me. And I'd tried. Like Ten, I'd done what I could for her, and I'd liked to think I hadn't fucked her up entirely. Yet...I couldn't escape the doubt.

I wasn't a man who was concerned too much with the road not taken. But there'd always been a kernel of doubt in me about what I could have done better for Isabel. I'd had no experience with kids, and I'd treated her the way I'd have treated one of my little sisters. Except my shitty apartment and a box by the doorway of The Castle, in the company of Old Nick's chief enforcer, wasn't exactly an ideal place for a kid.

If you'd done better, she wouldn't be looking at you the way she does. She basically imprinted on you, asshole.

As if I didn't already know that.

Anyway, basically my week had gone to hell before it had even begun and it didn't help that I had only myself to blame, so by the time Livia stepped out of the backdoor of The Castle, I was in a foul temper.

Her high heels tapped on the dirty ground, disturbing neon-soaked puddles of water, and prompting her to give a grimace of distaste. She was a sleek woman in her late fifties, with a smooth coif of short platinum blonde hair and a taste for loud gold jewelry. She wore a silver, sequined cocktail gown with a plunging neckline that perfectly displayed her still-smooth décolletage.

Livia was the master of 'look but don't touch' and she played being the queen of my old empire to the hilt. I trusted her about as far as I trusted anyone, which wasn't much, but in the decade since I'd handed the running of the network to her, she hadn't either betrayed that I was still running it or tried to take it for herself. She was happy being a figurehead. All care, no responsibility.

I could see the attraction.

"What have you got for me," I said as she approached.

She gave the junkies a glance and made a little moue of distaste. "A back alley, Caleb? Really? It's such a cliché."

Normally when we met it was at a bar, somewhere nondescript and preferably not very popular. But coordinating that with my schedule was a pain in the ass, and after seeing that message on Isabel's phone, I didn't have time to fuck about organizing it. I wanted any information Livia had and I wanted it now.

"Just tell me what you have on the Hamiltons," I said curtly.

My tone let her know exactly where I stood tonight and she was instantly all business, the fluttery, blonde-bombshell act dropping like a lead curtain.

“My contacts seemed to think something is going on,” she said briskly. “Whatever it is, though, it’s very hush hush, because they didn’t know.”

“I thought you had someone close to James.” I let nothing of my frustration show. Livia had managed to get a contact into James’ personal security, but since getting intel from him was risky, she only used the guy in emergencies.

“I do,” she said. “I even asked him, but he says nothing’s changed. His duties are the same and James hasn’t met anyone new or out of the ordinary.” Livia paused. “Though he thought Charlotte had a change of detail recently.”

Charlotte Hamilton was James’ wife. She was on the board of several charities, was a patron of various different art organizations, and was hugely influential. She was also Juliana’s mother, Isabel’s grandmother, and a very dangerous woman in her own right.

Perhaps she’d been the one trying to get in touch with Isabel and if so, it wasn’t merely to have a cozy grandmotherly chat about Juliana that was for sure. I didn’t know much about Charlotte, but I did know that she played the long game. And she might very well have decided to turn her daughter’s little mistake into an asset for her family, as well as taking some long-overdue revenge on the man who’d sullied — no doubt in her eyes — then killed her daughter.

I stared hard at Livia. “Do you have anyone near Charlotte?”

Livia grimaced. “No. She only has trusted people in her household. People who’d been in the family for years. She’s even more careful than James.”

Fuck. That didn’t leave me with a lot of options.

I could try the direct approach, contact Charlotte for a meeting for example. But the Hamiltons had never forgotten that I happened to be Ten’s friend, a man associated with the death of their princess, and who’d likely hidden their granddaughter from them. They had no love for me either.

“Okay. See what your guy can dig up,” I ordered.

Livia's jaw set. "I don't want use him for—"

"This is important, Livia." I didn't look away. I let her see just how important. "This is Charlotte's granddaughter we're talking about and if they're planning something to do with her, I need to know."

"If he's discovered, that's it. I can't get another guy in there."

"Those are my orders," I said. "Do it."

Her lips compressed. She was not happy and if I'd been her, I wouldn't have been happy either. You didn't put precious contacts at risk needlessly.

But this wasn't needless. This concerned Isabel and I needed as much information as I could get. Shit, if the contact did his job properly, he'd stay hidden and the Hamiltons wouldn't be any the wiser.

"Okay," Livia said. "I'll let you know when I hear something."

I didn't bother with goodbyes, I turned around and left the alley, automatically checking my vicinity for any tails. Coming out on my own and incognito was also a risk, but nothing beat old school one on one interaction. Texts, emails, phone calls could all be intercepted, which is why I always preferred face to face. It wouldn't hurt for Livia either. She needed to see me, see that I was still in charge, a reminder of who held the power here.

It may not have been necessary, but it wouldn't hurt. Old habits died hard.

The rain was still coming down, soaking the hoodie I was wearing. I'd come via the subway, and I was going to return home that way too, but the thought of Isabel kept replaying in my head.

Livia wasn't the only one who needed some face-to-face time.

Isabel's blow up today *was* my fault. I should have confronted her first thing this morning rather than letting her

stew all weekend and then all day. I knew her, knew her temper, knew how much she hated being ignored her. And walking out on her the way I had would also not have helped.

You're avoiding her. Man the fuck up and deal with it.

I gritted my teeth as I strode to the subway entrance, ignoring the rain as I went down the steps.

No one likes the truth being shoved in their face and certainly I didn't. But it was true, I *was* letting her get to me. Not helped by the physical attraction that was burning hot and strong no matter what I thought about it.

Then again, I wasn't a fucking teenager anymore. I was a forty-two, with decades of experience at controlling myself. I hadn't had this problem since I was eighteen and had the hots for the girlfriend of one of Old Nick's lieutenants. I'd been obsessed with her and had tried to seduce her, but I'd been a fucking idiot back then and had been beaten to within an inch of my life by her boyfriend.

I knew better these days.

So, I didn't go home. I went straight to my Central Park penthouse instead.

I put back my hood as I approached the doors and the doorman nodded, pulling them open for me instantly. Tony, behind the desk in the lobby, also gave a nod. "Sir," he said.

"Evening, Tony," I said. "Miss Fox still upstairs?"

"Yes."

"No dramas tonight?"

"No, sir."

Thank God for small mercies.

I headed for the elevator that led to the penthouse and put my thumb on the pad to unlock it then headed straight up.

The suite was quiet when the doors opened, and I stepped out. Little pools of light came from the lamp on the console table in the hallway and a few discreet spots in the ceiling.

I walked silently through the hallway to the living area doorway and stopped.

The living area had the same lighting, a few spots, a floor lamp or two and one on a side table beside the white leather sectional couch.

Isabel was sitting on the couch, cross-legged and her headphones on, gazing intently at the screen of her laptop. She'd changed out of her pretty office get up and wore instead a pair of loose comfortable looking yoga pants and that pale gray sweatshirt again, the one that kept slipping off her shoulder.

It had slipped off her shoulder now, and this time there was no bra strap marring her creamy skin. There was nothing at all, just smooth skin, and freckles.

The laptop screen lit her face, screwed up tight in concentration, and there were freckles there too, on her forehead and her nose and her cheeks. Fucking gold dust.

When she'd been a kid, that face had been rounder and there'd been a sweetness to it. That sweetness was still there, yet it was very much a woman's face now, the roundness gone. She had Juliana's high cheekbones and proud nose. Juliana's rosebud mouth.

There was nothing of Ten in her, apart from maybe that forehead and the sharpness that could edge her green eyes.

Desire clenched hard inside me whether I wanted it to or not, the memory of her beneath me on the floor of Arcadia replaying itself in my brain. The tight, wet clasp of her pussy around my cock, her face flushed and gleaming with sweat, her jaw tight as she fought against the orgasm I was hellbent on giving her.

She was a fighter, that girl, she always had been, and I liked that about her.

But nothing was going to happen between us again, I'd already decided, no matter how beautiful she was sitting there with that sweatshirt half falling off her.

Jesus, if it was a quick fuck I wanted, I could head to Arcadia and find myself a sexy little brat to play with. It didn't have to be Isabel Fox.

I hadn't moved, but something must have given me away, because suddenly she lifted her head and stared at me. For a second her eyes widened in alarm, her mouth opening. Then recognition hit and the alarm faded, to be replaced by a sharp, glittering anger.

"Jesus, Caleb," she said, not bothering to take off her headphones. "You should have let me know you were coming instead of hanging creepily in the doorway and waiting for me to notice you."

So, still pissed then.

"Yeah, I should," I said. "But I didn't."

"Sorry." She tapped one side of her headphones. "Can't hear you."

Still pissed and being passive aggressive about it.

I hitched a shoulder against the doorway and folded my arms. I wasn't going to let her draw me into an argument, no matter how much she wanted one.

She glanced down at her laptop for a couple of minutes, trying to get on with the serious business of making me wait, but her own impatience must have gotten in her way, because she looked up again, scowling. Then she pulled her headphones off. "Okay, fine. What the hell do you want?"

"We need a little talk, Isabel."

Isabel

Caleb leaned in the doorway with his arms folded, looking so unbelievably sexy it made me furious.

Everything about him made me furious.

Fury was apparently my default mode with him.

He wasn't in a suit for a change, but jeans and a black T-shirt with a black hoodie over the top. It was wet so he'd been out in the rain, which should have made him look bedraggled and sad, except he was anything but.

He looked hard and mean and dangerous. A guy you didn't want to cross. Except me being me, I wanted to cross him.

Why is fighting him automatically your first thought? It never makes things better. It only makes them worse. Especially after what you said to him today...

My stomach twisted, the memory of him walking out of the office earlier that evening, his expression set and hard, hitting me unpleasantly all over again.

He hadn't taken my badly considered throw-away statement about my childhood well, and okay, I didn't blame him. I'd let my temper get the better of me and I'd said something I hadn't meant, and that had pissed him off in a major way. I'd apologized, but he hadn't wanted a bar of it and had walked out.

Which meant what I should be doing was making nice, not being passive aggressive with my headphones. It was just... He'd set me off balance turning up out of the blue and looking the way he did, all dark and sexy and badass.

It probably wasn't great that in the past couple of hours before he'd turned up, the WiFi had come back on and so I'd been trawling the internet for anything I could find on the Hamiltons. Which so far hadn't been much. But I'd wasted a good amount of time looking at the vast number of pictures of Charlotte and James Hamilton — my grandparents — and wondering if I looked like them.

I'd also been trying to find contact details, because why not? Why couldn't I contact them myself? But there were none that I could find, or at least none that were publicly available.

Oh yes, and now I'd gotten my phone back, I'd also been texting Zara, who'd been frustratingly cagey about her auction. She'd refused to say who'd bought her and how it had gone, and then she'd told me she wouldn't be at work for the next week. But not to worry, she was fine.

I did wonder how fine she actually was, but there wasn't much I could do but offer support if she needed it and if she didn't need it, then too bad for me.

“Okay,” I said now, having given in and taken my headphones off, because being furious with Caleb wasn't going to help me. “I presume you want to talk about the message you found on my phone?”

“That would be a start.” He stayed in the doorway, his expression unreadable as ever.

There wasn't any point keeping the truth from him now. The dates I'd received those texts were right there on the phone, as were my responses. “Well.” I pushed my laptop closed. “You know when I received the texts, and you can see what I said. They were about Mom, and I wanted to know more.”

“You didn't think to question who sent them to you?”

“Of course, I questioned who sent them. But it was obvious that I wouldn’t get answer even if I asked, so I decided not to bother.”

His black eyes glittered in the dim light of the living room like the lights out in the darkness of the park just beyond the windows. “And you went to that first meeting. On your own.”

In retrospect, it had been a stupid thing to do. But I’d had no choice.

“It was dumb,” I admitted. “But they wanted me to come alone, and I wanted to hear what they had to say.”

Caleb remained very calm, the asshole. “You only had their word it was about your mother. You didn’t have a plan for what you’d do if it wasn’t?”

“I had that little Remington,” I said. “That was my plan.”

“Right,” Caleb said expressionlessly. “Your gun was a backup plan, despite the fact that you’re a hopeless shot.”

He was the one who’d taken me to a shooting range when I was thirteen and made me learn how to fire a gun. I’d quite enjoyed it, but he wasn’t wrong. I was a hopeless shot, most of my rounds completely missing the target and hitting the wall instead no matter how hard I tried to aim.

“Fine.” I could feel myself going red. “Again, that was dumb. But I—”

“You didn’t think, not once, that you could have come to me and asked for help?” He said the words quietly and yet unlike those bullets of mine, they were all direct hits.

I’d once trusted Caleb with everything, ever since I’d been small. He’d been the first one I’d go to whenever I had a problem, the first person I’d run to for help. Unlike Dad, Caleb was always there for me. Even when he was busy, he somehow always made himself available. I could always count on him for support.

But somewhere, at some point in time, I’d decided I couldn’t trust him with this, and I didn’t even know why. I hadn’t even been conscious of the change. Perhaps it had

something to do with that night when I'd realized I wanted him. Perhaps I'd been trying to distance him ever since.

I met those fathomless dark eyes now. He was so often unreadable that it came as a shock I could read the glitter in his gaze loud and clear: he was angry again. Angry that I hadn't trusted him.

I hadn't realized my trust meant something to him and for a second I could barely take it in. For so long all I'd thought about was my feelings for him — yeah, okay, it was self-centered of me, I'll own that — and I hadn't considered his feelings for me. I hadn't considered that me not trusting him would hurt him in some way.

That wasn't to say I didn't recognize that he cared about me — I knew he did. But his care was more along the lines of an uncle, or an adult looking out for a child rather than anything deeper. I hadn't realized that my trust was important to him and that the lack of it could actually hurt.

Something in my chest squeezed tight. "I did think about it," I said, feeling suddenly awful again. "But I didn't think you would help me. Not when it came to Mom. Dad never talks about her and whenever I asked you, you were always so cagey too. So, you know.... Maybe it's no wonder I didn't ask you."

A muscle leapt in his jaw, but he didn't speak. Then he shoved himself away from the doorframe and walked slowly into the living area, going over to the huge, plate glass windows that gave their magnificent views over Central Park.

He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and stood there silently, looking out. Then he said, without turning, "What do you want to know?"

It took me a second to process what he was saying and then, when it did, I frowned at his broad back. Last week he'd revealed a bit about her, such as which family I was actually related too, but that was it. Was there more? And why did he want to tell more now?

“What? After her being off-limits for years, you’re suddenly happy to talk about her?”

“I made a promise to Ten a long time ago, that I wouldn’t talk about her to you.”

I didn’t know whether to be pleased that he hadn’t told me because of a promise he’d made to Dad or angry that he’d made the promise in the first place. “Why?” I asked.

“Because he thought that he’d be able to keep you safe from your mother’s family if you didn’t know who she was. And because....” Caleb paused a moment. “Her death devastated him.”

My heart twisted hard in my chest.

Your fault. If you hadn’t been born, she would still be alive.

Tears pricked at my eyes, except it was stupid to be upset. I already knew how devastated Dad had been, that wasn’t news. And anyway, it wasn’t as if I’d chosen to be born. How could it have been my fault?

Forcing the feeling aside, I leaned back against the soft white leather of the couch. “I know that. It’s been years and he still can’t say her name. So why did you agree?”

“Because Ten is my oldest friend and he’s your father. I was hardly going to tell him how to parent his own child.”

That was fair. I suppose. “Yet you told me about her last week.”

He glanced back at me. “Your lack of knowledge was a dangerous thing, and I told him that. I had to weigh up your safety compared to a promise and your safety was more important.”

“Could have thought of that sooner.”

“But I didn’t. So here we are. Do you want to know more or not?”

I didn’t care that I was being challenging. Because okay, I’d made some mistakes, but this was still important, and he had to understand that. “You telling me about Mom is great

and all, but I'm still going to want to make contact with my grandparents. I want to know my cousins and aunts and uncles. I want to know my family."

Something flickered over his face, gone so fast I couldn't tell what it was. "If you want to know about the Hamiltons, it's all there on the Internet."

"I've been looking them up already, believe me."

"Isabel," Caleb began.

"I'm not looking to be invited to Thanksgiving or Christmas or whatever," I said quickly before he could go on. "I don't want to be in their lives. I just...want information. I want to know where I come from, don't you understand that?"

He was silent, his black gaze expressionless, so I added, "I know I already said it but I'm going to say it again. I'm really sorry about what I said to you in your office today. It was uncalled for, and I didn't mean it." I took a breath. "My childhood wasn't awful. I had Dad and I had you, and that's more than a lot of people have."

An intense light ignited in his dark eyes, something that burned as he looked at me. "You did." Then he glanced away. "But you shouldn't have. You should have had more. You needed more."

Shock rippled through me. "What? What do you mean I needed more?"

He didn't move, his back to me, staring through the windows and out at the night beyond. "You needed a mom. A dad. A house with a fucking white picket fence. Brothers and sisters and a yard to play in. You didn't need to be babysat by a fucking criminal."

I blinked, shock moving through me like a slow tide. Caleb had never said anything like this to me before, not once. I hadn't had even an inkling that he'd felt this way. "That's not true," I said. "My childhood was fine. I didn't want for anything. I was fed and clothed and I had people who cared about me—"

“Yet you have no problems at all with trying to contact one of the most powerful and dangerous families in the country because you want some family connection.” Slowly, he turned back to me, a ferocious look in his eyes. “And you didn’t even think twice before spreading your legs for the same criminal who used to babysit you.”

The shock moved deeper, freezing me. “But I—”

“You shouldn’t want those things, Isabel. If you’d had any decent childhood, those things should appall you. They should repel you. You should be running the fuck away from them instead of running headlong toward them.”

I blinked, a pressure in my chest starting to tighten.

Of course. This wasn’t only about the Hamiltons. This was also about Friday night and all the lines we’d crossed. Lines I hadn’t thought Caleb would care about and yet apparently, he did.

I took a sharp, silent breath. “You regret it, don’t you?” I hadn’t wanted to say those words because I didn’t want to know the answer. But they came out all the same. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? It’s about Friday night,”

The harsh, unforgiving lines of his face grew even harsher. “Yes. And yes, I regret it. I should never have touched you, Isabel.”

The word caught on something deep inside me, hurting me. “Why not? I’m an adult. You’re an adult. We both—”

“You’re nearly twenty years younger than I am. You’re barely a fucking adult. And I looked after you as a child.”

“So?” My heart had begun to beat faster, harder, inexplicable pain gathering inside me. That night had been revelatory for me in so many ways, and I hated that he regretted it. That he wished he hadn’t touched me. “I wanted you.”

“Because you didn’t know any better.”

I pushed myself from the couch, my hands in fists, angry now. “Don’t treat me like a fucking kid.”

“You are a fucking kid. I was the only man in your life for fifteen years and you imprinted on me.”

“Imprinted on you? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I’m not a lamb or a damn gosling, Caleb. And don’t patronize me. Don’t tell me I didn’t know any better. I knew exactly what I wanted.”

He’d turned around completely to face me, his tall, broad figure looming over me. I could see the anger in his eyes and sure, he was directing some of that at me, but I knew him. He was also directing it at himself.

“You can’t tell me that if you’d had a normal childhood, you wouldn’t have found some nice asshole at high school and be dating him. Or some clean-cut college boy.”

“I might,” I shot back, refusing to back down. “But I guess we’ll never know, will we? Because I didn’t have a normal childhood and I don’t want a clean-cut college boy. I don’t want a boy at all. I want a man. And the man I want is you.”

That muscle leapt in the side of his jaw, tension pouring off him. “How do you know? When Ten never gave you the option of dating? When he wouldn’t even let you go to your high school dance? The only man you know is me.”

I felt shaky, as if the foundations of my world had shifted. A reminder that the solid ground I’d taken for granted all my life wasn’t quite so solid after all. And not because I was doubting my desire for Caleb, no, that was still inside me, still burning strong. It was him. His doubt was shaking me. He’d always been so sure, so certain. The sun around which I orbited. And maybe I should have seen that of course he was going to doubt what we’d done together, because he wasn’t a monster, no matter what anyone else thought of him.

But I hadn’t seen it. And now I didn’t know what to do.

“So, what?” I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. “Your regrets don’t change anything. It still happened. I still had the childhood I had, and I still want you. And I don’t regret what we did together on Friday night. I don’t regret it at all.”

That's when I saw the flicker in his eyes, the glance at my shoulder where my sweatshirt had slipped. And it came to me in a blinding flash of light, a road to Damascus moment, where all of this was *actually* coming from.

He wanted me. It was in that glance, in the anger glittering in his eyes. In the tension rolling of him. It had been there when I'd stormed into his office earlier, when we'd looked at each other across his desk, my father not two feet away, the air full of that crackling, hissing electricity.

He wanted me and he didn't want to. It was making him angry. It was shaking him. Yet he wanted me all the same.

I didn't plan on taking a step toward him, but I did anyway. I'm sure he didn't mean to step back, but he did all the same, and I could see the realization of what he'd done and what it gave away flicker across his face.

His gaze hardened, sharp and serrated like a shard of obsidian. "Isabel."

He used my name as a warning, but I'd never been very good at listening to his warnings. I'd never been very good at doing what he said. In that moment, what I wanted and what he wanted were the same thing, and I didn't see why we shouldn't have it.

Caleb, for all his talk of being a criminal, had scruples, but I didn't. Not when it came to him.

I took another step, then another and another. He didn't move, only stood there like an immovable object to my unstoppable force, his gaze on mine.

"Isabel," he said again, though it didn't have the same edge of warning in it this time.

"What?" I was close to him now, the heat of his body making me want to press against him, and I could smell his scent, spicy and warm and so achingly familiar. The scent of safety and of comfort, and since Friday night, the scent of intense physical pleasure too. "You don't like wanting me." I looked up into his shadowed eyes. "I know you don't. But you want me all the same and that's why you're angry, isn't it?"

He said nothing, but he didn't have to. I could see the truth in his gaze.

"We can't change the past, Caleb," I went on. "You know that as well as I do. But I'm not a fucking animal who can't make their own choices about what they want and I'm not a child either. I'm an adult woman with a mind of her own. And maybe my childhood influenced those choices, I don't know, but what I do know is that I want you. I've wanted you for years. No one forced me to take my dress off and spread my legs for you. I wanted to do that. And if you were really all about my choice, you'd accept this one."

He didn't move, his gaze holding me pinned. His hands were still in his pockets, but there was nothing casual about the way he held himself. "I know what you are, little girl. I know all about you. But you don't know me. You don't know a single fucking thing. That's why you need to forget Friday night ever happened. Because it won't be happening again."

The words were an arrow in my chest. "Why not? It's just sex, Caleb."

His hard black gaze didn't waver. "Was it just sex for you on Friday night, Isabel?"

I flushed, hating the question and how it resonated inside me, setting something in me vibrating. I might have been a virgin, but even I was aware that what had happened between us on Friday hadn't been just sex. It hadn't been easy or casual, and I knew deep in my bones that it hadn't been something I could walk away from.

"No," he went on, watching me, reading me as if I was an open book. "I didn't think so."

"I don't care." A strange tight feeling gathered inside me. "I want another night. Just one."

"But you will care. When I give you that night and walk away the next morning, you will fucking care. Because the truth is that it'll never be just sex, not for either of us. Not with our past."

He's right, you know he's right.

My throat closed, my eyes prickling. Tears? Really? Because he refused to sleep with me again? I was ridiculous. But telling myself how stupid I was and how dumb I was to want him wasn't going to change the knowledge that sat inside me. The knowledge that had been sitting inside me ever since he'd danced with me at that gala.

He was right. It would never be just sex. Not with him.

I was in love with him, that's what I was, and that's why that night had been so intense. That's why this was so painful now.

I was in love and had been for years, and I'd had my night. Yet it hadn't been enough. I wanted more. I wanted everything. And the worst part was even wanting what I did wouldn't stop me from settling for whatever he'd give me. Which made me the worst kind of pathetic.

Especially when it looked like that would be nothing.

I wanted to demand he tell me why he couldn't do even a night, but I knew as well as he did why. It was our past, he wasn't wrong about that. About who we were to each other. About Dad.

It was so complicated, and I didn't want to be the cliched younger woman in love with the hot older man, begging for his attention. I couldn't bear that thought. Either he wanted me more than he cared about all that other bullshit, or he didn't. And I wasn't going to make him choose. So, I bit the words back and I blinked away the tears, and held onto my grit.

“Okay.” I lifted my chin, staring him down. “Fine. If that's how you feel, then what the fuck are you still doing here?”

Caleb

I'd hurt her, any fucking idiot could see that. She was trying to hide it with that defiance of hers, but I'd seen the tears in her eyes before she'd blinked them away.

I didn't give a shit about people's feelings. I hadn't been able to when I was with Old Nick, not if I'd wanted to survive, and even now I didn't let them touch me. But Isabel had always been different and so were her feelings, and now I felt the heavy weight of regret sitting on my chest.

Protecting her should mean her safety was more important than her emotions and I shouldn't have any regrets about what I'd had to do ensure it.

Yet...I did.

Isabel had been brought up by a father who'd continually distanced her, who'd never let her in. Who loved her but who had no idea how to deal with her.

She was a woman who'd constantly been denied and now I was doing the same thing. I had no choice, though. There was too much in my past, too much darkness, too much violence. Too much of my father in me and I knew how that had ended. Me, coming home from school one day to find the bodies of my family dead in the master bedroom.

Dad had killed them because he was afraid for them, because he'd wanted to protect them. Because he hadn't

wanted them to die in the hail of bullets that were coming for him. Because he'd loved them.

HE HADN'T LOVED ME, though. How could he? When he'd left me to find them?

That his was a twisted kind of love I knew even at fifteen, yet that didn't stop me from hating him for taking himself and my mother and sister away from me. Hating him for leaving me alone.

Old Nick had thrived on hate, and he'd stoked it in me. Stoked my rage too. He'd told me once that the reason he'd taken me from the streets was because he'd somehow seen in me the same darkness that had been in my father. He'd admired the lengths my father had gone to in order to protect his family. He'd seen it as an example of loyalty and that's what he'd wanted from me. Loyalty without limits. So, that's what I'd given him.

But it was a loyalty based on hate and fury, based on the darkness deep in my soul, on the revenge I'd eventually take on him, and that was something I never wanted to expose Isabel to.

I couldn't let her get under my skin more than she had already, and it was a good question she'd asked me. Why the fuck *was* I still here?

You know why.

The thought slid through my brain, a snake in the garden, undermining all my good intentions, all my denials.

You want her. Even though it's wrong, you want her.

Her, on the floor of Arcadia, naked and gleaming with sweat, her lip bloody, her makeup running. And me still buried inside her...

Fuck.

"Well?" Her chin was still lifted, fire glittering in her eyes along with the hurt she was desperately trying to hide. "What are you waiting for? Go on. Leave."

I should. I should turn around and walk away because I knew better than this. Isabel wasn't some little brat I'd picked up for the night. She wasn't a stranger from a bar. She was Ten's daughter and I'd made a promise to him to look after her. To keep her safe. And I wasn't safe, not any part of me.

You never promised Ten to protect her from you.

Desire coiled thick and hot inside me, my fucking cock deciding it was just going to ignore twenty plus years of self-control and get hard for a woman it should never have gotten hard for.

I couldn't believe I was still here, that I hadn't left.

Already, I'd let my emotions to get the better of me when it came to her. I'd allowed my fury at her for putting herself in danger overcome every good sense I had, propelling me over lines I should never have crossed.

And now I was allowing my regret at her hurting to keep me here, when what I should be doing was walking the fuck away.

You can't keep her out, no matter what you do. Which means there's only one way to take this.

Something shifted and hardened inside me, a knowledge that I couldn't escape. Because no, I couldn't keep her out, not now. I'd tasted her and I'd let her taste me. I'd bound her wrists and I'd fucked her. I crossed that line, and I couldn't cross back over it.

Nothing was going to change that night at Arcadia or erase what we'd done together. It was burned into my memory like a brand. Isabel Fox had gotten under my skin and there was no getting her out.

I couldn't walk away from her. I didn't want to, and while another night might ease the hunger, it wouldn't solve the fundamental problem.

She'd never be that kid I babysat again. She'd never be Ten's daughter. She'd never be the red-haired, rebellious teenager sharpening her claws and spitting curses at me.

No, she'd forever be the fiery, passionate woman I'd had on the floor in Arcadia, whose mouth had been hot, whose pussy had been hotter, and who'd screamed when I'd made her come.

And because of that, whatever would happen between us couldn't be for a night. It couldn't even be some week-long, month-long affair. It couldn't be casual; I couldn't do casual with her.

She was right when she said she was yours. She always has been.

Yes. She was. She was my responsibility. And I wasn't a man who walked away from my responsibilities.

Naturally, there'd be consequences. Ten, for example, wouldn't be happy with me claiming his daughter, to put it mildly. But too bad, he'd have to deal. I wasn't going to go sneaking around behind his back like a teenager. I was too old for that shit.

I'd also have to be careful around her too, make sure I kept some kind of emotional distance. Because it wasn't only our enemies and the Hamiltons I needed to protect her from. I had to protect her from me as well.

"It could never be just a night," I said, ignoring her. "You do understand that don't you?"

Her gaze flickered. Obviously, this was not the response she'd been expecting. "I know. You told me. You don't need to keep going over it."

"So, if you want more, Isabel, you'd better be clear on what you're getting yourself into."

She stilled, green eyes widening. "What? What are you saying?"

"I'm not boyfriend material." I held her gaze, let her see the demon in me. "All those rumors you've no doubt heard about me, about my past as Old Nick's right hand... They're true. Even the darkest ones. And yes, Arcadia's a bar, but it's also a sex club and I've owned it for years."

“Caleb, I don’t know—”

“I told you I wasn’t a romantic ideal and I’m not. I don’t do tender or gentle, and I certainly don’t do love.”

She went quiet, her expression taut.

We were standing close, and I could smell the sweet scent of her body, feel her heat. Desire burned steadily inside me, a hunger that felt insatiable. As if some part of me had always known she was mine and was impatient for the rest of me to get the fuck on board.

Yet I didn’t make any attempt to touch her, not yet. She had to know what she was getting herself into. Ten held her too tightly, but I wasn’t any different. I was a territorial bastard and if Isabel was mine, I’d keep her close. My cage might be less rigid than Ten’s, but it was still a cage.

“I like control, Isabel. And I’m possessive,” I said, laying it all out for her. “So, if you’re looking at me as a way of getting out from under Ten’s thumb, that’s a mistake. Once you’re mine, you stay mine and I don’t let go.”

The pulse at the base of her throat was beating very fast now and her green eyes were darkening. “I...Caleb, I...”

“If you want to be with me then understand that there’ll be no hiding and no sneaking around. I won’t lie to Ten or pretend it’s not happening. He’ll have to know. And you need to be clear that you won’t be his responsibility anymore. You’ll be mine.”

A flush stole over her cheeks. “Is this yet another attempt to scare me?”

“No. I’m just telling you what to expect if you want more from me.”

She searched my face, as if what was written on it was in a language she didn’t understand. “You’re.... actually considering it?”

“This isn’t going to go away.” I lifted a hand and pushed one red curl behind her ear, letting my fingertips linger on her skin, letting her feel the crackle of our physical chemistry.

“And I don’t want another scene like the one today in my office.”

She shivered at my touch. “I didn’t—”

“To be clear, I don’t blame you. It was my fault. I left you stewing all day and I shouldn’t have. Ten’s presence when you stormed into my office didn’t help either.” I forced myself to let my hand drop. “You weren’t expecting that, and it couldn’t have been easy to face him, not with me there, too. Not after what happened between us on Friday.”

Her mouth tightened. “No. It wasn’t.”

“No,” I agreed. “I don’t want you dodging your detail and fucking off God knows where either so if you think being with me will give you freedom, you’ll be mistaken.”

“If you think that’ll put me off, you’re wrong.”

“Really?” This time I took a step forward, closing what little distance remained between us and the sound of her sharp indrawn breath shouldn’t have given me so much satisfaction, but it did. “Because if you thought I was demanding on Friday night, that’s nothing to how demanding I’ll be once you’re mine.”

She swallowed, but didn’t back away, only staring at me as if all her Christmases had come at once, making it clear she hadn’t taken on board any of what I’d just told her. Because if she’d *really* understood, she’d be running past me and straight out the fucking door.

“I don’t care,” she said. “I’m already yours, I told you that.”

“You will care. When you realize that the cage I’ll put you in isn’t any kinder than your father’s, and that I won’t let you leave it.”

Her gaze wavered, as if some part of what I’d said had finally sunk in. Then it steadied, sparks of her stubborn, willful spirit flickering in her eyes. “We’ll see.” Her chin got that belligerent slant to it again. “One thing I know is that you sure do a hell of a lot of talking. Big scary Caleb telling me all about how bad he is and yet with no fucking action to back it

up.” One red brow rose. “Or perhaps you’re stalling. Perhaps I’m the one who scares you.”

She’s not wrong.

But that thought didn’t making any sense, so I ignored it, smiling at her instead. “Keep telling yourself that.” I lifted my hands, pushing my fingers into the softness of hair and pulling her head back. “Last chance.”

She said nothing, green eyes full of fire.

So, I bent my head and took what was mine.

I devoured her, pushing my tongue deep into her sweet mouth, tasting her. Then I curled my fingers into fists, holding her hair in a punishing grip so she knew she was caught and that there was no getting away from me.

She went soft, melting against me like hot candle wax, and then she wriggled, trying to get closer, but I tightened my grip on her hair, tugging it hard in warning. She gasped and stopped moving.

“Keep still,” I growled against her lips. “You were a very bad girl today, Isabel, and that means you don’t get to have whatever you want. You also need to be taught a few lessons in thinking before you speak and how to manage that anger of yours.”

Her breath was coming fast and hard, her eyes dark with desire. “You said today was your fault, not mine.”

I twisted one of my hands, wrapping all those silky red curls around my wrist so her head was pulled back even further, making her gasp again. “I said it was partly mine. But you shouldn’t have said what you did to your father. You need to learn some respect, some control. You need to learn discipline.”

Her usual defiance glittered in her gaze. “I don’t believe I signed on for another dad, Caleb.”

I gave a soft laugh. “Bullshit. I think a daddy is exactly what you signed on for.”

Her eyes darkened even further, and her breath caught.

As I'd thought. She liked daddy kink but then that was no surprise. There'd been a reason she'd lit up like a fucking Christmas tree the moment I'd called myself daddy back in Arcadia. A reason she'd loved the spanking I'd given her and followed all my orders.

You're really doing this too? You're really fucking going there?

I wasn't a good candidate for daddy kink. I was dominant in the bedroom and a few rules never went astray, but I wasn't the nurturing, caregiving type, not for little girls wanting someone to take care of them.

But Isabel had always been different. Even as a kid she'd tapped into something protective in me. Something that made me feel as if I was capable of more than just violence and rage. It had never been sexual before — she'd been a kid after all — but it was definitely sexual now. And I couldn't deny that I liked it.

She needed someone to trust. Someone to care for her. Someone to protect her. Someone to make her feel secure. And someone to fuck her the way her bratty little soul demanded.

Someone had to step up and that someone was me.

"I don't think so," she said mulishly, despite her obvious arousal. "Let me go."

"No. You wanted to be mine, Isabel, and this is what it means. I get to decide what you need and what's good for you, especially when you're getting in your own way."

"Don't you—"

"Here's what's going to happen," I interrupted, deciding to end this argument and now. "You need to stop pushing. You need to stop fighting. That's all you've been doing for the past couple of weeks and I'm tired of it. Tonight, you're going to obey me. Tonight, you're going to do everything I say and you'll do it without protest. Not one single fucking word, understand?"

"That's not fair. That's—"

I pulled her hair sharply to get her attention and she broke off on a little gasp. “I asked you a question. Answer me.”

“Yes,” she said sulkily. “I understand.”

“Understand, what?”

Her lush mouth still red from my kisses hardened. “I...”

“You know what to call me.”

Her cheeks flamed. “You’ve got to be—”

I jerked her head back harder. “I gave you an order, little girl.”

She swallowed, her gaze dipping to my mouth and then back again. “Jesus, okay, okay. I...I understand...D-Daddy.”

Hunger kicked hard inside me at the hesitant way she said the word, her voice all husky and uncertain, and at the direction of her gaze. At her own hunger for me and what I could give her.

“Good girl,” I murmured. “That’s what I like to hear. So, when I ask you a question, I expect you to give me an answer immediately and I expect it to be the truth. I also expect you to tell me if you’re uncomfortable. Red light for stop. Orange for maybe. Green light for go.”

“But I—”

“Speak when you’re spoken to and not before, and there will definitely be no talking back. No matter how mad you are at me.”

Frustration flickered over her face. It was obvious she didn’t like any of this, not one bit, and that was a trust issue, though whether it was me she didn’t trust or herself, I didn’t know. Another thing to work on tonight.

“Are we clear?” I prompted, wanting her to say the words out loud.

Her mouth compressed. “Yes.”

I raised a brow, waiting for the rest of it.

Her jaw firmed, but there was the telltale sign of a flush in her cheeks. “Yes, Daddy.”

She didn’t stutter this time, yet I caught unmistakable defiance in the words.

Little brat. Some lessons were going to be needed. Lessons in trusting me and herself with her own desires. Something else I’d handled badly that night in Arcadia. I’d been fighting my own desire for her, yet I’d given her everything she wanted. Then I’d snatched it away, teaching her that this was wrong, that she shouldn’t want this, making her doubt herself.

I didn’t want her doubting now.

“Is that defiance, I hear?” I asked softly. “Are you being oppositional, little girl?”

She was still blushing beautifully, and when her gaze dropped to my mouth once again, she licked her lips as if she was expecting a treat. “M-Maybe.”

Interesting. She’d gotten off on the spanking I’d given her in Arcadia in a big way and it was clear she was hoping for more of the same now.

That would not be happening.

I let her go and stepped back.

Her eyes widened.

I gave her a smile that held nothing of amusement in it, then drew myself up to my full height, letting her sense my authority.

“There will be punishments for little girls who don’t do what they’re told,” I said. “Punishments you won’t enjoy. Now....” I dropped my voice. “Take your clothes off for Daddy.”

Isabel

Daddy.

God. I couldn't believe I was getting off on that and yet there was no denying it. There was a deep throb between my thighs, my pulse was racing, and my mouth was dry. My scalp was still prickling from where he'd pulled my hair, which only added to the sensation overload.

Part of me was horrified at myself for liking it, while another part only wanted to take my clothes off and call him Daddy till the end of time. Or maybe not obey him and have him punish me, because apparently being punished turned me on.

I had no idea what to do with any of that.

I was supposed to be done with authority figures, done with being overprotected. Done with being treated like a child. So, it didn't make any sense that part of me wanted desperately to be his little girl. The thought of following his orders making me dizzy with desire.

You want to please him.

Ugh. Sadly, that night in Arcadia had only made that more and more apparent. I hated the thought of it though, because while I might be in love with him, I hadn't been put on this earth solely to please Caleb Cross.

'It will never be just one night, Isabel...once you're mine, you stay mine...'

I still couldn't get that out of my head. The possessiveness in his voice as he'd said the words had stolen my breath and even now, I hadn't gotten it back. Not when those words resonated inside me, the thrill of hearing them still echoing through my entire body.

I'd been expecting him to walk out that door, not stay. Not stride towards, thrust his hands in my hair and inform me that I was his. It was what I'd always wanted, always. So much so that I hadn't listened to all his warnings because none of them mattered. I didn't care. What mattered was that Caleb had stayed and he wanted me.

He wanted *me*. He wanted me to be his.

Except now I wondered just what the hell that meant. Longer than a night, he'd indicated, but did that mean weeks? Months? Years? And telling Dad...

"You will care. When you realize that the cage I'll put you in isn't any kinder than your father's, and that I won't let you leave it."

I shook away that thought. I'd sort through all the implications later, but not now. Now, I had to figure out my own confused feelings about all this daddy stuff.

"What kind of punishments?" I asked, partly because I wanted to know and partly to put off the moment I had to obey him, even though a large of part of me was screaming to just do what he said and be done with it.

He looked down at me, six foot five of masculine demand and authority, and God help me if that didn't make the throb between my thighs even more intense. "Why? Hoping for another spanking?"

I flushed, because that's exactly what I'd been hoping for, and naturally he could read me like an open book. "Then what?" I shouldn't have made it a demand and I knew it. He'd told me that he was tired of me pushing, but I couldn't help it. I had to draw a line in the sand somewhere, assert myself

somehow, because if I gave him an inch, he'd take my whole fucking world. I was so much younger than he was, so much less experienced. All the power was with him and calling him Daddy... Well, perhaps that was what made me so uncomfortable. Perhaps I didn't want to give him any more power than he already had.

"Tell me," I said, my heart racing. "What will you do instead? If I say no?"

He didn't move, his expression impenetrable. "I won't ask again, Isabel."

So, he was going to be an asshole about this, was he? Well, I could be an asshole too. "No," I snapped.

He lifted a brow. "No?"

"No, I'm not going to take my clothes off." I felt furious and unsettled, nervous tension knotting and coiling inside me. "I don't want to do what you say and I'm not going to call you fucking daddy." My voice had gotten louder, and the words echoed around the living room weirdly.

You fucking idiot. He told you he was tired of you fighting. What if he decides you're too much trouble and walks away?

The thought almost brought tears to my eyes, but I blinked them away. I had to keep what little power I had, and all of that power was concentrated in the word 'no'.

The lines of his face had hardened, the glitter in his obsidian eyes sharp, and he looked at me for a long time without speaking, drawing the tension in the room to screaming point. Then he said quietly, "I know what you're doing. You think I can't read every thought in your head? You're afraid. You're afraid of what you want. You're afraid of me changing my mind. You're afraid of being too much trouble and so you're trying to push me away. You're afraid of surrendering to me."

"No," I whispered helplessly, even though every word was true. "I'm...not."

He was silent a moment or two. "Do you know what a daddy does, Isabel?" he asked at last, his voice deep and

threaded through with heat, and he didn't wait for me to answer. "A daddy takes care of his little girl. He sees to her needs, to her pleasure. He makes her feel good. He protects her. It's not about bending her to his will or treating her badly. It's about making her feel safe."

The way he said the words and the slight softness of his voice touched the fear inside me, soothing it, sanding the rough edges off it, and before I knew what I was doing, I said, "I don't want you think I'm weak or powerless. Or like I'm this helpless little—"

"No," he interrupted flatly. "Do you really think I see you as weak and powerless? After you've spent the last decade fighting me and generally making my life hell?"

He's right. You are afraid and that's exactly what you're afraid of.

I swallowed, not wanting to admit it. "I don't know."

"The truth now, little girl."

Fuck. "Okay, yes," I forced out. "That's what I think."

"Well don't," he said. "I have never seen you as helpless or weak. But tonight isn't about the fight. Tonight is about the surrender."

A shiver went through me, as if part of me that had been hanging onto something for dear life was finally easing its grip. "Why do I have to surrender?" I asked, still holding on a little. "Why can't it be you?"

His hard mouth softened and curved slightly, the sight of his rare smile making my chest ache. "You think I'm not surrendering to you right now? I didn't want to be anyone's fucking daddy, Isabel. I like orders, but I'm not a caregiver and I never wanted to be. But you..." His gaze searched my face and the heat in it warmed me right through. "You turned the world upside down that night in Arcadia, and now this is all I can think about. This is for me as much as it is for you, understand? That's why I'm still here. I want to protect you, be responsible for you. See to your needs. Look after you the way Ten never managed." He reached out and touched my cheek,

his fingers brushing lightly over it. “Surrendering to me is a choice, it’s not something that I can take. You have to give it to me otherwise it doesn’t count. It’s a gift, don’t you see? And it’s a powerful gift. Because it’s your trust you’re giving to me.”

I hadn’t ever seen it like that. I’d only thought that following his orders meant I was weak and powerless. But looking up at him now, I could see that he believed every word that he’d said. That it *was* a gift I was giving him, and one he wanted very much.

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you want this?”

The hard cast of his features softened still further, in a way I’d never seen before. Making him look almost... approachable. “Because you fight when you’re afraid.” His fingers trailed down the side of my cheek to my jaw and he cupped it. “And if I don’t want you to fight, I want to make you feel safe. This is one way I can do that.”

But you’ve always felt safe with him.

Physically yes. He’d always protected me, and he’d always had my best interests at heart. Yet part of my fear was that deep down I’d always question whether I’d ever be enough for him. Because when I had ever been enough for anyone? For Dad I’d been a constant reminder of the love he’d lost and then a source of constant worry. I hadn’t been a good thing for him.

Caleb’s hand was warm on my skin, and I found myself leaning into it. “What if...what if I’m not enough for you?” I asked in a scratchy voice, half not wanting to ask because it felt like such a deeply exposing question, and half desperate to know. “What if you really do decide I’m too much trouble and walk away?”

He didn’t say anything immediately, staring down at me. Then quite suddenly, he gripped my jaw and bent his head, covering my mouth with his. It was another of his devouring kisses, hot and raw, deep and carnal, making me shake. I wanted to kiss him back, my hands lifting to touch him, but he pulled back just as suddenly. There were black flames in his

eyes, a hunger burning bright. “You’re enough for me, Isabel.” His voice so deep and so hot it just about scalded me. “You’ve always been enough for me. So why don’t you take off your clothes and I’ll show you how much?”

My mouth felt sensitized, my skin tight, and somewhere inside me, the fear that had been there so long I’d forgotten its existence, slowly relaxed and dissipated.

He wanted this, he wanted me, and knowing that was exactly what I needed. I wanted him, too. I wanted to be his. I wanted all the things he’d told me he’d do for me, and while the whole daddy thing still felt weird, he’d made me more comfortable about liking it.

It was a choice I was making, and it was a powerful choice. A powerful gift. And he was worthy of that gift, I’d always thought that.

So, I didn’t say a word, I merely I grabbed the hem of my sweatshirt instead.

Caleb looked at me. “You forgot something.”

I froze. “Forgot what?”

“What do you say when your daddy gives you an order?”

My mouth dried, but I opened it. “Yes, Daddy,” I said hoarsely.

He smiled and I could see how much he’d liked me saying the words, liked me obeying him. And that made me like it too. That pleased me so much my heart felt as if it was pressing painfully against my ribs.

“Good girl,” he murmured. “Stay being good like that, and you might just get a little something for yourself. But until then, I gave you an order, remember?”

I blushed like an idiot. “Yes, Daddy.”

His eyes glinted and he gestured to me to carry on. Then he folded his arms and watched me as I reached for the hem of my sweatshirt once more and pulled it up and over my head. Cool air whispered over my hot skin as I dropped the fabric on the floor, shivering a little.

He said nothing, but he hadn't said stop, so I didn't stop.

I reached around and unclipped my bra, slowly easing the bra straps down my arms and holding the cups against my breasts until the last minute.

"If I'd wanted a strip tease I would have said," he said. "I don't need embellishments. I just need you naked. Now, please."

I flushed, fighting the instinctive need to give him a snarky comeback, because now I felt as if I'd done something wrong. But no, he was tired of me fighting and quite frankly, I was tired of it too, so all I said was, "Sorry."

"Isabel." His voice held an edge to it. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I was just trying to—"

"What did I say?" His black eyes were very direct. "I said you were enough for me, didn't I?"

I swallowed, shifting on my feet. "Yes, you did."

"So. You don't have to do anything else except take off your clothes. That's all."

It was hard to quiet that part of myself. The part that wanted to prove myself to him, but it was clear he wasn't going to let me get away with anything, so I nodded. "Okay," I said and then, remembering, added, "Yes, Daddy."

"Good." He made another 'carry on' gesture.

So, I let out a slow breath and dropped my bra on the floor, then I pushed down my yoga pants, taking my panties with them, and stepped out of the fabric. Finally naked.

Caleb's gaze swept over me, making goosebumps rise on my skin. Then he took a step, closing the distance so that the tips of my breasts were almost brushing the damp fabric of his hoodie.

I shivered at his nearness, at his scent and the warmth of his body. I wanted him to come even closer so I could touch

him, but that was something he'd forbidden and since I was trying to be good, I kept my hands to myself.

He stared down at me, intent and hungry. "Pretty. You're very, very pretty." He reached out, his fingers brushing down over my stomach and before I could catch my breath, he slid his hand between my thighs. I gasped aloud as he touched me, his fingertips pressing lightly, exploring my sensitive flesh. "You're also very, very wet." One finger pressed lightly on my clit. "You like following my orders, don't you, Isabel? You like it very much."

I trembled as his fingertip circled my clit for a moment and then slid over the slick folds of my sex, finding the entrance to my body, testing me, making me gasp yet again. Then just as I was getting into it, he pulled his hand away, and as I was trying to catch my breath, he laid his fingers over my mouth. "Open," he ordered.

Automatically I obeyed and he slid his fingers inside, making me taste the salt and musk of my own arousal.

"Suck," he said. "I want you to taste just how much you want what's happening between us right now. And how much you love it."

I didn't protest. I sucked on his fingers like the good girl I was, the flavor his skin and my own desire making me desperate and needy. Then he took his fingers away and put one hand on my hip, drawing me slowly up against him.

I blinked, trying to get myself together, but it was difficult when the taste of my own arousal was in my mouth and the rough denim of his jeans pressing was against my bare sex. And, God, he was hard. I could feel that too.

"See how much your obedience pleases me, Isabel?" he murmured. "And all you did was take your clothes. So, stop trying so hard. You don't need to."

I let out a shaky breath. "I just want... I want this to be good for you too."

Something flickered over his face, but I couldn't tell what it was. "It's already good. Why do you think I'm still here?"

I'd barely had a chance to process that before he let me go and stepped back, and I had to stop myself from reaching out to stop him. "Now, go and get me a drink," he ordered. "I'd like a scotch. No ice."

I could do this. I could do what he said without protest. He wanted me, he did, and I had nothing to prove to him. I was enough.

I went over to the cabinet where he kept his alcohol, pulling it open and staring at the array of glasses. Then I glanced over my shoulder to check on what he was doing. He'd sat down on the couch and was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, watching me watch him. His gaze was so dark, his face set in hard lines, impossible to read. Giving me back nothing, the asshole.

Okay, so I was just going to have to trust that this was what he wanted, me just getting him a drink, so I turned back to the cabinet and bent over slightly, giving him a nice view of my butt, because why not. And I took my time choosing a glass. He liked a heavy tumbler for his scotch, so I chose a plain one in cut crystal, with a pleasing weight to it. Then I chose his scotch. Not the most expensive kind, but his favorite. An Islay single malt, all smokey and peaty.

I poured it carefully, shifting a little on my feet, the movement hopefully distracting and enticing for him. He liked it with a touch of water to release the flavors, so I added the exact amount he preferred from the water jug. Then I picked up the tumbler and carried it over to him.

He watched me intently, the weight of his stare making me tremble.

Some instinct I hadn't known I possessed made me go down on my knees in front of where he sat, then I held the tumbler up to him.

His gaze flared with heat and satisfaction rolled through me. He hadn't been lying when he'd told me he liked this too, had he? He did like it. He liked it a lot.

That's where your power is, remember? You're not the only one who's hungry. He is too.

It was true, and I'd forgotten that. In fact, now I thought about it, there were all kinds of ways in which I had power here. The power of my surrender to him, the power of my trust. The power of his desire for me and how I could give him what he wanted, and how I could deny him too.

Because I could do that. I could say no. And I knew without doubt that Caleb would never overstep that line. That I could get up and walk away and he'd let me go. Of course, if I did that, this would never happen again, I knew that also, so obviously that wasn't a choice I was going to make.

Not that I wanted to. No, what I wanted was to explore this dynamic between us, test my power.

Taking the scotch from me, he studied the tumbler a moment then took a sip. "Nice. Not too much water."

I flushed, pleased with his praise.

He took another sip, staring at me over the rim of his tumbler. "See? It doesn't have to be a performance all the time."

I lifted my chin, even though the reassurance felt like balm to my battered soul. "Nothing wrong with wanting to do a good job is there?"

He gave me another one of those smiles, full of a dark amusement. "Little perfectionist. Just remember that you don't have to earn my approval. You have it already."

I opened my mouth in instinctive denial, but the look in his eyes stopped the words dead. Truth gleamed in the depths of his black gaze once more, an honesty I wasn't expecting, and it was clear he didn't expect me to respond, because then he released me and leaned back against the couch. "Come here." He patted his thigh.

I took a deep, silent breath and got up from my knees, my heartbeat thumping hard in my ears, and eased myself onto his lap.

The denim of his jeans was still damp from the rain and so was the hoodie he wore, but I didn't care. I could feel the heat of his hard, muscular body, smell his scent, spice and rain. Every inch of my skin felt sensitized and I was so aware of him I could hardly breathe. All of this felt overwhelming and abruptly emotion crowded in my throat, making my eyes prickle.

"Relax," he murmured. "You're stiff as a plank of wood." One large hand came to rest on my hip, and he urged me to lean back against his chest, my head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I-I just—"

"Isabel." His palm came to the back of my neck, gripping it. "Look at me."

I turned my head, meeting his searching black stare, tense for no good reason. Only that I wanted him so much, but this wasn't how I'd expected it to go and I was so desperately unsure of myself despite what he'd told me.

"Stop thinking." He lifted his tumbler, took a sip, then bent and covered my mouth with his.

For a moment all I could do was lie there in his lap, trembling, and then the rich, alcoholic flavor of the whisky was in my mouth as he let me sip it from his. Warmth shot through me, from the whisky and the taste of him, a heady mix.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue in my mouth, exploring me with a slow, aching sensuality that made me moan. I shuddered, opening to him. His body was warm against mine, hot and hard, and he'd shifted, lifting his arm to keep my head turned towards him, cradling me against his shoulder.

All the tension in me melted away as quickly as it had come, replaced instead with a feeling of being safe, of being contained, surrounded by strength and warmth. There was no need to fight now, no need to prove anything. All I had to do was what he told me and trust that it would be good. And I did trust that. There was nothing he could do that I wouldn't want.

But there are so many things you don't know about him.

It was true. Yet he'd said I was his, and while I still didn't really know what that meant, I did know that whether he was aware of it or not, it made him mine too.

And if he was mine, I wanted to know everything about him. He'd told me that all the rumors people said about him, all the dark things people whispered about him, were true. That he was a murderer, a dealer, a pimp, a thief. That he'd hurt people. That he had the police in his pocket and that was why he hadn't gone to jail.

Well, if all of that *was* true, then I needed to know. And I was going to find out. I was going to find out *everything*.

Caleb

This wasn't what I should have been doing. This being holding her in my arms and letting her curl up in my lap.

Being easy with her. Telling her that I wanted her, that I would take care of her, that I wanted *this*. Her, being my little girl, and only her.

I wasn't supposed to be letting her get under my skin more than she already was.

What I'd intended was to get her naked, get her on her knees, then get her to suck me off. And after that, teach her a few lessons with pain as her reward.

Gentleness, kindness... I'd never had them to give, never thought I'd have either the capacity or the inclination. Yet when she'd been afraid — not of me, I knew that — but of her own desires and of what being mine meant, of not being enough...I hadn't been able to let that stand.

A little fear never did anyone any harm, but I didn't like her being afraid. I'd tried that with her back in Arcadia and it hadn't worked, anyway. I couldn't do it again. All that was left now was to give her something that was foreign to me — reassurance, softness. Tenderness.

I'd never been those things with anyone and by now it was reflex to be hard. To only be strong. Only merciless, pitiless.

But Isabel needed more than that from me and since I'd taken on the role of being her daddy willingly, I had to step up. I didn't want to break her, and I didn't want to hurt her. And I couldn't refuse to give her what she needed now.

So, I'd done the opposite of what I'd intended. Instead of treating her to a few lessons in obedience, I'd found myself stroking her cheek and calming her fears instead. And the thing that had surprised me was that apparently, I had the ability to gentle

The other surprising thing was that she hadn't fought me. She'd softened, become vulnerable, opening up to me in a way she never had before, and... Fuck. I liked her spit and her fire, but this new softness was something else. It was sweet, heady. It reminded me of those nights at my kitchen table, when she'd lean over the chessboard, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. Even then she'd wanted to fight me, beat me, and when she eventually decided on her move, she'd do it then look up at me, giving me that fucking wonderful, triumphant smile of hers. As if she'd won already.

Those evenings with her had been the closest to happiness I'd ever come.

You want that again.

The thought stole through me, a realization that tightened like a noose. Happiness wasn't something I ever thought about, nor peace or contentment. Ambition and fury had always been what had driven me. But now, sitting here with Isabel in my lap, I couldn't stop thinking about those long-ago moments of peace and contentment, the simple pleasure of being in the here and now with her and only with her. Because only she'd ever been able to give that to me.

Yes, fuck, I did want that again. I wanted to feel that again. And why the fuck shouldn't I? My life with Old Nick had been full of darkness and the constant threat of violence, and my life now was full of sharp, cold, glittering edges. Why couldn't I have something soft? Something warm and giving? Something that was sweet and only for me?

I could have Isabel, her softness and heat. Her vulnerability. Her trust. Her complete surrender. I'd worked hard enough for it, so why not? Why the fuck not?

She rested against me, her naked body warm and silky, the tension slowly draining out of her, and I could feel it drain out of me too.

I took another sip of whisky and bent my head again, letting her take it from my mouth, feeling her shiver as I followed it up with another hot kiss, tasting her sweetness along with the alcohol. And this time I went slow and deep, exploring her lazily, trying sensuality out for size since there was no rush.

She melted against me, her red hair over my shoulder, her head tipped back to give me even greater access, a soft moan vibrating in her throat as I licked and nipped at her soft mouth, taking everything even deeper, even hotter.

That sound of that moan combined with the press of her ass against my hardening cock stoked my hunger. The resistance that had held her so tense before had gone entirely, which meant that now was the perfect time to prove to her how completely she was mine.

I lifted my head, put the scotch down on the floor, then I eased her onto the couch on her back and pinned her beneath me, pressing her down into the leather of the cushions.

She was warm, her thighs spread so I could lie between them, her pussy pressed to the aching length of my cock. I could feel her heat even through the denim and I could smell her arousal. It got me even harder.

Her eyes were very dark, all the green lost, and her pretty face was flushed. The pulse at the base of her throat was racing and I bent to taste it, feeling it flutter against my tongue as I licked her then sucked gently.

“Are you mine, little girl?” I murmured against her throat. “Are you mine completely?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “Yes, Daddy.”

Christ, the more she said that word, the more I liked it. The more I wanted to hear it. It settled something tense inside me, eased a tightness I hadn't known was there.

How can you accept this so easily? When you know how wrong it is?

Was it wrong, though? She wanted this too and maybe she needed it, the way I was beginning to think I needed it. She wasn't a child anymore and if she was adult enough to be naked beneath me, she was adult enough to make her own choices. Choices I had to respect. I had to stop telling her she didn't know any better, that she was too young, too inexperienced. Isabel Fox knew her own mind and I had to respect that.

She squirmed against me, rubbing her hot little pussy against the zipper of my jeans, making me grit my teeth against the urge to tear my clothes off and sink my cock into her right then and there. But there would be plenty of time for that, later. Right now, I wanted to test how far her surrender went.

I shifted, grabbing her arms, and lifting them up and over her head, crossing her wrists and pinning them down on the cushions with one hand. Then with the other, I gripped her chin, forcing her gaze to meet mine. "If you're mine, I want you to prove it. I know you've got a strong will. I know you can hold out because you proved that to me in Arcadia. But what I'm curious about now, Isabel, is how quickly can you give in?"

She trembled as I pressed her crossed wrists more firmly into the cushions, her back arching in response, the hard tips of her breasts lifting and pressing against my chest.

"Give in?" She sounded breathless. "What do you mean?"

Letting go of her chin, I slid my free hand down over her stomach and between her thighs, my fingers sliding over the slick folds of her pussy, curling in to press against her clit. She was deliciously wet and slippery, shuddering and jerking in my grip, her mouth opening in a soundless gasp as I stroked her.

“I mean this,” I said. “Tonight’s challenge is that you’re going to come for me in twenty seconds and I’m going to watch.”

“Too easy.” Her voice had gone husky. “I won’t need twenty seconds.”

“Then let’s make it harder, shall we?” I took my hand away from between her thighs. “Here are the rules. First, you can’t touch yourself. And second, you’re not allowed to move.”

Her eyes widened. “What? But that’s not—”

“Remember what I told you about doing what I said?” I interrupted, holding her gaze as I settled into my role. “Continue to defy me and you’ll be racking up quite a set of punishments.”

She sucked in a breath, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “Yes, Daddy.”

Hunger shifted inside me, along with an intense satisfaction at how she obeyed. Her trust was a precious thing and better than any drug.

“Good girl,” I murmured approvingly. “Your twenty seconds starts...now.” I started to count aloud, watching her face as she swallowed, her eyelashes fluttering as she stared up at me. She didn’t move, not even a wriggle, but I could hear her breathing getting faster and faster as I got down to eleven.

“Ten. I’m going to be asking you exactly what’s going through your imagination right now,” I said. “Nine. And if you’re lucky, we’ll do it for real. Eight. But only if you come within the time frame. Seven. And only if you don’t move. Six.”

She panted. “God...”

“Five.”

“Caleb...” Her brow furrowed with concentration. “I... I...”

She was shaking now, I could feel the tremors quaking through her, but since she wasn’t actually shifting around or

squirming, I allowed it. “Four.”

Her lashes lowered. “Please...”

“Three. Open your eyes. Look at me.”

They fluttered open again, her green gaze feverish. “Cal...”

“Two. Remember what to call me.”

There was desperation in her gaze now, as if she was dying of thirst and only I could give her water. “Daddy, *please*...”

I loved the urgent note in her voice and the way she begged. And it satisfied me intensely knowing that I was the only one who could give her what she needed. No other man could and since she was mine now, no other man would. There was only me.

I slid my hand between her thighs again, over her silky, slippery skin, finding her clit and stroking, giving her the friction she was pleading for. “One. Now, come for me like a good girl. Come for your Daddy.”

Her head went back into the cushions, her body arching, a cry escaping from her throat. I bent over her, covering her mouth with mine, swallowing that cry and the sounds of her orgasm too, allowing my weight to settle on her and hold her pressed to the couch, containing her.

She shuddered and shook, kissing me back desperately as she trembled through the aftershocks. Then after she quietened, I lifted my head.

“I’m sorry.” There was anguish on her face. “I didn’t do what you wanted.”

Christ, how had I not seen how desperate she was for approval? I’d known, of course, but hadn’t really comprehended the depth of it. Fucking Ten. That was his fault. He’d ignored her needs for far too long and this was the result.

Well, I’d already told her she had my approval — she’d always had it — but it seemed I was going to need to keep emphasizing it.

“You asked me for help, though,” I said soothingly. “Which is what you should do, Isabel. That’s what a Daddy does for his little girl.”

Her lashes lowered. “I disappointed you. I hate disappointing you.”

Something just behind my breastbone tightened, a thread of emotion I shouldn’t feel. “You have never disappointed me, Isabel,” I said roughly. “You drive me fucking crazy by not listening and not thinking through some things, but you’ve never disappointed me.” I let her see the truth as her lashes lifted once more and she stared up at me, and gradually her anguished expression faded.

“I suppose that makes me kind of pathetic, but—”

“Hey. Don’t start with that. We’ve already established there’s nothing pathetic about you. Now...” I brought her wrists down, chafing them to get the blood flowing again. “The more important question is what exactly were you imagining to get yourself off just now?”

A flush crept over her cheeks. “Do I have to tell you?”

“I already told you that I was going to want to know, so yes, you do.” I pinned her wrists on either side of her head this time, keeping her contained so she knew there was no escaping me. She was so warm, and the scent of feminine musk was heavy in the air, and I was so hard I fucking ached. But I’d asked her a question and I wanted the answer. “Come on, be a good girl. Out with it.”

“I....” Her reddish lashes lowered, hiding her gaze. “I was ___”

“Look at me.”

She let out an annoyed sounding breath, but obeyed, her green eyes dark.

“Continue,” I ordered.

“Okay, okay. Well, I was lying on my front, and you were...behind me.”

The way she hesitated almost made me smile. “Were we fucking, Isabel?”

Her color deepened, which was adorable considering all the things we’d already done together. “Yeah, kind of.”

“What do you mean kind of?”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, so we were.”

I debated punishing her for the disrespect of the eye roll, but I also liked that though she was soft and vulnerable, there was still a hint of the fire that made her who she was.

Little brat. But two could play at that game. I shifted on her, an easy, lazy movement, and was satisfied to hear her breath catch. “Tell me where exactly I was fucking you.”

She went an even deeper red. “Ummm....”

Ah, so that’s what she’d been imagining.

“Seems my little girl has an even more of a dirty mind than I thought. Was I fucking your ass, Isabel?”

She bit her lip, squirming with embarrassment. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

Her chin firmed suddenly, and her gaze met mine, a flash of defiant emerald. “Yes, Daddy. You were fucking me in the ass.”

“Is that disrespect I hear?” I shifted on her again and flexing my hips, pressing my cock against the heat between her thighs, enjoying how she shivered and gasped. “Are you getting mouthy with me?”

“N-No.” She moved restlessly. “S-Sorry, Daddy.”

I bent and nuzzled against her throat, the lure of her hot little body and the sweetness of her surrender making it more and more difficult for me to hold back. And after all, why should I? She was mine now.

“Did you like it?” I put my tongue over the fast beat of her pulse, tasting it. “Did you like me fucking your ass?”

Her breath caught. “I...yes.”

Heat coursed through me because I liked that thought too. I liked it a lot.

I nipped her and she shuddered. “Good. You’re mine, remember? And that goes for all of you. I’ve already taken your pussy, so maybe I’ll take your ass too.”

She shivered. “You think I wouldn’t want that?”

She saw it as another challenge, another test, I could see that immediately. Testing herself, I suspected, not to mention the bond between us. And perhaps me as well, to see if I’d go that far and go there with her.

Not that she needed to test me, not now. I’d go there with her. I *wanted* to go there with her. I wanted all of her, every single piece, and being her first... Fuck, I was all Neanderthal when it came right down to it.

But this couldn’t be a test of courage. She had to want it.

So, I stared back. “Do you?”

She blinked, hearing the demanding note in my voice, and realizing I wasn’t playing anymore.

“Don’t turn this into a test, Isabel,” I went on before she could reply. “This won’t work if you view everything we do together as a personal challenge. If you’ve got some boundaries, I need to know what they are. This is supposed to be about pleasure, not about forcing you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

Her mouth had compressed into a line again. She did *not* like being told off, that was clear. “I want to be someone you can do anything with,” she said at last, reluctantly. “I don’t want you to hold back because of who I am.”

“You still doubt, don’t you?” I searched her flushed face, because that was the truth, wasn’t it? “You doubt that you’re enough for me.”

She swallowed but didn’t avoid my gaze this time. “Maybe.”

“Well then...” I let my weight settle on her, so she could feel my intent physically. “If words aren’t enough for you,

then maybe it's time for me to prove it. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes." Her voice was hoarse but very firm. "My light is green, Daddy."

Isabel

All the lights were green. Every single one. With his weight on me, pressing me down into the couch cushions, anchoring me and surrounding me in his heat and his scent, how could they not be green?

He'd been right. I'd doubted him, been fearful of telling him about that dirty little fantasy of mine, and not because I didn't want it, but because I didn't think he wanted to do it with me. I didn't want him holding back just because I was Tennyson Fox's daughter. Much younger and much more inexperienced than he was.

Plus, I hadn't been able to shake how disappointed I was that I'd failed his little challenge. That he'd had to put his hand on me in order to make me come. Stupid for it to feel like a defeat, I know, but I'd felt it all the same. I'd been angry with myself, so I'd kind of...pretended I'd been fantasizing about anal sex, again to prove myself to him.

God, I was never going to learn, was I?

Fundamentally though, I couldn't keep doubting. At some point I had to accept that he was here because he wanted to be and that I was enough for him.

I had to trust him.

Except, now he wanted to do the thing I'd lied to him about and...well. Half of me was afraid, while the other half

had gone hot with a weird mix of embarrassment and excitement.

My cheeks felt like they were on fire, but I wasn't going to change my mind and tell him I was maybe a red light. That felt like yet another defeat and besides, it wasn't as if I *didn't* want it. I was sure if anyone could make me like it, it would be Caleb.

I trusted him and I wanted him to know that.

His black gaze narrowed slightly, as if he could sense that I wasn't totally on board, and my blush got deeper. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he let go of my wrists and shifted moving off me to stand beside the couch.

I sat up, my heartbeat thudding, wondering if my unease had spooked him, yet he only grabbed the hem of his hoodie and pulled it up and over his head, discarding it carelessly onto the floor. Then he began taking off the rest of his clothes.

Okay, so he wasn't spooked and if he was getting naked then that meant he was really going to do this with me. The thought made my heartbeat go rabbiting around in my chest.

It wasn't helped by the fact that my mouth was going dry as I watched him strip and my fingers itching to touch him. Holy shit, he was beautiful.

"Can I.... can I help?" My voice was hoarse, and I sounded ridiculous, but every part of me ached to touch him.

"No." He took his T-shirt off and dropped it onto the floor, the blackness of his eyes almost a tidal pull. "But you can watch."

So, I did, my heartbeat hammering as I let my gaze rove over the bare skin of his magnificent torso. He was all broad shoulders and muscled chest, flat stomach, and chiseled abs. Against his olive skin the black lines of his tattoos were stark, abstract and curving and interconnected. They wrapped around the biceps and forearm of his right arm in a full sleeve, circling the biceps and shoulder of his left. There were stars and mandalas, the dark shadows of birds and tigers in a jungle, and a dragon across his chest...

I'd never seen them on display before and they were all so beautiful. I couldn't drag my gaze away.

His hands dropped to the waistband of his jeans, and he undid the buttons, then he pushed them down along with his boxers, kicking them off so he was finally, gloriously, naked beside the couch.

I'd never seen Caleb Cross naked in my entire life and now I had, I'd never be the same. Narrow waist, lean hips, long, powerful thighs... He was perfect. There was nothing about him that wasn't drop dead gorgeous, and the intense sexual energy he was giving off only made him more so.

He saw me watching, well aware that I was mesmerized, and he smiled a very masculine smile, full of satisfaction and heat. His hand dropped to his cock, long, thick and curving up to his flat stomach, and he gripped it casually, making my mouth water to taste him the way I had back in Arcadia that night.

"Not now," he said, since clearly, he could read every thought in my head. "Sit right back on the couch."

I swallowed and did what he said, watching as he bent to grab his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. He took a condom out of it then went about the business of sheathing himself. As before, when I'd watched him do it in Arcadia, I found it unbearably erotic, my breath catching as he rolled the latex down over his cock.

The sound made one corner of his mouth turn up. "Next time, I might let you do the honors." He dropped his hand and came over to the couch, standing there and looking down at me. "Spread your legs, little girl. Let me see that sweet pussy."

I did as I was told, shivering at the feeling of exposure and the slight stretch of my tender flesh. "I thought—"

"I know what you thought. But I need to take the edge off first." He knelt on the cushions directly in front of me, his hands sliding beneath my thighs, lifting my hips. "Hold on, Isabel. Daddy's going to fuck you hard and rough."

I hardly had a moment to draw breath before his hands tightened almost painfully on my hips and he thrust into me, hard and deep.

I gasped, arching against the back of the couch, feeling the delicious stretch and burn as he pushed deeper. Then he pinned me there, his hard chest pressed to my tender breasts, the delicious heat of his bare skin against mine, and let go of my hips, one hand winding in my hair to pull my head back so he could take my mouth, the other gripping the back of the couch.

Then he began to fuck me, and he'd promised, he was indeed hard and rough, his mouth savage on mine, the flex of his hips relentless, driving me into the couch. I was held there, sandwiched between the leather back and his powerful body, unable to move, unable to escape the driving thrust of his cock.

I panted as the pleasure began to build, thrilled at the power of him, because he wasn't holding back, and I loved it. I wanted more. I lifted my hands to grip his shoulders, my nails digging in as I tried to move with him, flexing my hips to get more friction and shuddering as he devoured my mouth.

He drove deeper, a growl of masculine satisfaction escaping him, winding my pleasure tighter, making me dig my nails in harder and nip him, desperate for more.

The only sound in the room was our ragged gasps and the slap of his flesh on mine, getting faster and faster. Then he let go of my hair, both his hands gripping the back of the couch, using it as leverage to fuck me even harder, rougher. I arched and twisted, desperate for more of the relentless pleasure he was building. But then he turned his head and bit the side of my neck, giving one last, deep thrust before he stiffened, a deep growl of release escaping him.

For a second he remained still, gripping onto the couch, with me pinned between him and the leather, then slowly he released the it and drew back, pulling out of me, making me gasp.

I was shaking, the ache between my legs throbbing. "But I...I need...." I whispered helplessly. "D-Daddy...please..."

His gaze was black, glittering, the expression on his face still taut despite his release. “That was for me,” he said roughly. “You don’t get to come yet, little girl. I want you hungry, understand?”

I didn’t, but I knew better than to question him. “Yes, Daddy.”

He nodded then got off the couch. “Now, lie down on your front. I’m going to get a couple of things and I don’t want you to move until I get back.”

My mouth was dry, the ache between my legs too intense to ignore. It wouldn’t take much to get me off, all he’d to do was brush his fingers over my clit and I’d be gone. Especially when I could still feel him inside me and the hot slide of his skin against mine...

“And don’t even think about touching yourself,” he went on, reading every single one of my thoughts. “If I come back to find you’ve given yourself an orgasm without my permission, there’ll be trouble. Are we clear?”

I bit down on my instinctive protests, wanting to be good for him. “Yes, Daddy,” I said before obediently, before lying down on the warm leather, my heartbeat racing.

He left the room and took his time, the bastard. I lay there silently, my brain ticking over, the cool air moving over my bare skin, making me aware of my nakedness and the burgeoning ache between my legs.

He wanted me hungry, he’d said. But why? When I was always hungry for him?

Waiting had never been my strong point, especially with the flavor of scotch and him heavy in my mouth, and the feel of his cock stretching my sex, and I was starting to get tense and restless, when I was jolted by the brush of soft fingertips down my spine.

My breath caught hard in my throat, and I froze. I hadn’t heard him come back into the living room.

He didn’t say anything, but the light touch shifted to the top of my spine, resting there briefly, and then it was gone. My

chest tightened at the loss. “Daddy?” I said, the heavy sound of the word reassuring in a way I couldn’t have articulated.

“Yes,” he murmured. “And I see you kept your hands to yourself.” His touch was back, his fingers trailing down my spine, soothing me, easing the tightness in my muscles even as it made the throb between my thighs more insistent. “Good girl.” His fingers stroked over the curve of my butt. “You waited very patiently. Now, relax for me.”

The restlessness vanished, a weird sense of calm hitting me as his fingers continued to stroke me, down the backs of my thighs and between, brushing tantalizingly near my aching clit. I shuddered, wanting to press myself into his hand, but I stopped myself, hanging on to my patience, because I knew he wouldn’t like it.

He moved again, and I felt the cushions dip as he got onto the couch behind me. Instinctively I shifted, but his hand landed heavily at the small of my back, pressing me down. “No. Keep still.”

I tried to calm myself. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good. Now, open your mouth.”

“What? But I—”

“Open it.”

There was no arguing with his tone, so I opened my mouth, my heartbeat getting faster. He slid something soft between my teeth, a length of material, tying it firmly behind my head.

A gag. Okay, I hadn’t expected that, but I didn’t protest. I could smell his familiar scent on the material and that eased my anxiety.

“This is an exercise in trust, Isabel.” His voice was rough and gravelly. “And you need to trust me. Do you? Nod your head if so.”

I nodded, breathing fast and hard. As if he needed to ask. I’d always trusted him. Always.

“Good girl.” The warm note in his rough voice made my heart feel sore and my eyes prickle. I loved the sound of it so much. “Now, hands behind your back.”

I knelt forward, pressing my cheek to the cushions and did as he asked. Then I felt something wind around my wrists, another soft piece of material binding them together.

“Did you imagine this, Isabel?” he asked quietly as he pulled the material tight. “That I’d gag you and tie your hands behind your back? Was this part of your fantasy?”

It hadn’t been, but the feel of being bound was so deliciously erotic that I nodded my head anyway.

Caleb laughed, a soft, sexy rumble. “Liar. I’ll punish you for that later.”

Forgetting that I had a piece of material between my teeth, I began to protest, only for him to laugh again, the sound brushing like velvet over my bare skin. “And that’s why you have a gag, little girl. Because you just can’t help yourself, can you?” His hand stroked down my spine, making me shudder. “But don’t worry, feel free to say what you like. The gag will stop you from breaking any rules.” His stroking fingers paused at the tie around my wrists, and he gave it a tug. “And this will stop you from doing any forbidden touching either.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath, my heartbeat racing, the persistent, nagging ache between my thighs almost painful. He knew me too well. I’d have broken all the rules and earned some punishments without even thinking, but this way I didn’t need to be anxious about it.

Being bound was erotic, but I hadn’t realized it could also be relaxing.

“So,” Caleb went on, “You won’t be able to speak or use your hands, so nod if you’re comfortable. If I think this is too much for you, I’ll stop and that’s part of the trust exercise. You’ll have to trust that I’ll know what’s best for you.”

I nodded, shivering with hunger, a growing nervousness, and a desire that I couldn’t deny. It felt so starkly forbidden,

yet that was also part of the appeal. Apparently, I had a taste for the forbidden.

It was all due to him, of course. This wouldn't work with anyone else. Only him.

His hands settled on my hips, warm and strong, drawing me up onto my knees and his touch calmed me further. He wouldn't be doing any of this if he had doubts I could handle it, which must mean he had no doubts.

He was trusting me, I realized with a sudden flash of insight. He was trusting me to handle myself the way he thought I could.

I breathed deeply, the last of my trepidation falling away, relaxing all my muscles as the cushions dipped and he leaned in close. Then something cold and liquid dripped over my skin and I jumped.

"Easy," he murmured. "It's just lube." He touched me, his fingers smoothing the liquid in between my ass cheeks, finding the tight opening there and massaging liquid around it, inside it, making me groan into the gag.

A dark, dirty pleasure began to unfurl inside me, stealing what little breath I had and building the already intense pressure between my thighs. Oh, this felt good, like really, *really* good. I'd had no idea. And that there was an edge of wrongness to it only made it hotter.

More of the cold liquid fell on my skin, his finger pushing deeper, and I made another helpless sound, unable to stop myself. I couldn't keep still, my hips shifting as I pressed back into his touch, wanting more, wanting him to touch me more directly but then he took his hand away.

"What did I tell you?" His hand came down on my ass in a swat that made me jump again, my skin prickling with heat. "Keep still."

"Sorry, Daddy," I muttered inarticulately through the gag.

He must have understood, because his hand descended again to stroke the curve of my ass. "Apparently even a gag isn't enough to silence Isabel Fox." There was amusement in

his voice. “But do as you’re told next time, hmmm?” As if to emphasize his point, he pinched me. Hard.

A jolt of pain shot through me, adding to the pleasure already gathering inside me, and while I was tempted to keep on breaking the rules — seemed as if I had a taste for pain — I also wanted to be his good little girl, so I stayed still, trembling.

His hand stroked over me again, warm and strong, and then unexpectedly a hot mouth rested at the top my spine, delivering kisses that fell like sparks down the length of my back. All the while that wicked finger worked in and out of my ass, the combination of filthy pleasure and tender kisses making me moan against the gag.

I closed my eyes, need pulsing like a giant heartbeat inside me, shaking with the effort of not moving, conscious of the taste of cotton in my mouth.

God, if he drew this out any longer, I was going to explode.

Then just as that thought occurred to me, he took his finger away and gripped my hips, positioning me, and then came the hot press of his skin against my ass and the thick slide of his cock between my ass cheeks. The head of his dick pushed against the tight opening there and I stiffened instinctively, chills chasing over me.

“Relax,” he murmured and gripped the material imprisoning my wrists to hold me still. His hips were insistent, pressing deeper, but his hand was on my back, giving me long calming strokes. “Trust me, little girl. Trust me to make it feel good. And trust yourself to handle it, enjoy it.”

That was the issue, and he knew that. It wasn’t him I didn’t trust, it was myself. Myself and my stupid feelings for him, the hunger inside me that wanted him so very badly yet was so afraid of failing him.

But he’d told me repeatedly how much he wanted me, how I hadn’t disappointed him, and I wouldn’t, and I guess this was part of the trust exercise. I had to trust his word that I was

enough. I had to believe him and trust myself, trust my feelings for him.

So, I surrendered. Surrendered into the heat of him behind me and his strong hands. Surrendered into my feelings for him. It felt a like drowning. You knew you'd never reach the surface. You knew you'd never find air. You couldn't fight the water and so you opened your mouth and breathed it in. And there was beauty in finally letting go. A sense of relief so powerful it almost brought tears to my eyes.

He must have felt all the tension leave me, because then he pressed forward, and I felt him slide into me, my flesh parting before him. I gasped, shivering. It hurt because he was big and this wasn't something I'd ever done before. But he kept stroking my back even as he pushed deeper, slow and relentless.

I breathed through the pain, felt the pleasure coil tighter as his hand moved over my skin. "Good girl," he murmured in rough approval. "You're such a good girl for me."

I flushed with heat at his praise, glowing at the warm note in his voice, then broke out into a sweat as he pushed even deeper. My vision swam with more tears at the unbearable sting, but he didn't stop, and I didn't want him to.

He thought I could handle it and so I would. And he wasn't holding back, and that made everything a thousand times more erotic, a thousand times more sweet.

I panted as he let go of my wrists and slipped his hand between my thighs, finding my aching clit and rubbing gently. The pleasure grew sharper, and I groaned again, shivering.

He began to move, slow and easy. It hurt but not so much that I couldn't deal, and besides, the pain added a jagged edge to the pleasure, intensifying everything. God, it felt good, and I could tell by the sound of his breathing, of how fast it was getting and by how tight his grip on my hip was, that he was feeling it too.

His finger slid around and over my clit, and I ground my hips against it, desperate for friction. I thought I'd have gone

off like a rocket the moment he touched me, yet I hadn't. The feel of his cock in my ass was so good and yet not enough. I needed more.

He thrust and I heard him curse under his breath, then he thrust again, a deep grunt of pleasure escaping him. I loved the sound. I loved that I could make him feel good too, but I wanted to see his face. I wanted to watch what I was doing to him, but he had a firm hand on me and all I could do was moan against the cotton in my mouth, the pressure of an intense, mind-blowing orgasm slowly building inside me. A pressure that with every thrust of his hips and stroke of his finger, was becoming more and more insistent.

He kept his pace easy yet relentless until if I'd had my hands free, I would have been clawing at the cushions. But I didn't have them free. All I could do was writhe beneath him, moaning out my pleasure from behind my gag.

“Are you ready to come, little girl?” His voice was dark and harsh from behind me. “Are you going to come for your Daddy?”

I nodded frantically, pushing back against him, desperate for more friction. And he gave it, pinching my clit sharply, hard enough to make the pressure inside me suddenly burst apart in a wild cascade of pleasure.

I screamed against the material over my mouth as ecstasy exploded like a firework, lighting up every nerve ending I had. There were lights behind my eyes, my entire body shaking, but Caleb only upped his pace, thrusting harder, faster, his breathing harsh, his grip on my hips punishing. Then at last he gave a guttural roar, his hips slamming into mine one last time as the orgasm came for him too. Then his hands came down on the cushions on either side of my head, his body covering mine, pressing me down into the couch as I trembled through the aftershocks. He was so hot and heavy, the hard, muscular weight of him like a shield between me and the world. He was like a giant security blanket, and I just wanted to stay there, snuggled beneath him and safe.

For a long minute afterward neither of us said anything. All I could hear was the sound of his harsh breaths mingling with mine and the loud beat of my heart in my ears.

“Are you okay?” His voice in my ear was rough. “Hurt anywhere?”

I shook my head, my brain still ringing from the effects of my orgasm, my heart shuddering, pleasure swooping around inside me. Caleb shifted, pulling away, and I shivered yet again at the loss of his warmth. But then his hands were back, undoing the tie around my wrists and getting rid of the gag.

“Lie still,” he murmured and then a warm cloth slid between my butt cheeks, easing sore flesh and sensitive tissues.

A delicious lassitude crept through me, and I lay bonelessly on the couch with my eyes closed, letting him take care of me. I felt sleepy and warm and more relaxed than I’d felt in years.

Finally, Caleb’s arms came around me and I opened my eyes to find myself picked up off the couch and held against the heat of his bare chest.

“Where are we going?” I asked sleepily, relaxing against his shoulder.

He glanced down at me, his black eyes glinting. “To bed.”

“Oh good.” I sighed, loving the feel of his bare skin against mine. “I’m tired.”

He gave me a wicked grin. “I didn’t say we were going to sleep.”

And I felt the electric jolt, a pulse of lightning down my spine.

“Good,” I said.

Caleb

I kept her up till nearly dawn, unable to get enough of her. It seemed the more I had, the more I wanted. She didn't fight. She gave me everything I demanded, along with her own fierce hunger and passion and the sweetness of her surrender.

It was intoxicating. I'd had plenty of little subs at my beck and call, all of them desperate for my discipline. Yet I'd never had a little girl who only wanted me. Who trusted me not only with her body, but her soul as well, and I knew Isabel did.

I could see it in her eyes when I had her beneath me, when I was inside her with the tight wet heat of her pussy gripping me. She didn't look away, staring at me as if I held the sun and moon and stars in the palm of my hand and was holding them out for her to take.

Maybe it was hero worship, maybe she was just cock drunk, but instinct told me it was more than that. That it was deeper.

My better self was urging me to call it off, that I needed to take into her account her feelings and that if I truly wanted to protect her from me, I had to distance myself. Yet it was too late for that. I'd crossed the line completely and there was no going back over it. I also wasn't going to hurt her by changing my mind. Once I made a decision, I never went back on it.

Besides, the way she looked at me made me feel like a god. As if there was more than darkness at the heart of me, something that was worth looking at. A man who didn't have a past built on violence and murder, on selfishness and greed. A man who was better.

Then there was that little piece of happiness I'd never expected to find again, that little piece of contentment. It was there, in her arms, and I wasn't going to give that up. I couldn't. I was too much of a selfish bastard and besides, she was mine now. Nothing would change that.

First up, Ten had to be told that his daughter was mine, and second, there was the issue of the Hamiltons to be dealt with.

Handling Ten, at least, was straightforward, though the consequences wouldn't be. This would put our friendship on the line, no two ways about it. I could, of course, not tell him, but that wasn't an option, nor was giving her up for his scruples. I had her trust. I had her surrender. I had some of the peace I'd been missing in my life, and it was too precious to throw away, and no bastard was going to take it from me, not even Ten.

When morning came, I left her sleeping, ordered security to keep an eye on her, told Sally I wouldn't be in for a couple of hours, then I headed straight to Ten's.

He lived in a Tribeca penthouse. With five bedrooms, massive kitchen, huge lounge area, an outdoor terrace with views out over the city, and stuffed full of Fox Tech smart home systems, it was nearly twenty million dollar's worth of real estate.

He barely lived in it, spending most of his time in the Fox Tech offices in downtown Manhattan, though I knew he was home now because, miracle of fucking miracles, according to his secretary, he hadn't come into work. He was apparently taking 'a day off'.

Ten never took a day off, which meant something was up, but I wasn't much in the mood to question what that something was today. I was too busy preparing myself for what was going to be a very unpleasant conversation.

I'd sent him a text to let him know I was coming, but he hadn't responded. And when I got to his building, no one opened the door to my knock, not his housekeeper or even his security.

Annoyed, I called him and when I didn't get an answer, I hit redial until finally he answered with a very annoyed, "What the fuck do you want?"

"I'm standing on your doorstep," I said. "I need to talk to you ASAP so open the fucking door."

He made an exasperated sound. "What about? I'm very busy at the—"

"It's about Isabel."

Instantly the phone went dead and ten seconds later the front door jerked open, Ten standing in the doorway.

Normally, he wore suits as uptight and rigid as he was, but today he was in jeans, a black T-shirt, and his feet bare, his black hair damp. He looked almost shockingly underdressed.

"Since when did you have that stick up your ass removed?" I asked as he stood aside to let me enter then shut the door behind me. "You could be on the beach in California."

He ignored that, his blue eyes cold. "What about Isabel?"

This wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be done, so I braced myself, preparing for the shit to hit the fan. "Isabel and I are together," I said bluntly. "As in a relationship."

Ten blinked. "A relationship? What kind of relationship?"

I said nothing, only looked at him, letting him work it out for himself. There was no point me giving him details. In fact, the fewer details he knew, the better.

"You can't mean..." He stopped, his expression hardening, becoming forbidding. "You'd better not be saying what I think you're saying."

Again, I stayed silent. What else was there to say?

“Cal.” The forbidding expression gradually disappeared to be replaced by slow dawning shock — clearly it had never occurred to him that the kind of relationship Isabel and I had would ever be *that* kind of relationship. “Not *my* Isabel.”

“She’s not your Isabel anymore, Ten.” I held his gaze, letting him see the truth in it. “And she’s no longer your responsibility. She’s mine. In every sense of the word.”

There it was, finally, the fury igniting like a gas flame in his eyes. “No. No.” He took a step toward me, rage radiating from him. “Isabel? You and *Isabel*?”

I faced him and didn’t try to avoid him as he abruptly shoved me hard against the wall, his forearm over my throat. “What the *fuck* are you doing with my daughter, Caleb? Answer me!”

“You know what I’m doing with your daughter.” I kept my voice calm. “She’s mine, Ten.”

He shoved his forearm harder against my throat, pressing against my windpipe, making it difficult to breathe. We were evenly matched in terms of strength and Ten knew how to fight. But I was a dirty fighter and he wasn’t; I could bring him down if I needed to.

“She’s twenty years younger than you.” His furious blue gaze was inches away. “You babysat her, for fuck’s sake!”

“And I’m a criminal with a dark past,” I added, because someone had to say it. “A murderer, with no boundaries and no morals.”

His lips peeled back in a grimace, his arm like an iron bar. “You fucking bastard. How long has this been going on? Did you seduce her? Did you manipulate her?” He shoved me. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

“She wanted me,” I said, hard and flat. “She’s had a crush on me for years and it couldn’t go on. It was putting her in danger with the Hamiltons and so I took action.”

“What the fuck do you mean you took action?”

“I told her nothing was going to happen between us, and I meant it. But Isabel doesn’t like the word no in case you hadn’t guessed, and she took matters into her own hands.” I gave him a level look. “You think I seduced her? I wouldn’t have touched a hair on that girl’s head. No, she seduced me.”

Ten gave a harsh laugh. “She’s twenty-three. What the fuck does she know about anything? You could have said no. You should have fucking said no.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agreed. “I should have. But I didn’t. I didn’t want to hurt her.” An anger I hadn’t expected was gathering in me too, on Isabel’s behalf, and even though I knew it was a bad idea, I said, “You left her without any emotional support, and someone had to fucking give it to her. And she decided that person was me.”

Ten cursed savagely under his breath then pushed hard against my throat one last time, almost choking me as he pushed himself away. I stayed where I was and when his fist came back and launched itself at my face, I didn’t avoid it.

It hurt, but I let him take two and when the third one came, I caught his fist in mine and gripped it. “You can have two hits,” I said. “But that’s it. If you have anything more to say, you can say it to me, but you will absolutely not talk to Isabel, not until she’s ready to talk to you.”

“Don’t you dare fucking tell me what to do with my own ___”

I closed my fingers around his fist, squeezing it. “Do you understand, Ten?”

His jaw hardened, fury still burning in his eyes. He ripped his fist from mine. “You hurt her, I’ll kill you. I might kill you anyway.”

“Hurting her is the last thing I want to do, believe me.” My jaw throbbed but I resisted the urge to touch it. It was no doubt bleeding, but I welcomed the pain. I deserved it.

Ten’s face was white, and he looked ready to hurl something else at me, a chair maybe, when a light, delicate

female voice came from somewhere beyond the end of the hallway. “Sir?”

He stiffened and glanced behind him a moment. Then he looked back at me. “Get out. Get the fuck out of my sight. We’ll have this conversation later.”

I wasn’t going to argue. He’d need some time to come to terms with it — if he ever came to terms with it, and with Ten you never knew.

There was regret inside me, heavy as a stone. Ten and I had been on the streets together, we knew each other better than we knew ourselves. We were brothers.

And you let your fucking dick get in the way.

No. Reducing the bond between Isabel and I to one that was all about sex felt wrong. She was more to me than that, which was a problem. Especially when I couldn’t afford for it to be more.

Just then a woman appeared at the end of the hallway. She had some kind of soft woolen throw wrapped around her, her hair loose across her shoulders in a long, blonde fall. She was young and very beautiful and somehow familiar. Was that the virgin from the Arcadia auction? Had Ten actually bought her? And what the fuck was she still doing here?

Before I could say anything, Ten stepped in front of me, blocking the woman from sight. “Get out,” he growled. “Get the fuck out now.”

Interesting. Considering the woman looked at least as young as Isabel, Ten’s high horse wasn’t looking quite so high. Then again, that woman wasn’t my daughter, so I guess I couldn’t talk.

I’d said my piece though and now he needed to deal with the fallout.

We both did.

Without a word, I turned, pulled open the door and walked back out again.

My driver was at the curb, so I got into the car, pulling out my phone to check my messages. There was one from Isabel: *Where did you go?*

To see your father, I texted back. *I told him. I also told him not to speak with you until you were ready.*

There was a moment's pause then her reply came back. *Ugh.*

The simple one-word answer made me smile, and I felt curiously lighter despite the pain in my jaw from Ten's fist and the wreckage of our friendship laid at my feet. *I'll tell you more when I get home,* I texted back. *And don't get up. I want you naked, in bed and waiting for me.*

There was another pause, then she texted, *I have work today.*

No, you don't, I replied. *Daddy's orders.*

There were benefits to being the boss and this was one of them.

Isabel texted back a short, *yes, Daddy,* along with a heart-eyes emoji, and I was still smiling as I instructed the driver to take me home.

There was one other person who needed to know and that was Atlas, so I texted him, and ten seconds later, my phone started ringing. I hit the answer button because I wasn't going to put off the inevitable.

"I've already been punched twice by Ten," I said to him by way of greeting. "You can have one too if you like."

There was a brief silence, then Atlas said, "Are you fucking insane?"

"If I am then so is Isabel."

"You both are," Atlas observed, either not hearing or not giving a shit about the warning note in my voice. "What the fuck were you thinking? She's twenty years—"

"I know exactly how young she is, believe me." I didn't want to have the same fucking conversation twice. "It was a

mutual decision.”

“Fuck,” Atlas said succinctly. “How did Ten take it?”

“How do you think he took it? Badly. He punched me in the face twice and told me to get out.”

“And Isabel?” Atlas was a laidback guy on the surface, but I could hear low note of anger in his voice. He didn’t know Isabel quite as well, but he was protective of her all the same.

“Isabel is happy. She’s a grown woman who makes her own decisions and if you’re worried about her, you can ask her yourself.”

“Fine. I might just do that.” Then the call ended.

Well, Atlas could call Isabel and she’d no doubt rip him a new one. She wasn’t shy about it. She was my little girl, and she obeyed so sweetly, but she had the heart of a lion, the stubbornness of a mule, and could stand up for herself without my help.

Atlas wouldn’t know what hit him.

I glanced down at my phone again, debated for a moment.

Then I made one last call.

Isabel

I didn't want to talk to Dad, nor did I want to think about his reaction to me and Caleb getting together. However, I didn't mind ranting to Atlas when he called to grill me, about how everyone underestimated young women and yes, I was very aware of the power gap between Caleb and I, and yes, I knew it wasn't just about age, but experience too. Then I went on to lecture him about my own agency and how it was my choice and how dare he treat me as if I didn't know my own mind.

I knew it was just concern, but still, by the time Caleb got back to the penthouse, I was in a mood. Especially now Dad knew about us. I hadn't contemplated his response too deeply because I hadn't wanted to think about it, but it made me feel unsettled and weird and angry.

He'd be furious and he'd blame Caleb, even though the whole thing had been my decision. Fucking patriarchy.

Caleb came into the living room after I'd just gotten off the phone with Atlas, a darkening bruise on his strong jawline. No surprises about where that came from.

He stopped in the doorway and stared at me, his black eyes sparking with annoyance. "Why aren't you naked?"

I didn't say a word, merely shrugging off the robe I was wearing and letting it fall. I was naked underneath it so really,

he couldn't complain. "That's from Dad, isn't it?" I came over to where he stood, reaching to touch the bruise. "He was really mad, wasn't he?"

"He wasn't exactly singing with joy, no." Caleb didn't move as I touched him, his gaze dropping down over my naked body. He didn't make any effort to hide his hunger and he didn't flinch as my fingers brushed over the prickly skin of his injured jaw. "But that's his problem. It isn't yours." He reached for me, one hand sliding from my hip to the small of my back, while the other slid between my legs, stroking me and making me wet within seconds.

Pleasure crackled like lightning through me, but I ignored it, because now reality was hitting there were a whole lot of things I hadn't considered. "It is my problem," I said. "You're his friend. If you hadn't done anything with me then—"

"He was always going to have a problem with it, and I knew that." Caleb rubbed his thumb gently over my clit and making me tremble. "I knew that the moment I first touched you. It didn't make me stop, Isabel, and it's not going to make me stop now."

My mouth was dry, my heartbeat racing. Pleasure was beginning to blur the edges of my thinking, and I didn't want him to stop. But this was important. "I don't want your friendship to be ruined because of me."

"If our friendship is ruined it won't be because of you." His hand shifted as he slid a finger inside me, pushing in deep, testing me. His black gaze was fierce, and I could see something hard and sharp in it, a tension in his tall, muscular body that hadn't been there last night.

Seeing Dad had obviously not been great for him and no matter what he said, I knew that if being with me destroyed his friendship with Dad, it would hurt him.

I kept one palm pressed to his hard chest, the other stroking his bruised jaw, my hips flexing with the movement of his hand. He needed this from me, I could sense it, some pleasure to combat his worry. "What can I do?" I asked. "What do you need from me, Daddy?"

He took his hand away from me abruptly and let me go. Then he stood back and took off his clothes, ripping at them as if he couldn't get rid of them fast enough. Naked, he bent to grab his wallet from his jeans and he took out a condom, tearing the packet open then rolling the latex down with a casual movement that had my mouth going even drier than it already was.

"I thought next time I was going to do that for you," I said.

"Not now." He reached for me, grabbing my hips, propelling me across the room and up against the cold glass of the huge floor to ceiling windows. I gasped, his ferocity taking me by surprise. He didn't wait, his hand sliding behind my left knee and lifting it up, hooking it around his waist, then he slammed himself inside me in one hard, possessive thrust.

I cried out, arching against the window, feeling the stretch and burn of sensitive tissues that had already gotten a major workout the night before. My hands were against his chest, half holding him away so I could breathe through the twin sensations of discomfort and pleasure.

"Take me." He thrust deeper, impaling me, stretching me, pressing me against the unforgiving glass. "Take my cock, little girl."

The window was cold and hard at my back, while Caleb was hot and hard against my front, and I squirmed against him, trying to breathe, trying to adjust to him inside me. "Yes, Daddy."

"And what do you say?" The edge of demand was in his voice. "What do you want me to do to you? I need the words."

His whole body was tense, so I slid my hands up his chest to his shoulders, digging my fingers into the heavy muscle there. His skin was smooth and even though I'd tasted every inch of it the night before I wanted to taste it very badly now. But I remained where I was, sandwiched between him and the glass, looking up into his battered face and the black maelstrom of his gaze.

"I want you to fuck me, Daddy," I whispered.

He put his hands on the window on either side of my head and bent, his mouth covering mine. A devouring, hungry kiss that gave no quarter, leaving me with no option but to take it. And I wanted to. The meeting with Dad had clearly affected him and now it was obvious that he wanted to stake his claim on me.

I had no problem with that whatsoever.

I slid my fingers into the thick, black silk of his hair as he began to move, thrusting into me, each flex of his hips shoving me against the glass. In a dim part of my mind, I knew that we were on show, that probably all of Manhattan could see us, but maybe that had been his intention.

Maybe he wanted them to see us.

Maybe he wanted everyone to know that I was his.

I held tight to his hair, glorying in the feel of hot, powerful body slamming into mine as he fucked me up against the glass. There was no tenderness, no gentleness. It was all raw need and pent-up fury, and I let it hammer at me the way his cock hammered at me, driving me harder against the window.

It was glorious and painful and so good, the pleasure indescribable. And when he slid his hands beneath my ass and lifted me completely off the floor, my legs wrapping around his waist, it got even more intense.

I came, screaming against his mouth, and he didn't stop. He only fucked me harder, sliding a hand between my thighs to pinch my clit, making yet another orgasm crash over me so close to the first that this time I could only give a soundless cry. Then he growled against my neck and bit me, his teeth sharp against my skin as the orgasm came for him too.

There was a moment of silence, the room echoing with the sound of our combined breathing, harsh and fast, then Caleb said roughly, "You should know what I am. You should know my past, and you should hear it from me."

I was still pressed to the glass, his body against mine a wall of hot skin and hard muscle. The air was full of the earthy scent of sweat, sex, and masculine spice and for a second I

didn't want to hear it. I'd apparently forgotten my need to know everything about him. It didn't matter. Knowing wouldn't change the way I felt about him, not a single iota.

My hands were still tangled in his hair, the heavy strands silky against my fingers, and I kept them there. "I don't need to know," I said, my voice ragged. "Your past doesn't matter to me."

"It might not matter to you, but it matters to Ten." Caleb shifted against me. "Better you hear the worst from me rather than him."

I kept my legs tight around his waist, holding him to me, wanting to keep him close. "It won't change anything. It won't change the way I feel about you."

Caleb stared down at me, the darkness in his gaze consuming. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not giving you up, Isabel. Telling Ten makes this long term, understand? So, it doesn't matter whether it changes things for you or not, you're still mine. I told you that."

Perhaps he'd meant to scare me, but he'd already been very clear about what to expect from him and I'd made my decision. I wasn't going back on it.

I didn't care what he'd done. I knew what kind of man he was deep down, even if he didn't. He might think he was the monster in the labyrinth, but he'd never been that to me. He was a good man, capable of kindness and gentleness. Loyal and protective and caring of the people who mattered to him.

"Good," I said. "Because it looks like you're stuck with me since I'm not going anywhere either."

He said nothing, though he tried to pull away again. I didn't release my legs, keeping them tight around him, and he so relaxed, his body holding me pinned to the glass. "You know about Old Nick?" he said finally. "He was king of the criminal scene for decades. My father used to work for him. Right up until the day he kept some of Old Nick's drug money to buy me a bike. He thought he could get away with it, but no one steals from Old Nick. Nick's MO was to shoot first, ask

questions later, and not just the thief. He punished the whole family too. My father knew there was no escape. So, he turned the gas on and killed himself, my mother and my little sister. I came home late from school to find them all dead.”

A pulse of horror went through me. He’d told me that story a week or so ago, but I thought he’d been talking about other people. He hadn’t, though, had he? He’d been talking about his own family.

There was nothing I could say. I could see the glitter of grief in his eyes and the echo of his own horror too, blunted after so many years, but still there, and all I could do was tighten my fingers in his hair, keep my legs around his waist, holding him tight.

“I’ll never know why he didn’t wait for me,” Caleb went on roughly. “Why he only left me to find them.”

The words chilled me. He sounded...puzzled almost. As if he’d wanted to have died with his family, but that couldn’t be right, surely?

Maybe it is. Ever heard of survivor’s guilt?

I searched his face, feeling cold inside. “You didn’t... You didn’t want to have died with them, did you?”

He wasn’t looking at me, I realized. He was looking past me, out the window. “Not then,” he said. “But later, I wondered if that wouldn’t have been better.”

The chill deepened, icy tendrils threading through my blood. He couldn’t think he’d have been better off if he’d died. He couldn’t.

I pulled hard on his hair to get his attention. “No,” I said fiercely. “No, Caleb. It wouldn’t have been better.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “There are many people who would disagree with you.”

“Maybe, but I’m not one of them. I wouldn’t have wanted you to not be in my life, Caleb. That wouldn’t have been better for me.”

He stared at me for a long moment and what was going through his head I had no idea. Then he went on, “I ran away after my family died. I was on the streets for a while, which was where I met your father. Eventually we were taken in by Old Nick. I had no idea that my father had worked for him and maybe if I’d known I wouldn’t have accepted the job offer. But I didn’t know. I was tired of having no money and nowhere to live, and it seemed like a good option. I climbed the ranks, eventually becoming his right-hand man, his top enforcer. When people needed punishing, I was the one who did it. And I was the one who kept them in line.” The sharp end of an uncompromising edge glittered in his eyes, the echo of the man he’d once been. “I liked it.” His voice was flat. “I was tired of being powerless and being Nick’s right hand gave me a lot of power. But there was no room for mercy. There was no room for kindness. Those were weaknesses and I got rid of them as soon as I could. It was kill or be killed and I wasn’t going to die like the rest of my family. I wasn’t going to let my father take that from me too.”

I could hear the anger in him and okay, maybe I did understand. His father had left him with him nothing, no explanation, no warning. He’d been a boy on his own and everything he’d ever loved and ever known, his whole life, had been taken from him. In his mind, it *would* have been better not to be here. To be with his family instead.

Yet he wasn’t and the fact that he was standing right in front of me now meant he’d had a strong survival instinct. He hadn’t laid down and died. He’d got rid of certain parts of himself, the softer parts. The human parts. And he’d lived. No wonder he was so angry, though.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said hoarsely. “I’m glad you survived.”

He gave a mirthless smile. “You might change your mind later. Old Nick certainly did. He got nervous that I’d remember his role in my family’s death, and that I was after revenge. He also thought I was going to take his empire. He was right, on both counts. He tried to get rid of me, but I got in first.”

It was clear what he meant. I'd never met Old Nick. Caleb had always kept me well away from him, but the things I'd heard about him...

“Good riddance,” I said. “Better him than you.”

Caleb's smile turned bitter. He lifted his hands and cupped my face, his thumb stroking over my lower lip. “Such a fierce little girl. I'm a murderer, Isabel. I'm just like my father. Doesn't that bother you even a little bit?”

“No,” I said honestly. “He was going to kill you, but you got in first. You were just trying to survive.”

“Some would say that isn't any kind of justification.”

“Yeah, well, I'm not ‘some’.” I opened my mouth and licked his thumb, then I took the tip between my teeth and nipped him. “I told you. I don't care what you did back then. The past is over and done with. You're not part of that world anymore. You're alive and you're here with me and that's all that matters.”

“If you think the business world is any different then you're naive.” His gaze dropped to my mouth. “It might not involve murder, but I can and still do destroy people from the boardroom as well as I ever did from Old Nick's club.”

“It's different.”

“If you're trying to imagine I'm some kind of saint—”

I bit him again, harder this time, making him break off. “You? A saint? Please. I might be naive, but even I know you're not exactly pure as the driven snow. Why would you think I give a single fuck about that? And why are you so wedded to the idea that you're a horrific murderer anyway?”

He pulled his thumb from my mouth and gripped my chin hard, his gaze a black storm. “It's probably best if we don't have this conversation.”

“It's because you want to believe there's hope for you, don't you?” I ignored his grip. I ignored everything but the fury in his eyes and the need that lay behind it, because it was

all very clear where it was coming from. “You want to believe there’s redemption.”

Shock flickered through his eyes, gone so fast I almost believed it had never been there at all. But it had and I knew what it meant all the same.

He *did* want that. He wanted to believe there was hope.

My hands tightened in his hair, because even though he had a grip on me, I had a grip on him, too, and I wasn’t letting go. I brought his face close, and I looked into his eyes. “You don’t need to be redeemed, Caleb Cross. You might think there’s a monster inside of you, but I can see the truth. I’ve always seen it. You’re a good man whether you believe that or not, and you always have been.” *Why else would I fall in love with you?* I couldn’t say that out loud, not yet. I didn’t have the courage.

He was silent a moment. Then he leaned forward and kissed me again, hard, and I could taste his hunger. He might not admit it, but he wanted to believe me. He wanted it badly. So, I kissed him back, melting against him, letting him know without words that my belief in him was strong and that I trusted him.

The kiss became hot, the desperation falling away to leave behind it a slow sweetness that had me trembling. He released my chin, his hands stroking down my sides as if he wanted to check that I was still all there. Then he lifted his mouth from mine. “I have something else to tell you.”

I wasn’t ready for the kiss to end, so I lifted my lips to find his again. “What?”

But he pulled back and looked down at me. “I’ve arranged a meeting with your grandmother.”

Caleb

I sabel's eyes went wide. "You what?"

The glass around her body had fogged from the heat of her skin and that heat was seeping into me, too. It felt so fucking good. She had felt so fucking good. All silky and soft and wet for me.

I hadn't expected to feel so hungry for her the moment I'd got back from seeing Ten, but the moment I'd laid eyes on her, the most intense possessiveness had risen inside me. The pain from the punches Ten had delivered made my jaw ache and I knew I'd all but wrecked our friendship. But she was mine all the same and I was going to keep her.

Ten might be her father, but I was her daddy, and she was going to be my little girl from now on.

I hadn't questioned the need to take her — she'd been wet and willing — so I had. But I'd also known that I was going to need to lay the truth out for her too. The truth about myself. Because if I didn't, Ten would, and I didn't want her hearing it from him. It had to come from me.

I don't know what I'd expected. I certainly hadn't anticipated the grief that had gripped me when I'd told her about my own father, a grief I hadn't felt for years, buried as it was under so many layers of rage.

I hadn't expected to feel again the agony of not understanding why he'd left me behind either, as sharp as it had been that day. I hadn't let myself think of that for a long, long time, because it changed nothing. I was still alive, and they were dead, and fury was better than bewilderment any day of the week.

It had to have been her ripping those confessions from me and recalling old emotions I'd thought I'd cut out long ago. Her and her warmth and her softness. Her and the grief in her eyes. Grief for me.

I'd had to move on from that quickly, telling her the truth about Old Nick's death, but she hadn't seemed to care. She hadn't seemed to care about who I'd been back then.

She'd thought I was searching for redemption, but she was wrong. I didn't want redemption. What kind of redemption was there for a man with twenty years of violence behind him anyway?

I was a good man, she'd said, and then she'd kissed me as if she believed it. And for a moment I'd almost believed her, too. But that was a path I didn't — couldn't — go down. I had other things to deal with anyway, such as the meeting with Charlotte Hamilton.

Calling that woman had been the last thing I'd wanted to do. Exposing Isabel to the Hamiltons after a week of trying to keep her away from them had gone against every instinct I possessed. But keeping them out of her life forever was never going to happen, not when they wanted to be there. I was rich and powerful, but I didn't have the two hundred years of history and lineage behind me that they did.

Plus, even though I could have kept Isabel locked up and safe, for all my talk of keeping her in a cage, after seeing Ten I knew I couldn't do that to her.

I couldn't be him, keeping her from the only family she had apart from him. Not when I knew how painful that was. I'd lost my family and I wouldn't wish that agony, that loneliness, on Isabel.

It was a risk. I didn't know what the Hamiltons might want from her and what they'd tell her. They were powerful enough to do anything they wanted. But Juliana had been Charlotte's daughter and Charlotte wouldn't hurt her. She only wanted to know her.

So, on the way back to my penthouse, I'd called Charlotte's personal secretary and demanded I speak with her. I'd been confident she'd want to speak to me since she knew who I was and that I was close to Isabel. And sure enough, she did. It had been a brief conversation, enough to set up a meeting time. We'd had a brief, tense discussion about where — Charlotte had wanted it at the Hamilton's New York mansion, but I'd insisted it be on neutral ground, so I'd given her Arcadia's address. If she knew what the club actually was, she gave no sign, merely agreeing and saying she'd be there tomorrow night. If she'd found me calling her out of the blue and offering her the granddaughter Ten and I had been hiding from her all these years a shock, she gave no sign of that either.

"I called her this morning," I said to Isabel now. "After I saw Ten."

Isabel was still staring at me as if she'd never seen me before in her entire life. "But...why?"

"I always thought Ten was wrong not to tell you about Juliana," I said. "You need to know where you came from Isabel. You need to know about your mom. I didn't know her that well — Ten was a possessive asshole about her. But your grandmother does. She can tell you all you need to know."

Shock was written all over her face. "But isn't the whole reason I'm a prisoner here is because you *didn't* want me going anywhere near the Hamiltons?"

"It was." I held her gaze. "I was wrong."

Abruptly the shock disappeared, her green eyes dancing instead. "Would you mind saying that again? And let me get my phone. I want to record you saying the words 'I was wrong' for posterity."

I let out a breath, watching delight flicker in her eyes, the tension coiling inside me loosening. She was so beautiful when she teased me. I was half-inclined to let her. “What? And have you play it back to me at every opportunity? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Spoilsport.” She became serious again. “But is it true, Cal? You really organized a meeting with my grandmother?”

I lifted my hand, cupped her face, her skin silky and soft against my palm. “Yes. Tomorrow night at Arcadia.”

“Arcadia? Seriously?”

“It’s neutral ground.”

“Okay.” This time the amusement in her gaze was wicked. “So, I’m meeting my grandmother at your glorified sex club. That’s not awkward at all.”

I pinched her cheek, feeling a smile tug at the corners of my mouth. “Behave,” I murmured. “It’s not a sex club.”

“Well, we had sex there.”

“Little girl.”

She grinned then turned her cheek against my palm. “Thank you. I just...thank you.”

Such a simple thing to say, yet I could hear the emotion in her voice. This meant a lot to her, this was important. A heavy warmth gathered in my chest. I hadn’t realized I was capable of giving joy to another person, let alone her. I hadn’t thought I’d even care. But I did care. It seemed making her happy was important to me.

What? You think that makes you worthy of her? You’re not and you never have been.

I shoved the thought away. My worthiness or otherwise had never been the point; she was mine regardless. I could enjoy her gratitude though. Because this *was* for her. Not for me, not for Ten and not for Atlas. Not for my company.

This was entirely for Isabel Fox.

She looked up at me, her gaze fierce with an emotion I couldn't quite read. "You mean a lot to me," she said. "You know that don't you?"

The warmth inside me become hotter, burning in my chest. It was dangerous, her feeling something for me, because she shouldn't. I could look after her, protect her, give her pleasure, buy her anything her heart desired, but if she wanted anything emotional from me, I couldn't give it to her. I *wouldn't* give it to her.

My heart was dead, and I'd killed it years ago.

I stroked her cheek, relishing the silken feel of her skin. The way she looked at me was addictive, but despite how much I liked it, I had to be clear about what she could expect. "Don't turn this into something it isn't, Isabel."

Her gaze narrowed. "And what exactly what am I turning this into?"

"I can't be important to you," I clarified. "I can't be someone you care for. I'll be your daddy, your protector. I'll be your lover. But I can't be anything more. So, if you're looking for a boyfriend, or a partner or a husband, you'll have to look elsewhere."

Little sparks glittered in her eyes, that fierce emotion turning into anger. "I don't believe I ever said I was looking for any of those things, but okay."

I'd hurt her, but too bad. She had to know. "Maybe not now, but you will at some point."

"Except I can't look elsewhere, can I? Because apparently, I'm yours and will be for some indeterminate length of time. And I don't imagine you'll be happy with me finding someone else."

Little witch. Trust her to zero in on the essence of the problem. Which was no, I wasn't going to let her find someone else. I'd claimed her and I'd likely destroyed one of my closest friendships because I wanted her; there was no coming back from that. Plus, there was the intense possessiveness that surged inside me at the thought of her

being with another man. That would happen over my dead fucking body.

So, if you can't have her, no one can?

Jesus, this was why I couldn't get any more involved with her than I already was. That darkness in me, that jealousy, that possessiveness, was already hungry. The fury that had ensured that when I put Old Nick down, he stayed down.

My father's blood ran in my veins and what he did, I was more than capable of too. I couldn't expose Isabel to that.

Love had killed my family and I wasn't going anywhere near it.

Tension crawled through me, and I knew I'd ruined the moment of sweetness between us. But I couldn't let her think that there would be more of those moments. I couldn't let that warmth in my chest get any deeper.

"No," I said. "No, I wouldn't."

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it again and I couldn't have said what she was thinking. Then strangely, the glitter of her anger faded, her frown easing.

She touched my cheek and then brushed her fingertips along the side of my jaw, where Ten had punched me. It ached. "Let me do something for you, Daddy," she murmured. "Anything, just tell me what you need."

Generous little girl. I'd been expecting her to argue not stroke my cheek and offer herself to me. "You heard what I said, didn't you?"

"Yes." She traced the line of my lower lip, her touch almost unbearably gentle.

"And you're not bothered?"

"No. Why would I be?" Her hand curved behind my neck, her fingers threading through my hair as she urged my head down. "I don't want anyone else," she whispered. "I only want you, Daddy." Then she pulled me down further until her lips met mine and she kissed me. It wasn't a hungry kiss, it was

sweet, so very sweet. And gentle too, her tongue beginning to explore my mouth, all tentative and hesitant.

It was so much like the kiss she'd given me in Arcadia that night, after we'd had sex and just before she'd walked away, that I actually had to catch my fucking breath.

There was a tenderness to it that I'd never experienced in my entire goddamned life, and if I'd had any sense, I would have pulled away. I would have ordered her to stop, to obey me, put her on her knees and taken her hard.

But I didn't. I remained still, holding her against the window, not kissing her back and not moving, letting her kiss me so carefully, so gently. I'd never known a kiss could be so sweet. I could feel the inevitable hunger rise, dark and demanding, but I didn't let it out. I wanted this. I'd thought I'd done everything there was to do sexually, but I hadn't experienced this. Softness, tenderness. I shouldn't want it, yet...

Her hands moved to my chest, stroking. "Let me take care of you, Daddy," she murmured against my mouth. "Let me make you feel good."

"Isabel...."

"Please."

I found myself powerless to stop her as she made me let her back down onto the floor. Then she dealt with the condom herself before taking my hand and leading me over to the couch. She pushed at me, so I sat, and she knelt at my feet, between my knees.

She ran her hands up my thighs to my stomach, her fingers light and cool against my hot skin. I was getting hard again, and when her hand moved to grip my cock, I growled, but didn't move.

Her head bent over me, her breath warm on my skin and my muscles tensed as her tongue touched the head of my dick, giving me a light lick. She did it again and I wanted to thrust into her mouth, but I didn't. I kept still as she began a series of light licks and nips, and kisses. "You taste so good, Daddy,"

she murmured. "I love sucking you." Then she took me inside her hot mouth, one hand gripping me, the other stroking my stomach and my thighs. She was so gentle, touching me with care and a tenderness I'd never had from another person before. No, it had always been rough, always violent.

No one had touched me before as I mattered.

I should have ended things right then, thrust my fingers in her hair and wrapped the red silk of it around my wrist. Fucked her mouth until she cried, but again, I stayed still. And when she took that mouth away, I didn't protest, I just sat there, hard and aching, need pulsing inside me as she found a condom and put it on me herself with those cool, light fingers.

Then she climbed into my lap, facing me, and eased herself down onto my aching cock. Her eyes had darkened, the slick heat of her pussy gripping me tight, and she put her hands on my chest and leaned forward, kissing me as she began to move. I could taste myself in her mouth, as well as the sweetness that was all her, as pure an aphrodisiac as there ever was, and then we were moving together, a slow rise and fall.

I settled my hands on her hips, not gripping tight, only holding her, but it wasn't enough. I needed her skin against mine, so I slid my arms around her, pulling her close, turning the kiss hotter, more demanding.

I wanted this. I wanted her against me. I wanted her flavor in my mouth, her pussy wrapped around my cock, her cool hands on my skin, touching me gently.

I wanted Isabel, her brave, passionate, stubborn spirit. Her fire. Her generosity. Her caring nature. I wanted all of her, because for some reason, she wanted me. Despite there being nothing but a dead, bitter wasteland where my soul should be. Despite violence and force being all I knew. Despite how I'd told her that now she was mine, she would never be free.

I should have pushed her away, but I didn't.

I held her closer, held her hard against me instead and I moved with her, slow and deep, pleasure building higher and

higher, until at the very end I put my hand between her thighs and brushed her sensitive little clit, giving her that last bit of friction.

Then orgasm hit us both and she gasped into my mouth as the pleasure gripped me in a fist so tight, I couldn't breathe.

"I love you," I heard her say softly, before all thought was crushed beneath the weight of it. "I love you so much."

Isabel

I didn't hear from Dad that night or the next day, not that I was waiting for a call from him. I definitely wasn't. And it was fine, because I didn't want to talk to him anyway, not when I had the upcoming meeting with my grandmother to look forward to.

That morning I fussed around with finding an appropriate dress to wear, settling finally on a pretty green wrap dress that I'd found in the depths of my closet back in my Village apartment.

Caleb had once again insisted on me taking the day off and hey, if he was going to give me a day's leave with full pay, who was I to argue? I was going to have to talk with him about my future at Cross International, and my career in general since me sleeping with the boss didn't feel like a power move. Not that he would have taken advantage of me or his position, it was just that *I* didn't like it. I was only working there because of Dad anyway.

I didn't want to think of Dad though, or my future at Fox Tech, at least not until I'd talked to my grandmother.

Caleb had gone to work, and he didn't get back till later, so he wasn't around to distract me as I got ready for the upcoming meeting.

I should have been thinking about my grandmother, not Caleb, I guess, but my head was full of him and the day before, when he'd told me about not being able to be a partner or boyfriend. Which a) I hadn't asked him to be and b) I didn't want him to be my boyfriend anyway. That made me feel like a teenager messing around with the boy next door, not my father's best friend, a man nearly twenty years older than me.

You know what you want him to be.

I wanted him to be mine and forever. Because it was true what I'd told him. I didn't want another man, not ever. It would always be him, that's why I'd made him feel good the day before. Why I'd kissed him, why I hadn't had sex, but made love to him. Because while he might not be able to give me anything emotionally, I could give it to him. I could let him know that he was important to me, that he was special and too bad if he didn't like that.

I hadn't intended to whisper 'I love you' as the orgasm had hit me, but the emotion had clenched tight as a fist around my heart and the words had come out before I could think better of it.

He hadn't reacted, so he probably hadn't heard, which was just as well.

That was a conversation we'd have to have at some point but not now.

There was a small cold spot in my heart, a small sliver of ice that had lodged there when he'd said he couldn't give me anything more, and while I could tell myself all I liked that I didn't want more, I did. I wanted his heart. I wanted him to be mine just as I was his.

Why would he ever do that?

I ignored the ice, and I ignored that thought too. Somehow, if I wanted him, I was going to have to close the distance he was dead set on putting between us and I had no idea how to do that. But I was determined to find out.

Except that would have to wait until after I met Charlotte Hamilton.

I fiddled with my hair and my makeup endlessly before my ride arrived. I was going to meet Caleb at Arcadia and he'd provided me with a car.

I was nervous. No, scratch that, I was terrified. Not that Charlotte Hamilton would do anything to me, but that she'd take one look at me, find nothing in me worth knowing, then turn around and walk back out again.

I mean, my own father couldn't even bear to be around me so why would my grandmother?

Then again, Caleb saw something in me. He wanted me. He'd put a treasured friendship on the line for me, so there had to be something worthwhile in me. I still felt guilty that it was me who'd led to the ruin of his friendship with Dad, but... well. Maybe I'd have to deal with that myself.

Maybe instead of avoiding Dad, I should confront him.

Again, though, that could wait.

Caleb met me at the Arcadia entrance. It was still early, and the place looked more like a respectable, elegant house than it did a bar, and not at all like a sex club.

The chandelier glittered and the glints caught in Caleb's dark eyes as he let me inside, and a wave of heat washed through me as I saw the blatant appreciation in his expression. It made me feel good, made me feel more confident. Okay, so I didn't look awful then. Good to know.

He must have seen my nervousness, because he gave me one of his sudden, rare smiles. "She'll love you, Isabel. You're beautiful. You're also brave, fierce, and smart. She won't know what hit her."

My heart clenched tight at the words and the conviction in his eyes. He believed what he said and that steadied me. God knew I didn't want to be a disappointment to her the way I'd always been to Dad, but maybe I wouldn't be. Caleb thought I was worth something and while I didn't need a man's validation, I appreciated his faith in me.

He took my hand, his fingers warm and strong in mine, and we went up the stairs together. Mercifully the room he'd

set aside for my grandmother wasn't the same room he and I had had our first encounter in — that would have way too awkward — but one at the end of the hallway, not so much a study as a gracious drawing room, with big windows facing the street. There were couches in soft gray velvet, the carpet pale, and cushions in dusty colors that complemented the muted tones of everything else.

A restful, quiet room.

An older woman who looked to be in her seventies sat on one of the couches. Her hair was bone white and flowed in careful waves to her shoulders, framing a strongly featured face. She was dressed to perfection in elegant black slacks and a crisp white blouse. Simple clothes yet expertly tailored and no doubt costing the earth. Her eyes were green, and they were familiar because I saw eyes the same color staring back at me from the mirror every morning.

Charlotte Hamilton. My grandmother.

There was a moment's silence and then my grandmother nodded at Caleb. "Thank you, Mr. Cross," she said in a cool voice. "I will speak with my granddaughter alone, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Caleb said with equal cool. "She's all yours. My security will be outside." Then with a final squeeze of my hand, he let me go and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

Charlotte said nothing for a moment, surveying me.

My heartbeat thumped uncomfortably in my head.

"He seems to be very concerned that I'm going to do something horrible to you," she said in tones as crisp as her tailoring.

I eyed her. "And are you?"

For a moment her expression remained cool. "You think I would?"

"No. Though you'd dearly like to get one over on my father, I suspect."

She nodded, though I didn't think it was in agreement. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yes. And Caleb too."

"Yet Mr. Cross was the one who approached me to organize this meeting," she pointed out calmly. "And apparently your father doesn't know about it. I'm sure there's a reason for that."

"Caleb did it for me," I admitted. "I...wanted to meet you. I've wanted to meet you for years."

Charlotte's sharp features softened slightly. "Your father made that difficult, didn't he?"

"My father made it impossible. Though I'm not sure he's entirely to blame." I stared at her. "You were going to take me away from him."

"I was. He was a foolish upstart who didn't deserve my daughter." She paused a moment and gave me a slow, careful scan. "He didn't deserve you either."

I flushed, defensive anger on Dad's behalf gathering inside me. "You don't know me, so you really can't comment."

Strangely, the cool expression left her face, a faint smile taking its place. "Now, that sounds like Juliana." There was warmth in her voice now. "You look like her very much."

I didn't want to admit that Dad hadn't talked about her — it felt like a betrayal — so all I said was, "What was she like?"

Something of my anguish must have showed in my face because Charlotte said, "I don't blame you, child, to be clear. Not for her death. That was no one's fault, least of all yours."

I wanted to say that I didn't think it was my fault, because I didn't like the idea of this stranger — that's who she essentially was to me — seeing right down to the doubt in my soul. But I couldn't deny it. It was true. There was that small part of me deep down that believed I was to blame for my mother's death. That if she hadn't had me, she wouldn't have died.

“I didn’t say it was my fault,” I said, trying to regain some dignity.

But her sharp green gaze missed nothing. “He blamed you, did he?”

She didn’t explain who ‘he’ was. She didn’t have to.

“No,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure it was true. “He didn’t. But you should know that her death devastated him. He loved her.”

“She wasn’t his to love. He stole her.”

“Look,” I said before I could stop myself. “I know she was your daughter, and you didn’t approve. But it was years ago, and you can’t change anything now. I don’t care about your argument with Dad, I’m here to talk to you about my mother.”

It was perhaps an unwise thing to say, but I was good at saying unwise things. And it didn’t seem to count against me, because Charlotte’s features softened even further, her smile wider and warmer. “Oh yes,” she said approvingly, “you are so like Juliana. You want to know what she was like? Well, she always said what she thought and didn’t much care if people liked it or not.” Her mouth quirked. “Especially if that person was me.”

There was something about the way she admitted it — maybe even that she admitted it at all — that made me like her. “I suppose she got that from her mother too,” I said.

Charlotte gave a surprised sounding laugh. “Yes, perhaps she did.” She paused a moment then patted the couch next to her. “Come here. Come and sit down and I’ll tell you about my daughter.”

So, I did.

Juliana Hamilton it seemed had been a tempestuous woman, fiery in her passions, fiercely loyal and very outspoken, and also very much loved. Her death had devastated the family and they’d been even more devastated when Dad had hidden me away.

Perhaps if they'd tried to talk to him like normal people, it wouldn't have turned into the major deal it was, but their arrogance combined with Dad's paranoia had turned my presence into a huge drama.

I told Charlotte that and in no uncertain terms, but she didn't seem offended, only agreed that in retrospect they could have been more accommodating. Then again, the Hamilton's weren't used to being accommodating. They were used to getting their own way and when they didn't, their actions were...inappropriate to say the least.

We talked for a long time. Charlotte probed gently about my childhood, but I was still feeling defensive of Dad, so I didn't give too much away. She also wanted to know where Caleb fitted in all of this, and asked me quite a few questions about him, too. Again though, I decided I wasn't going to give her anything about him either. His secrets were mine to keep, no one else's.

However, I couldn't quite keep everything from her.

"You're in love with him," she said, after she'd asked a question about Caleb, and I'd been far too vague with my answer. "And don't try to deny it. I saw it the moment you came into the room with him."

I could have denied it, but that would look like protesting too much and anyway, why should I deny my feelings for him? He was too important, and I was done with pretending. "Yes," I said. "And before you say anything, I don't care that he's too old for me and I don't care if you think it's wrong. I know what I feel. I might be young, but I'm not stupid. Also, I know about his past and all the rumors about him, and no, they don't bother me."

Charlotte eyed me, her mouth pursed as if she was trying to decide how she felt about that. Then she said, "Stephen is fifteen years older than I am, though people back then didn't really comment about our ages. I certainly didn't notice and neither did he. You'll need to be strong to manage a man like Caleb Cross, very strong indeed, but..." She smiled. "You're

my granddaughter, so I think you'll manage him very well indeed."

I let out a breath. "I'm not sure he feels the same." Another inadvisable thing to confess, but then I was the queen of saying inadvisable things.

"I see," she said, "So you haven't told him how you feel."

"No," I admitted.

"And you don't think he feels that way about you?"

"He told me very clearly that he doesn't have anything to offer me emotionally, so no." I ignored the ache in my heart, the nagging want that wouldn't leave me alone. What did it matter that he didn't feel the same way about me? I'd had that for years from Dad and I was fine. I'd take what I could get from Caleb.

But should you? Shouldn't you want more?

"You want him to though," Charlotte said quietly, watching me.

I looked away, my hands in fists in my lap, desperate to deny it and yet not being able to. Not when the truth was likely written all over my face.

"Juliana loved your father very much," she said after a moment. "She loved fiercely and completely, and she loved him. And...I knew he loved her in return. She was, I admit, happy with him. That's why you shouldn't blame yourself for her death. She never told me about you — she was punishing me I think — but I know that she would have wanted you so much. She would have loved you fiercely and if there had been a choice between your life and hers, she would have chosen you every time."

My eyes filled with unexpected tears, my throat closing, leaving me unable to speak.

"You deserve that kind of love, Isabel," Charlotte went on. "You should have it. And if Caleb Cross is the man you want it from then you need to demand it, and if he doesn't give it to you, then it's because he's not worth your time, understand?"

“Perhaps I’m just not worth it,” I said, forcing out the words, not wanting to bare my soul to this woman and yet wanting someone to talk to. Another woman who would maybe understand.

Charlotte reached out, the rings on her long, slender fingers flashing in the light as she brushed my cheek gently with her fingertips. “A woman like you is always worth it, my child. You are strong, I can see that already, and you need a man who will be your equal in spirit and most definitely your equal in love. If he can’t give that to you then he is the weak one. He is the one who isn’t worth it, not you.”

For some reason I found her light touch immensely reassuring. “And if he won’t give it to me?”

“Then you must walk away,” she said simply.

I swallowed, the thought leaving me bereft. Because where would I walk to? There was only Caleb and Dad in my life, and if I didn’t have them... “I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Charlotte smiled and this time it was full of all the motherly love I’d never had. “Yes, you do. You will come to me, of course.” Then she took my hand, and I could feel her strength. “You are not alone, Isabel Fox. You’ll never be alone again.”

Caleb

I didn't trust Charlotte Hamilton further than I could throw her, so I kept watch outside the door. Not that she'd do anything to Isabel — if I thought that then Isabel wouldn't be here in the first place — but she might tell her things that would upset her. Charlotte might even be hurtful towards her, and I didn't want Isabel hurt, not by the only other family she had, so I stayed where I was.

Eventually, Charlotte came out and gave me a cool glance. "Relax, Mr. Cross," she said. "Isabel is fine." She moved past me towards the stairs and as she went by she murmured, "But if you hurt her I will have your head."

She didn't wait for a response, already sweeping down the stairs to the entranceway before I could say a word. Not that I would have said anything anyway.

I'd have had my own head before I hurt Isabel.

After Charlotte had gone, I stepped into the room she'd just left, to find Isabel standing by one of the windows, looking out. She turned as I came in, her expression unreadable. Which was odd. Isabel was usually an open book.

"She loved you," I said, coming to a stop. "I knew she would." Of course, Charlotte had loved her; she was her daughter's spitting image. Both beautiful and fiery and stubborn.

“Well.” Isabel met my gaze. “At least someone does.”

I stiffened. “What does that mean?”

Her shoulders squared, green eyes glittering. “I could ask you the same thing. You told me yesterday that you couldn’t give me anything more emotionally and I’d like to know what *you* meant by that.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, ignoring the chill that crept through me and the memory of those words she’d whispered the day before.

I love you. I love you so much.

I’d ignored them, dismissed them. Told myself I’d misheard, that it had been the heat of the moment, nothing more. But it hadn’t been the heat of the moment.

“If it’s love you’re looking for, you won’t find it with me,” I said harshly.

Isabel looked down at her hands, clasped together in front of her. “I see.”

A taut silence fell and for the first time in my life, it was me who wanted to fill it.

“Where are you going with this, Isabel?” I demanded.

She lifted her gaze. “Here’s the thing. I’m in love with you, Caleb. I’ve been in love with you for years, and I thought I could do this with you without getting anything back. But... I’m not sure if I can.”

Even though I knew that’s what she’d been going to say, the words felt like the blow of an ax against a tree, a vibration, a shudder going all the way through me.

“It’s a crush,” I insisted, as if me telling her about her own feelings would make it true. “That’s all it is.”

“No.” Her voice was quiet and very certain. “That’s not all it is.”

Another shudder went through me.

She can’t love you and she can’t want more.

“Love?” The word tasted bitter in my mouth. “What does a fucking twenty-three-year-old know about love? Nothing, Isabel.”

I thought she might look away at that, but she didn't. “More than a forty-two-year-old, apparently.” The words were steady, none of her usual anger or ferocity in them and for some reason that made the tension inside me even worse. “Tell me, Caleb,” she went on. “Have you ever been loved? Or have you ever loved anyone?”

You love her. You've always loved her.

No. It wasn't that kind of love. Before we'd got together, I would have said she was like a niece to me, or a much younger sister, but things had gotten complicated. Sex had added a layer that hadn't been there before and arguably shouldn't have been there. But there was no point thinking about the 'shouldn'ts'. It was too late for that now.

“Yes,” I snapped. “I had parents, remember? Your father's important to me and so is Atlas. You, too.”

“But not in *that* way, right?”

“Where the fuck are you going with this?” I growled, losing patience. I took a step toward her. “You want to go over my knee, little girl?”

She didn't move. “This isn't about you being my daddy, Caleb. This is about us and what we want from each other, and it's more than just sex. *I* want more than just sex. For years I blamed myself for Mom's death. Dad wouldn't talk about her and since he held me at such a distance, I used to think he blamed me for it, too. But...” And there they were, those glittering sparks, that fiery spirit, burning in her eyes. “Charlotte told me that it wasn't my fault. That Mom loved me and wanted me, that she would have died so that I could live a thousand times over. She'd be glad that I was here, so now I'm thinking that maybe it wasn't fair of Dad to treat me the way he did. That I'm worth more than that. That I'm worthy of being loved, that I deserve it.”

Every word she said was that ax chopping away at me, cutting me down. Taking pieces of me away until there was nothing left. Because every word she said was true. She did deserve all those things. It wasn't fair for Ten to have distanced her the way he had. It wasn't fair that her mother had died. It wasn't fair that Ten had kept her from people who would have loved her...

It wasn't fair for me to deny her the love she wanted.

But there was no other option for me. Love opened the gates to the darkness, and I couldn't let it get out.

"You do," I said roughly. "You do deserve to be loved. But I meant it when I said I couldn't give it to you. I can't."

Her jaw hardened but that was the only sign she gave that the words had hurt. Clearly, she'd found some of her grandmother's cool. "Why not?"

I muttered a curse. "Didn't you listen to me when I told you about my father? About what he did? He killed my mother, my sister. He killed them because he loved them and wanted to protect them. Why the fuck would I want to put that love onto anyone?"

She didn't flinch, not once. "Why the fuck would you think that's something you would do?"

"I told you what I was capable of. I can't allow myself to love *anyone*. It's too much of a risk."

"That's bullshit," she said flatly. "That's just self-protective bullshit. If there's anyone on this earth who's desperate to love someone and be loved in return, it's you, Caleb Cross. You're just afraid you're not worthy enough for it."

The ax kept on chopping, hewing me away. But I ignored it. She was wrong. She was just wrong. She was too young, too naive. She didn't understand.

I took a step toward her and then another, and another, wanting to propel her up against the wall. Then kiss her, fuck her, make her forget all this shit about love. But she didn't move, she didn't back down. Not one single step, even when

we were almost touching. Forcing me to make a choice between shoving her or backing away.

I couldn't put my hands on her, not now, not with my heart beating like a fucking drum and a sharp agony winding through me. But I couldn't back away either, so we stood there facing each other.

The irresistible force meeting the immovable object.

Her gaze was full of the beautiful passion that was all Isabel and she didn't look away. She wasn't scared of me; she never had been. She wasn't scared of my anger or my hunger, and I couldn't fathom it.

Maybe she's right. Maybe it's all just self-protective bullshit.

It might. But I wasn't willing to take that risk, not with her.

"What are you going to do, Caleb?" She looked up at me, not giving an inch. "Are you going to push me up against that wall and have me? You can, I'd love it. But that doesn't mean I'm willing to take the scraps you throw at me."

"I told you that you were mine. I'm not letting you go, no matter how badly you want it."

"I know. You did warn me. You said you'd put me in a cage, and you wouldn't let me leave. But I don't think you'll stop me if I choose to walk out of here." Her stubborn chin lifted. "I'm going to give you a choice. I want your heart, Caleb. I want your fucking soul. I want *everything* you are because you have everything of me. But I'm not staying if you can't give me that. I can't. I won't. I'm not doing with you what Dad did with me. I refuse. I'm fucking worth more than that. And you can fling patronizing little digs about my youth and inexperience at me all day long and it won't change my feelings for you. It won't change what I want either." She looked me straight in the eye. "So, sure, stop me from leaving. But if you do, you have to give me what I want."

My heartbeat was loud in my ears, full of a desperation I'd never felt before. "Or I could just stop you and give you nothing."

“You could. But you won’t.” She said the words as if she believed them, as if she believed there was still something in me that would let her go after I’d claimed her. After I’d ruined my fucking life for her.

“I can’t,” I growled. “I can’t give you what you want.”

A glitter of pain flashed through her eyes and then it was gone.

“Fine,” she said coldly. “I guess I’ll see you around sometime then.” She sidestepped me and headed towards the door.

Turned out she was right about something.

Even though every part of me wanted to stop her, even though every instinct was screaming at me to grab her and hold her forever.

I didn’t.

I let her go.

Isabel

My heart felt like it was coming apart in my chest, but I left him. I left him standing there and he didn't come after me. He didn't stop me.

Fury and hurt battered away inside me as I went down the stairs of Arcadia, every instinct I had urging me to turn around and go back to him, tell him that I didn't care if he wouldn't give me his heart, that I'd take whatever I could from him, and it would be enough.

But it wasn't enough. It never would be, and I'd decided I was done with accepting the scraps from the people I cared about. I was done with thinking I wasn't worthy enough for their love.

Charlotte had told me I was worthy, and Caleb had made me feel worthy, even though it wasn't enough to make him change his mind.

But that wasn't my problem. That was a Caleb problem. For all his blustering about how terrible he was and his 'darkness' and blah, blah, blah, he was a good man. He'd done some bad things in the past, yes. But that didn't define him. That wasn't who he was, not deep down.

He couldn't see that in himself, but I could. I knew what he was, and I'd told him so, and if he didn't trust me enough to

believe me, then there was nothing I could do about that. He had to make the decision for himself.

So, you'll have nothing from him. Nothing at all.

My heart tore at the thought, but I ignored the pain.

I wasn't going to settle, not anymore. I wanted all of him and if he couldn't give me that, then it would have to be nothing. I'd never been a half-measures type of woman.

I couldn't make Caleb give me what I wanted, but I could at least confront my father and try to do something about their friendship, since it was me who'd caused the issue.

I'd walked away from Caleb, but I couldn't let him drown. I wanted to fix the relationship between him, and Dad and I would.

The time for avoiding all my issues was done.

Ignoring my own fury and hurt, I took a cab downtown to the big steel and glass building that housed Fox Tech.

Dad's office was naturally on the top floor and like Caleb, he was guarded by a dragon of a secretary called Karl, who was in his thirties, a slender, elegant man with steely gaze and a rigidity that equaled Dad's on occasion.

Karl gave me the same kind of look that Sally did, but I ignored him. "I'm going in, Karl," I said as I strode by. "I don't care if he's got a meeting."

Karl said nothing, but I heard him say on the intercom, in strongly disapproving tones, "Miss Isabel is here, Mr. Fox."

I didn't bother waiting around to hear what reply Dad gave him, I simply strode on through the big glass doors into Dad's office. He was sitting behind his desk and instantly came to his feet as I entered, his blue eyes full of cold anger.

Luckily the icy calm that had settled over me after leaving Caleb — some of my grandmother's spirit living inside me — was still with me and I held tightly onto it.

"Isabel," Dad said. "What are you doing—"

“I need to talk to you about me and Caleb,” I interrupted, coming to a stop in front of his desk.

Anger flickered over his face. “Don’t mention his name to —”

“Oh, stop it.” I didn’t bother to hide the tired note in my voice. “I’m not here for your righteous anger. I know you want to protect me, all the bullshit I’ve had to endure for years is all about your need to protect me. But I’ve had enough, Dad. It ends today.”

He opened his mouth, but I held up my hand. “I haven’t finished. I love Caleb. I’ve loved him for years. Yes, I know his past. Yes, I know what he’s done. The thing, Dad, is that he’s the only one who has ever given a shit about me. The only one who ever gave me the attention I wanted. He made me feel important. He made me feel wanted. He made me feel like I was worth something.”

Dad didn’t say anything, his face gone white.

“You held me at a distance for so long, and you know what I thought? I thought you it was because you blamed me for Mom’s death. I thought you couldn’t stand to look at me, because of her.”

Shock rippled over his face. Okay, so maybe I’d gotten that wrong. But still, if I let him speak now, he’d take over completely and I wasn’t having that. So, I continued, not giving him a break to stick his oar in. “Regardless, Caleb was there for me, and he always has been. That’s why I fell in love with him. I know he’s older than me and I don’t care. But as it happens, he’s not willing to love me back and since I’m not accepting scraps from him ever again, you don’t have to worry about us being together, because it’s over.” I ignored the cracks spidering out in my heart, little bolts of agony that I couldn’t ignore, no matter how much I wanted to. “But I won’t have you destroying a friendship over me. I refuse to be the thing that breaks you up. He’s a good man. He’s loyal and protective, and you need him whether you know it or not. And he needs you.” I stopped at last to take a breath.

But Dad didn't say anything. Abruptly he turned away, striding over to the windows, and standing there with his back to me, his hands in the pockets of his suit pants.

A heavy silence fell.

"I know I haven't been a good father to you, Isabel," he said after a moment, his voice impossible to read. "And you will never know how sorry I am for that. When your mother died, I was so furious with the world that I thought it was better to keep you away from me." He paused a moment and then glanced at me. "But you have to know that I *never* blamed you for her death. She wanted you so much. She loved you from the moment you were conceived, and she would have given her life up a thousand times just so you could exist. We both would."

The shattered edges of my heart shifted and ground against each other, making the pain radiate out. But this was a bittersweet pain. Charlotte had told me as much about Mom, but having Dad confirm it...

She'd loved me. She'd wanted me. She would have given her life for me.

"If she could see the woman you've become, she...She would have been so proud. Just as I am proud." Truth burned in his eyes. He meant this. "I'm sorry, Isabel. I'm sorry for all the years I wasn't there for you. And... It should have been me taking care of you, not Caleb."

Okay, so it was becoming a little clearer now, his anger at Caleb. "Is that why you were so angry with him?" I asked.

"That's part of it. But you're still twenty-three and he's forty-two. He was your babysitter. Him taking you is a betrayal of trust that I—"

"Wait up," I said coolly. "He didn't 'take' me. I pretty much took him. I also don't appreciate you acting as though I had no agency in this. I'm not a child, Dad. I knew what I was getting into with him. I know about fucking power imbalances. And I can't believe I'm having this goddamn conversation with yet another man, but for fuck's sake. I might be young,

but I'm not naive. I'm an intelligent woman who can make her own choices and you have to start letting me make them. There'll be mistakes, sure, but I can learn from them. That's what being an adult is all about."

Dad glowered. "He should have known better."

"Jesus, didn't you hear a word I said? If you're going to blame anyone, blame me, for God's sake." I folded my arms. "Anyway, it's moot point now. He told me he'd never let me go, but he did."

A muscle jumped in Dad's jaw. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. He went on and on about how he'd never let me go, because he's committed to this idea that he's the world's most terrible person. So, I told him that if he wasn't going to give me his entire fucking soul then I'd walk out of there and he'd let me go. And since he didn't want to give me his soul, he let me go."

Dad's dark brows drew down, his blue gaze impenetrable. "Jesus, Isabel. You seriously thought he might?"

It was obvious that Dad didn't even consider it a possibility, which didn't help matters. But I wasn't going to let his opinion hurt me, not anymore.

"I'm not that unlovable, Dad. I thought it was a reasonable request."

"I didn't mean—"

"Not that it makes any difference. Caleb's convinced he's a terrible person and is trying to protect me from himself." I gave Dad a look. "A fact which you did not in any way try to disabuse him of."

That muscle jumped in Dad's jaw yet again and he looked as if he might say something. Then, clearly thinking better of it, he turned away, back to the windows. "You shouldn't have anything to do with him."

"Why? Because he killed the man who would have killed him? Yes, I know all about that. He told me. But that doesn't mean he's beyond redemption. He's also the most fiercely

loyal man I know and the most protective, and he wants to do good by the people who are important to him. Not to mention that he's had a shitty life, and no one has really taken care of him, not one single person."

"Is that why you love him? Because you want to take care of him?"

"No." My throat closed abruptly. "I love him because he makes me happy."

Dad stood silhouetted against the windows, looking out. A tall, broad figure, enigmatic for most of my life. But not cold, I'd gotten that wrong. He'd been furious years ago, and I had the impression that he was furious still. That fury was banked now, but it was still hot, still glowing.

"You deserve to be happy," he said abruptly into the silence. "Your mother would have wanted that for you and... so do I." He turned to look at me once more, then without a word, he started for the door.

I stared at him in surprise. "Where are you going?"

But he didn't answer. He just walked out.

Caleb

I'd let her go. I'd let her walk away. And that was for the best, I had to keep telling myself that. I couldn't do to her what Ten had done to her. I couldn't keep her in that cage after all.

Perhaps that meant there was some hope for me, but I didn't think there was. I was still who I was deep down, the son of a murderer. A murderer himself.

She deserved better than that, she always had.

After she'd gone, I went into my private study in Arcadia, only realizing my mistake as I shut the door and turned around. Because then the memories of how I'd taken Isabel here began to replay themselves in my head. Her on her knees, her over my lap, her on the floor, tears streaming down her face.

Her in my arms, leaning back against my shoulder, makeup melted, the look of satisfaction on her face making my chest feel tight.

"I'm yours," she'd told me that night. "And you're mine."

But I wasn't hers, that was the problem. I could never be hers. She might think it was all self-protective bullshit, but it wasn't. It was about protecting her. It had *always* been about protecting her.

I strode over to the liquor cabinet and poured myself a healthy tumbler of scotch, I didn't notice what kind. I knocked it back and then poured myself another. I had things to do, work to manage, and I needed to tell Ten that his daughter was safe, both from me and the Hamiltons. Yet I found myself sitting in the armchair instead and staring at the empty fireplace in front of me.

There was no fire in it now, the grate blackened from the years and as dead and empty as my soul. That too had been blackened, by the years as crime lord and dead from all the things I'd done to survive. A soul that had to stay dead, no matter how it wanted to burn for one red-haired, green-eyed girl.

A girl with more passion and heat than any fire. A woman who'd wanted to take a chance on me and who'd had me close that door in her face.

I'd hurt her and I wasn't supposed to. But it was for the best — I had to keep telling myself that. She would heal, she'd find someone better, more worthy than I was. Someone who could give her all the love she deserved. Someone whose heart was still beating and whose soul wasn't black all the way through.

Someone who wasn't me.

I don't know how long I sat there, but suddenly the door burst open and fucking Ten strode through it, trailing his usual icy fury, his blue eyes blazing.

"If you try to punch me again," I said flatly, on my fifth scotch. "I'll throw this glass at your head. I gave you two hits but no more."

Ten ignored me. "You fucking asshole. First you decide that Isabel's yours and you burn down our friendship for her. The next, you let her go because you won't give her what she needs. Exactly what kind of prick are you?"

Every muscle in my body went tight. "You saw her?"

"She stormed into my office, told me I was a terrible father, but also that she won't allow our friendship to be

ruined. Oh, and then she said you made her happy, but you also let her go.”

Fuck.

I took another sip of my scotch, trying to ignore the helpless fury that was gathering inside me. A fury that had nowhere to go but inward, since the only one I could blame for this situation was myself.

“You are a terrible father,” I said. “And as for our friendship, I’m not sure it can be salvaged. And yes, I let her go. I can’t give her what she wants.”

“Why the fuck not?” Ten demanded, as if he hadn’t punched me the day before for daring to lay a finger on her. “She’s perfect. She’s the most loveable person in the entire world.”

“I know, she is,” I said roughly. “Which is exactly why I can’t do it. She doesn’t need me in her life. I’m a violent, murdering—”

“For fuck’s sake,” Ten interrupted. “Just because your father did what he did, doesn’t mean you will.”

I threw back the rest of my scotch. “There’s a reason he left me behind, Ten.”

Ten stared at me, his blue gaze seeing far too much. Seeing back to the traumatized fifteen-year-old I’d once been, full of grief and fear and rage. Abandoned, lost. He knew the doubts inside me better than anyone, better even than myself.

“Did you ever think,” Ten said, “that the reason your father didn’t kill you too was because he loved you? Because he couldn’t bear to take your life?”

The whisky was burning a hole inside me, burning through all my inhibitions and the guards I kept on myself. “How does that make it any better?” I demanded. “And what does that say about what he did to my mother and sister?”

“You’ll never know, Caleb” Ten said. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You’ll never know why. Which means the reason doesn’t matter. It never has. His decision was a bad

one, but it doesn't mean you have to make the same choice. Jesus Christ, you've protected and cared for Isabel for years and you've never hurt her. Not fucking once."

Something twisted inside me, but I ignored it, pushing myself out of my chair instead and heading to the liquor cabinet again. "So, what? I'm a hero now?"

"Caleb," Ten growled. "She loves you. She told me that you make her happy. Sitting here brooding like a billionaire in a romance novel doesn't help her and that doesn't help me."

"I thought you'd be happy about that," I growled back.

"Yes, well, I'm not. She deserves better than you, I agree, but she's decided you're the one she wants, and while I don't approve, she *is* a grown woman and knows her own mind." He drew himself up. "I've held her at a distance for years, trying to do the same thing, trying to protect her. But it only hurt her and hurt her badly. She thinks I blame her for Juliana's death, for God's sake. I have to make it up to her. She deserves to be happy and I'm not going to be sitting on the sidelines or getting in her way again. I want her to have what she wants. So, grow the fuck up and make her happy."

"Go away, Ten," I reached for the scotch bottle. "I've made my decision."

But he didn't. Instead, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and he pulled me around to face him.

"You're my brother," he said. "It's not only her who deserves to be happy. You do too."

Shock gripped me. "Ten—"

"I never approved of you being with Old Nick or taking his empire, but I understand why you did. And you've been nothing but a good friend all these years. I won't say I approve of you and Isabel being together either, but if it makes you both happy then I'll deal with it." He stared hard at me. "Does she?"

I could hear my heartbeat beating like a fucking drum. Those words were the most I'd heard from Ten about our friendship in years. "Does she what?"

“Does she make you happy?”

Well, does she?

I'd never thought about happiness. I'd never thought it could be something that applied to me and yet...That's what I'd wanted to keep hold of when I'd decided she was mine. Those little pieces of happiness, of contentment. Small moments yet precious ones. They made me feel as if I was worthy of something better. Something more.

“Yes,” I said, because I couldn't lie, not about that. “She makes me the happiest I've ever been.”

“Then stop sitting here drinking your way through the cellar and go and give her what she wants.” Ten shook his head. “I loved a woman once, Caleb. I loved her so much, and even though I lost her, I never wished I hadn't loved her. Not once. You should have that. You need to have that.”

The words shouldn't have made any difference. I was determined for them not to. Love wasn't something that had ever touched me, nor did I want it to. Yet...I couldn't seem to get Isabel's face out of my head. Her green eyes meeting mine as I told her I'd never give her what she wanted, what she needed. So calm and certain. As certain as when she'd told me I was a good man.

'You want to believe there's hope for you.'

My hand was gripping the whisky bottle tightly, my blood pumping hard in my veins as Isabel's voice echoed in my head. She'd told me that yesterday, and I'd thought she was wrong, but...

She's not wrong. That's what you want. Hope. Happiness. Love. All the things you've told yourself you don't need. But you do need them. You've always needed them.

I stared hard at that bottle, trying to catch my breath. Trying to ignore the ache in that blackened soul of mine, the one that wanted Isabel to be right. That was desperate for her to be right. That there was hope after all for a man like me.

She believed it. Why don't you?

I looked up from the bottle and met the blue eyes of the man who'd been my friend for over twenty years. Who'd saved me from the bitter loneliness of the streets and while he hadn't taken my path, he'd remained my friend all the same.

"She thought I was worth something," I said roughly. "She thought that I...could be saved."

"Of course, she does," Ten said. "And if you don't believe me, then believe her."

The words echoed through me like a bell tolling.

I hadn't believed her, I'd ignored her. I'd thought I knew better, because I was older and more experienced, yet love was one of the few things I'd had very little experience of. There had only been my long-ago family and what I remembered of them, which was very little, had been tainted by my father's actions.

But Isabel knew about love. She loved me, she knew everything about me and yet she still wanted me. She wanted everything, even that blackened soul of mine.

You want to give it to her too.

Something loosened inside me, a knot that had been pulled so tight nothing was going to undo it. Yet thinking of her, thinking of the way she looked at me, her heart in her eyes, all it took was one tug and the whole thing came undone.

I *did* want to give it to her. I wanted to give her everything. I wanted to lay the entire fucking world at her feet and myself along with it, and there was a reason for that. A reason that I'd claimed her and a reason that in the end, I'd let her go.

I stared into Tennyson Fox's cold blue eyes. "I love your daughter, Ten. And I'd burn the world for her if she asked me to."

His gaze narrowed. "Don't burn the world, asshole. Just make her happy, that's all."

I didn't need to be told twice.

I put down the scotch bottle and without a word, I turned and strode out.

Isabel

I had no option but to go back to Caleb's penthouse after seeing Dad, but mercifully Caleb wasn't there. I went into the bedroom and started packing my things, because I wasn't going to stay, not now there was no need.

I wanted to get home to my apartment in the Village then figure out just what the hell I was going to do now. I couldn't go back to work at Cross, that was obvious, and what Dad would do about me and Fox Tech was also up in the air.

Whatever, I wasn't going to wait around to find out. My heart might be breaking, but I wasn't going to let Caleb Cross destroy me. I might be a Fox, but I was a Hamilton too, and I wasn't alone. I'd call Charlotte, get her advice, and then maybe find—

The bedroom door clicked shut behind me.

I whirled around in shock, only to find Caleb standing right behind me. He was in dark pants and a white business shirt, what he'd been wearing that morning, but he didn't have a jacket or tie, the top buttons of his shirt undone, and his sleeves rolled up. The material was rumped, and his black hair was spiked as if he'd run a hand through it one too many times.

My poor broken heart tried to leap out of my chest, my pulse careering out of control, because even though he'd hurt

me so badly, I still wanted him.

I'd always want him.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded shakily. “I thought you weren't—”

“I made a mistake,” he interrupted. “I shouldn't have let you walk away.” He'd always had a fierce, kinetic energy and now it was pouring off him, his expression taut.

I lifted my chin. “And presumably you remembered what I wanted in return, don't you?”

His black eyes blazed and that was the only warning I got. Suddenly he closed the distance between us, his hands reaching for me, settling on my hips and jerking me close. “I remember.” His voice had deepened, becoming a growl. “You wanted my heart. You wanted my soul. You wanted everything.”

My mouth had gone dry, and I knew I should pull away, because having him touch me after I'd walked away from him was torture. Yet I couldn't move. “I do,” I said thickly. “That hasn't changed.”

“Good,” he said in fierce tones. “Because you already have them. I gave them to you a long time ago.”

It took me a moment to process the words and then when I did, I found my eyes full of tears, the pieces of my heart digging into me, jagged and sharp. “What?” I managed faintly.

“Do you know why I gave up Old Nick's empire?” He stared at me as if there was nothing in the entire universe he'd rather look at. “It was because of you. Because you made me think that I could have better, that I could have more. You want me want that. You made me want to put the darkness behind me and you gave me hope. That's why I'm here.” He lifted his hands and cupped my face, gentle despite the ferocity that burned in his gaze. “I love you, Isabel Fox. And you have everything of me. Everything I am. All of it. The darkness, the bad things, the good things too if there are any left in me.”

My heart was in agony, but the pain was sweet. I couldn't believe what he was saying. “We all have little pieces of

darkness inside us, Caleb. And pieces of good as well. You accepted all of mine, and so I accept all of yours. I always have. I just thought...I thought you couldn't give that to me. I thought you didn't want to."

"I was wrong." His mouth quirked. "And yes, you can record that for posterity."

I hit him on the shoulder, I couldn't help myself. "Caleb..."

He bent and before I could say anything, he kissed me, his mouth hot and tasting of scotch and him. "Ten gave me a talking to," he murmured against my lips. "And we agreed that no, I don't deserve you, but you deserve happiness, and that's what I want to give you." He lifted his head, looking down at me. "I want to make you happy, Isabel."

"It's not just about me, though. You deserve happiness too."

"Maybe." His thumbs stroked my cheekbones, his touch warm, easing the agony inside me. "I'm not sure I've earned the right to it."

There was a sun rising inside me, like spring arriving after an ice-cold winter's day, and I could feel more tears prickle in my eyes. "You don't have to earn the right to be happy, Caleb," I said huskily. "You just have to have hope."

The fierce expression on his face changed, became warmer, more tender and I couldn't believe that all of that was for me. "You're my hope, little girl. You always have been."

And at that, reader, I cried. I cried like the love-sick idiot I was.

But Caleb didn't mind. He kissed me again, kissed all the tears away, and then he took me to bed. And he took the jagged pieces of my heart in his large, warm hands and he put them together, making me whole again.

It wasn't going to be an easy road for us, and it wasn't going to be simple. Our forever was going to be complicated. But I didn't mind.

Caleb Cross was a hard man, a difficult man, but he loved me intensely and with all the conviction of his fierce soul.

He was my daddy, and he was worth it.

He was worth everything.

EPILOGUE

Zara

If you think I didn't know what I was doing when I walked through that curtained doorway in Arcadia, wearing only a Red Riding Hood cloak, on the way to auction off my virginity to the highest bidder, well... You'd be wrong.

I knew exactly what I doing.

Isabel was worried for me, and I appreciated that about her, but she needn't have wasted her energy.

They'd told me he'd be in the audience, even though he generally avoided the auctions at Arcadia, and that there would be no doubt he'd buy me. Having spent the past month researching everything about him, I knew they'd be right.

He'd be unable to resist.

Andre took me to the back of the room and a little off to the side, where there was a small alcove to sit in and where I could watch everyone come in unseen. All the buyers hoping to buy a virgin for the night, and all the voyeurs who only wanted to watch.

Rich people. Privileged people. People who'd never had to scrape to survive. People who didn't appreciate what they had.

Well, if this went off the way they'd promised me, I'd never have to scrape again.

I saw him then. He was easy to spot, half a head taller than everyone else, along with his friends, Atlas Blackwood and Caleb Cross. Both the latter were intensely charismatic in their own way, but I only had eyes for the man who'd be buying me at some point this evening.

Tall, in his perfectly tailored dark suit, six four at least, and broad too. Short, ink-black hair cut close to his skull, straight black brows. A sharp, proud nose and a perfectly carved mouth. His face was all edged planes and fierce angles, beautifully put together, but so stern. An avenging angel's face. He looked as if he never smiled. As if he'd never heard the word laughter. He looked like he was judge, jury, and executioner.

It was his eyes that did it. A deep, electric blue and so cold, a frozen gas flame. A stare full of knives with blades so sharp you could have a mortal wound before you even felt it.

Tennyson Fox. Billionaire CEO of Fox Tech. Father of my best — my only— friend. Enemy of one of the most powerful families in the country.

And buyer of my virginity if the evening went the way they said it would.

I knew he couldn't see me from where I sat, and yet somehow his frozen blue eyes found mine all the same, sending a shiver straight down my spine.

Weird. I didn't let men affect me, not ever, and I wouldn't tonight either.

Because tonight, whether he knew it or not, I was the one in charge.

Stay tuned for:

Bought

(#2 in the Arcadia series)

Coming soon...

ABOUT JACKIE

Jackie writes dark, emotional stories with alpha heroes who've just got the world to their liking only to have it blown wide apart by their kick-ass heroines.

She lives in Auckland, New Zealand with her husband, the inimitable Dr Jax and her two lovely kids. When she's not torturing alpha males and their gutsy heroines, she can be found drinking chocolate martinis, reading anything she can lay her hands on, wasting time on social media, or being forced to go mountain biking with her husband.

www.jackieashenden.com

jackie@jackieashenden.com



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