

A man with dark hair and a serious expression is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a dark leather jacket over a denim shirt. His right hand is raised in the background, with a bright light source behind it, creating a silhouette effect. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

Mysterious Savior.
Disguised Villain.
Vengeful.

THE PRODIGAL

KRISTY MARIE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Prodigal contains villainous politicians. These congressmen are completely fictitious and do not represent or resemble anyone who has been or currently holds positions in Congress. At the time of this novel, there are no congressmen named Tooney and Albrecht.

It should also be noted that *The Prodigal* deals with sensitive themes—though very fleeting—in portions of the story. If child abuse could be triggering for you, please use your best judgment when choosing to continue. Otherwise, I hope you enjoy Eden and Remington's story.

*For the girl in the mirror.
Don't let fear be your future.
Do it afraid.*

The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one that overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives it. Revelations 2:17 Bible NASV



PROLOGUE

Remington

Five years ago.

Her face is ashen as she struggles to breathe, her chest rising faster. “You aren’t who he says you are,” Mom assures me, easing the white stone into my open palm. “It’s time, my love.”

I close my hand around the stone, its weight carrying a freedom I never imagined I would have.

“You remember what I said about the white stone, right?”

I nod, fighting to keep my emotions in check. “A new name.”

She smiles, finishing the quote like she always has, “One only you will know.”

I never understood the meaning of these words she started whispering in our nightly bedtime story several years ago. I only knew that I wasn’t ready for a new name.

Not until now.

“You are strong, my love. You can do this. You can be victorious. Find your name, and never look back.” Her hand feels cool as she squeezes mine weakly. “There’s cash under my bed.”

“No,” I beg, “I won’t leave you here—not alone with him.”

The smile I’ve known for years emerges, offering me the strength I need. “You *will* leave me,” she demands, “and you will run far away. Pay cash at motels off the highways—the ones that won’t ask for ID.”

She reaches up and strokes my face with the back of her hand. “You must never let him find you.”

“I can’t. I don’t feel—”

She presses a kiss to my hand. “You are healthy, my love. Stronger than any boy I’ve ever known. I failed you. I didn’t protect you like I promised.”

“You did protect me,” I argue.

“Not like *she* would have.”

I can feel a tear drop down my cheek. “I don’t *want* to leave you.”

“Nor I you.” She gasps. “But, I promise, we’ll meet again.”

I can tell she’s lying, but maybe that’s just the panic setting in. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“You won’t be, my darling. Run until you find *home*.”

“How will I know where that is?” I choke as raw and overwhelming emotion clogs my throat. “How will I know when I find *home*?”

“You’ll know,” she wheezes, “you’ve found it when you find peace.”

Peace? What is peace?

But I never get to ask her.

Cradled in my arms, my adoptive mother takes her final breath, setting me free for the first time in my life.

But I'd soon learn freedom didn't equal peace.

As a matter of fact, I wouldn't find the peace she spoke of until years later.

After it was too late.

After I had a new name.

After I...had become the villain.



CHAPTER ONE

Remington

Present Day

I've never been good with boundaries.

They take away from getting to know the person behind the mask.

Or, in this case, behind the snoring.

Pulling out a handful of shit from the purse, I drop the items I don't care about onto the counter.

A library card.

A frequent shopper card to some crappy coffee place.

A tissue.

Mints that expired two months ago.

And what looks to be an emergency tampon—I hear no woman should leave home without one. Apparently, Eden Da Luca from Atlanta, Georgia, is no exception. My friend, Halle,

would be impressed with Eden's tampon preparedness and unimpressed with the fact that I'm pilfering through the purse of the front desk clerk at Midnight Gardens Motel. I hear that's unacceptable behavior—even for guests.

But again, I don't live with boundaries, nor do I care if my behavior is unacceptable. If Ms. Da Luca didn't want me going through her shit, she shouldn't have fallen asleep on the job and left her purse on the counter while her phone played some true crime episode that clearly bored her to sleep.

Not that I blame her. It's after ten p.m., and there are literally only two cars in the motel parking lot. The place isn't exactly hosting the nightlife scene. Assuming the dark-haired clerk, with flushed cheeks and a slightly open mouth, is nineteen-year-old Eden Da Luca from Atlanta, she should be more aware of her surroundings. There are people in this world who would take advantage of the fact that she's unconscious.

People like me.

I bang my hand over the old-school bell on the counter three times before it sends her shooting upright, her eyes widening as she takes a quick glance around.

"Can I get you a coffee or perhaps a nightcap?" I offer sarcastically. "I hate disrupting REM sleep, but some of us would like a nap, too."

Those brilliant blue eyes snap to mine, lingering for a moment before they lower to my hand.

"Is that my license?" she snaps, noticing the other things I tossed out on the counter. "Is that from my purse?" Heated anger bleeds through her words, and it revs the shitty engine inside me that gets a cheap thrill out of irritating people. "Did you go through my purse?"

I can understand her shock. A stranger helping himself to the essential items you carry with you at all times could be considered invasive, but that's if the person going through said items has a moral code. I'm sorry to say, Ms. Da Luca here is out of luck.

“That depends,” I drawl lazily, flipping her license between my fingers, “did you leave your purse on the counter where someone could go through it?” Let’s not split hairs here. We both are at fault in this situation. “Because if you did, you can’t dangle temptation and expect me not to accept the challenge.”

Her cheeks redden. “It wasn’t a challenge!”

She lunges for the ID in my hand, but she’s not fast enough to grab it. “You shouldn’t leave your shit on the counter. Someone could steal—”

Motherfucker. I sound like my father.

But Eden doesn’t give me time to dwell on that fact. “Is that what you were planning to do? Steal my purse.”

Please.

Narrowing my eyes, I try to focus on her nose, not on her mouth, which is very distracting under the dim lighting. “You have nothing I could possibly want,” I say flatly. “But the lint-coated breath mints are pretty tempting.”

She sucks in a breath, and dammit, I look at her mouth. It’s full and pouty, with a layer of gloss that really puts some fucked-up images in my head.

“Ha!”

Before I realize it, this nut jumps over the counter and snatches the ID from my fingers, shouting like she just overcame an enormous obstacle instead of simply plucking a piece of plastic from my hand that I wasn’t even holding tightly. “Let this be a lesson to you, Mr. Stranger, you can’t dangle temptation in front of me, either.”

Good gracious, she actually puffs out her chest, while sitting on the counter, but that’s not the most ludicrous sight at the moment. “The dress code seems a bit too casual,” I say, ignoring her temptation comment—because, please. There are no words for such ridiculousness. This girl wouldn’t sample temptation if it begged her. She seems wholesome—which, I have to admit, is disappointing.

It takes Eden all of three seconds to track my gaze to her mismatched fuzzy socks and to jump down from the counter, scattering the items from her purse onto the floor in front of me. “You caught me on a break,” she lies, seemingly innocent. “It’s a twelve-hour shift, and my feet get tired.”

“From sitting?” I tip my chin to the chair I found her in. “I hear you can get insoles to help with that.” I doubt ridiculous socks give her much arch support. But then again, she’s full of shit. This woman got comfortable and settled in for a paid nap.

She straightens, placing a hand on her hip. “How can I help you, sir?”

I raise my brows. “I’ll be honest; I don’t hate the moniker. It has a certain plea to it.” And I enjoy a bout of begging almost more than a cigarette.

“What do you want?” Ah, how the unprofessional have slipped further.

Holding her angry gaze, I ignore the zip of pleasure I get from her attitude as I squat down and pick up the fallen items from when she nearly tackled me to get her ID. “I need a room,” I say, tossing the tampon and old mints onto the counter like the asshole I am. “Can you manage that, sweetheart, or should I wait for the morning shift?”

She snatches the items and throws them behind her, not even caring that the impact dislodges the lid to the mints and scatters them everywhere. “You should probably shove that ‘sweetheart’ right up your—”

“Ah. Ah,” I chide. “You wouldn’t want to offend me even more than you already have, would you? I don’t know about your boss, but mine is a stickler for keeping customers happy.” Which is bullshit, but I let Vance think I actually care what he wants.

Ms. Da Luca inhales and looks to the ceiling, likely remembering the reason she needs this job in the first place, and sighs. “Would you like a single or double bed?”

I can’t hide my grin. “I want the one with a patio chair.”

You would have thought I asked for turn-down service with the look she gives me. “All the rooms have an outdoor chair.”

It’s like she doesn’t even work here. “No. You only have two rooms with a chair.”

Unlike Ms. Employee of the Decade, I did my homework when I pulled in and scoped out the place, noting each room with a chair out front. One seems to be occupied, if the car parked in front of it is any indication of occupancy, but the other appears to be vacant. You don’t live with plastic surgeons for two years and not grow accustomed to the finer things in life.

Eden looks down at the wooden counter like there’s a reservation log there. “Shoot. Looks like both are booked. My apologies. May I suggest the motel down the street instead? I hear their chairs sit better than ours anyway.”

Now, she’s just making me hard with this petty behavior.

I pull out my wallet with a chuckle. “I’ll take whatever you have available, then.” Unfortunately, the motel down the street lacks the one amenity I need—her.

Eden cuts me a disappointed look, but she takes my cash. “I’ll need your ID, too.”

Is that excitement I detect in her tone? Is Ms. Petty eager to learn my name? She should be because it’s a name she will never forget.

I hand over my license and watch as she schools her features. “Remington Jude Potter from Bloomfield, Texas.” She grins like she really has something on me. “Are you visiting Georgia for business or for pleasure?”

Any other time, I’d tell her that my comings and goings are none of her damn business, but I rather enjoy this game we’re playing, so I offer her an olive branch. One truth that she should always remember. “I’m only here long enough to return a favor.” *Or obtain vengeance. Same thing.*



After Eden slides me an actual metal key to Room 101, I walk out, feeling her scrutinizing gaze on my back. She didn't ask me any other questions. She simply went over the rules—which I ignored—and had me sign an agreement I didn't bother reading.

I'm simple like that.

I don't need to know the rules because I won't abide by them anyway, and I don't care if I get my deposit back because I spend more on a night of takeout than I paid for that silly deposit.

Finding Room 101 is more like just looking to my left, but seeing how Eden was petty, I bypass my room and head for the first room with a chair, which just so happens to be the one that has the car parked in front of it. I grab the cheap, plastic chair by the armrest, and drag it back up the walkway, pausing only briefly to give Eden a thumbs-up through the lobby window.

Let this be a lesson to her that challenging me is my favorite type of foreplay.

When I want something, I don't accept no for an answer.

No one, not even a terrible employee, will come between me and my chair. Just ask my uncle, Vance, who has tried tossing dozens of chairs by the road for trash pick-up, only to discover another one in the morning. The chairs are my signature—and were once the only thing I could call mine.

But that life is behind me now.

That boy no longer exists—but his chairs still do.

Flashing Eden a smirk, I set the chair outside my door and dare her to move it. I'm not above having a spare delivered here, but I'd prefer not to use my credit card and have dear old dad ask why I had chairs delivered somewhere other than his or Vance's house. It would cause suspicion, and I need my

father to stay enthralled with my mother and their new beginning.

They deserve to be happy, and I'm not known for bringing joy to people. It's better if they focus on building the Georgia branch of Potter's Plastics and enjoying the new home they just had to build ten miles from the college campus I don't plan on staying at.

But that's an argument for another day.

Right now, what Duke and Ramsey Potter don't know, won't hurt them.

Sliding the key into the lock, I put my shoulder to the door and shove until it opens. I flip on the light, revealing a single bed and shaggy brown carpet. Unfortunately, I've seen worse, but I'm a little out of touch with roughing it. Living the life of luxury for the past couple of years has made me weak, but that's all going to change starting today.

Tossing my phone on the dresser, next to what looks like a twenty-six-inch TV, I frown. That's going to be a problem. Not that I watch a lot of television, but I'll need it when... It's fine. I can manage. Just because I've grown accustomed to being the son and nephew of renowned plastic surgeons in Texas, doesn't mean I didn't have humble beginnings. I'll make it work—no matter what.

Because I'm out of options.



CHAPTER TWO

Eden

The new guest is watching me from the chair outside his room.

It's not in a weird or creepy way, more like he's amused—if the grin he constantly flashes me is any indication. After he gave me a thumbs-up, while he dragged that stupid chair to his room, I might have googled him to the point of stalking, but that's nothing new for me.

As an FBI special agent hopeful, I find that online research is the most effective way to get to know someone. You don't need a coffee date or even dinner. You just need a full name and a location, and poof—a window to the soul of over-sharers.

But Mr. Remington Jude Potter from Bloomfield, Texas, has nothing online. No social media. No scathing Yelp reviews. Nothing. It's like he doesn't exist. Or maybe he's like me, and he doesn't want to be found. Not everyone wants to put their entire lives online and open themselves up to be

judged by the masses. Some of us want to hide in the shadows, so we can run when the past catches up to us.

Regardless of Remington's reason for not posting pictures of every aspect of his life on the World Wide Web, I didn't find anything related to the Potter last name either, except for a group of plastic surgeon brothers in Bloomfield, Texas, who each hold a specialty in their field of plastic surgery. Dr. Astor Potter, the oldest brother, is a craniomaxillofacial surgeon, who spends most of his time doing charity work by offering pro-bono surgeries to children. His middle brother, Vance Potter, seems to be the face of the medical practice, specializing in burns and scar revisions. The youngest brother, Duke Potter, is sought-after by celebrities because he specializes in cosmetic and reconstructive surgery. The entire practice is revered. The *Bloomfield Times* even had several articles documenting the brothers' contributions and fundraising efforts in their community.

But not one of those articles mentioned a Remington Potter being related or having any association with the medical facility. If Remington is related—which would seem super coincidental if he weren't—someone went to great lengths to keep him a secret, and that annoys me. Not because I'm nosy about the guests who check in here, but because Remington seems to know that I couldn't find anything on him.

Okay, so maybe that's all in my head.

It's not like I talked to him after he left for his room; it's just the vibe he gives off. The man oozes arrogance, and in my experience, arrogance comes with knowledge—or stupidity—but Remington seems to act as if he's one step ahead of the public he's forced to interact with. At least, that's my observation after dealing with him and watching him subsequently toss the bedding from his room outside the door to the lobby earlier.

If that wasn't a sign that he thought he was too good for the world, he then settled himself outside in the stolen chair with a cigarette and watched as I gathered up his linens and brought them inside, as if I was the hired help meant to serve

him—which I sort of am, but still. He doesn't have to come off as a pretentious know-it-all.

It was like he knew I was watching him after he checked in, and he wanted to be sure I knew he could watch me, too—but with way more condescension.

What's worse, though, is I think he actually brought his own linens. I mean, what college-age guy checks into a motel for a night with three large duffle bags? A diva who likely brought his own sheets, that's who.

I could have called his room and asked if he wanted fresh sheets, but that would have signified that I cared if he slept on a bare mattress—and I don't. That's how we here at Midnight Gardens treat our annoying guests—with the utmost care of not-giving-a-shit.

The hotel phone rings, pulling my attention from the arrogant dick in Room 101, still smoking his cigarette as he continues looking directly into the lobby. Argh! Why couldn't Bill splurge for blinds? Better yet, I wonder if Bill would care if I used one of the sheets Remington dumped to cover the windows. See if the fucker still enjoys watching me then. But then someone would complain, and I'd lose one of my two jobs. Considering I don't have all that many skills to offer an employer while I obtain my bachelor's degree in criminology, I need to stay put. Loan sharks don't appreciate late payments—even if the money was borrowed to pay tuition.

The phone rings again, and I finally put myself into motion and answer. “Hello—I mean, Midnight Gardens, how may I help you?”

The line goes eerily quiet, and chills break out along my arms. It could be a spam call. There's no reason to think it's *him* again. He doesn't have my new number, nor has he figured out where I live. But then again...

“Eden.” The gruff voice halts my breath. “Don't make this hard, sweetheart.”

He says the words like a concerned parent.

But he's no parent.

“Tell her I’m sorry,” I say, keeping the emotion from my voice as best as I can, “and that I wish her all the best.”

It’s all I can offer right now.

There might be a Saint Michael pendant hanging from my neck, but I’m no saint. Forgiveness is fear, and right now, I can’t afford either one. She’ll have to understand.

“You know I can’t do that,” he says, admitting that this won’t be the last I hear from him. “You owe her, and I never forget a debt.”

He and I have very different definitions of debt. “Then you should know that should you act on collecting that debt, you think I owe, I will call the police. Then we’ll see whose definition they agree with.”

Fucker. He doesn’t scare me. He’s just her dumb pawn—and I’m tired.

I’m tired of her.

I’m tired of him.

I’m tired of freaking Georgia. All I want is a fresh start and a new life, where pity and vengeance don’t follow me.

A light chuckle has me gripping the phone tighter. “Okay, Eden. If this is how you want to play it. I’ll see you soon, sweetheart.” The line goes dead, and I just sit there, staring at the phone in my hand.

Argh!

I don’t hate many people, but that man, and the woman he works for, are at the top of my list. Never have I seen anyone as selfish as they both are. They are the scum of the planet, but I can’t escape them. Because as much as I hate it, these selfish assholes *are* my parents.

The bell on the door startles me, and I drop the phone, spinning around to find a delivery guy with a bag of food. “This is the Midnight Gardens Motel, right?” He turns up his nose, like he hopes it isn’t.

“Yeah, but I didn’t order food.” Let’s not keep him any longer than he wants.

“No, you didn’t,” he says. “A Remington Potter did.”

Of course, it’s our resident diva. “He’s in Room 101.”

“Perfect. Thanks.” He sets the food on the counter, and before I can ask him what the hell he’s doing, he walks out and drives away, leaving me to deal with the diva’s dinner.

“Great. As if this night couldn’t get any worse,” I mumble to myself, opening the bag and finding BBQ ribs and wedge fries. Mmm. They smell expensive and filling, not like the ramen noodles I scarfed down earlier.

I eye the fries and then the window, noting the chain-smoker absent from his blessed chair. He won’t notice one fry missing, right? I mean, it’s the least he could do after going through my purse earlier and staring at me for the past hour.

The more I think about it, the more I agree with myself. Mr. Potter can share. After all, it’s for a worthy cause. I could have given him Room 102, which smells like feet and baby pee. I’ll consider it a tip.

Grabbing the bag, I take it behind the desk, where I put the phone back on the cradle and settle into my own chair for the next episode of *Seventy-Two Hours*, a true crime show that I can’t seem to get enough of.

I don’t know how long I watch before the phone rings again, but this time, it’s not an outside number. It’s Room 101.

I glance down at the bag in my lap. All the ribs are there, but there’s only one fry left.

Shit.

I’ve eaten all of this hateful man’s fries, but it’s fine. It’s fine. I’m sure once I explain, he’ll be chivalrous and laugh, saying he didn’t need the carbs anyway.

I think of the scowl he wore earlier when he spoke to me... Yeah, that’s not going to happen.

I pick up the phone, and he doesn't let me get through the usual greeting before he clips, "Did my food get delivered to the desk?"

I could lie. I could say no, but he probably wouldn't be asking me if he didn't already know. He likely tracked the delivery. "It did. I was just about to call you."

He makes this scoff-like noise. "The app says it was delivered fifteen minutes ago."

"Well," I snap, "maybe you should have walked over here fifteen minutes ago. What do I look like? Your server?"

Just who the hell does this man think he is—the line goes dead, and I turn, just in time to see him throwing open his door and stalking across the parking lot.

Crap.

I eye the last fry and decide it'll be too suspicious if I leave it. It's easier to claim they left it out of his order than to say they only gave him one. He doesn't seem like the gullible type. Well, he doesn't seem like the forgiving type either, but I chew and swallow anyway, just as he reaches the door with that haughty frown.

"Here you go, sir," I say tightly, trying to swallow the last bit of potato and smile.

He cocks his head to the side, his eyes narrowing on my mouth. "I hope you're not eating those mints."

"What?" I inhale a bite of potato and choke, covering my mouth with one hand and shoving the bag of ribs at him with the other.

He takes the bag and opens it like he knows something is up. "Where are my fries?"

At least he isn't stupid.

I finally get my cough under control and level him with an exasperated look. "How should I know? Do I look like I work for Benny's BBQ?"

His fingers twitch against the paper bag before he smiles, reaching in and pulling something out of the bag and tossing it at my chest. “What the—”

The cardboard container hits me in the chest before I realize what it is: the box the fries came in. “I can explain,” I almost plead, but it just makes Remington laugh.

“And you will,” he says, walking backward to the door. “Tomorrow. With my fries.”

Then he leaves.

He doesn't sit in his chair.

He doesn't call and complain.

He just disappears behind the door to Room 101.



CHAPTER THREE

Remington

“Where the fuck have you been?”

With an apple midway to my mouth, I pause and grin. “In a delectable young college gir—”

Halle slaps my hand away from my mouth before I can answer Duke. “Don’t even think of finishing that lie.” She holds up a finger in warning, as if I’ll listen.

“How do you know it’s a lie?” I bite into the apple and chew, thoroughly amused by just how shitty the attitudes in this room are for so early in the day.

“Because,” Halle laughs, “you barely tolerate us, and we’re your family. There’s no way you willingly spent the evening with some girl—no matter how pretty she was.”

She’s not wrong.

I don’t like people.

Nor do I date or have friends.

Except for Halle. I suppose she's the closest I have to a friend, even if she's several years older than me and is engaged to Vance—the grumpiest of my two uncles.

“Fine,” I admit, flashing my father, the famous plastic surgeon, Dr. Duke Potter, an almost apology, “I overslept.”

His eyes narrow. “You never oversleep.”

Technically, he can't be sure of that fact, seeing as how I've only lived with him for a little while, and even then, I still stay with Vance and Halle most of the time, so he and Ramsey, my mother, can have privacy—okay fine, it's so *I* can have some privacy. Duke is a nosy bastard. The point is, the three couples gathered in this kitchen don't actually know if I oversleep because they don't know if I even sleep. They only assume I'm out of bed in a timely manner because I was never late to the office when I worked there.

“What can I say?” I lie effortlessly. “I've embraced the lazy college life.”

“You've embraced the lying life, you mean.” Vance leans against the kitchen counter and cocks a brow, daring me to lie—which, obviously, I have no problem doing, since I wasn't banging some college girl, nor did I sleep through my alarm.

“You caught me.” I frown. “I was trying to give you all enough time to decorate for my birthday party.”

Vance rolls his eyes. “The party celebrating your *fake birthday*.” I can tell he'd rather be buried in Halle than standing here with his two brothers, their women, and his niece, celebrating a bullshit birthday I made up all because Ramsey is sentimental and will use any excuse to see me.

I flash him a grin. “I don't know how many times I have to tell you boys, that pussy, no matter how sweet it is, should not control you.”

“Hey!” Halle slaps my arm but laughs. “I don't control him.”

My gaze drifts to the fish tank on the wall, where Halle's lone goldfish swims in Vance's newly-built home in Georgia. “Sure, you don't, Hal.”

My father and uncles might be oblivious to the power their women hold, but I'm not.

No woman will ever influence my decisions like—

Arms wrap around my shoulders and squeeze. "I have something to show you."

I let out a long and dramatic sigh at the only voice that brings out my softer side and shake the apple in my hand. "If it's another naked picture of your husband, I'll pass. I just ate."

Her laughter sends pain through my chest. "Smartass." But she kisses my cheek anyway and takes my hand without asking. "Come with me."

I groan when the sounds of muffled titters and snorts go around the kitchen.

They know I'm full of shit.

One woman can influence my decisions, but it's *only* this one.

My mother.

My *real* mother.

The mother who longed for me for eighteen years. The one who was told I died after I was born, only to find out my grandfathers had forged my parents' names and put me up for adoption. It was this woman who sacrificed her entire future by agreeing to marry the devil to learn of my whereabouts. This woman is who everyone should aspire to be.

She's fearless.

Brave.

And loves with her entire heart.

I'm not worthy of the kind of devotion she gives to those she loves.

But every day, I try to be the son she deserves—to some degree.

Even if that means enduring a few giggles from these man-bitches in this kitchen.

Agreeing to follow, I allow Ramsey Potter to lead me through the kitchen, but not before I chuck my apple at Vance, only missing him by an inch. I wave goodbye to my uncles with a flip of my middle finger—which only increases their laughter. Not my father’s, though. He leans against the counter, his face stoic, as usual, when he’s reminded of how long it took our family to get to this point.

I’m not an affectionate person.

I don’t love.

I don’t long.

I exist.

At least, I did until I found Vance and Halle. But it wasn’t until a year ago that I learned the youngest Potter brother, Duke, was my father—the same one I was told didn’t want me, which couldn’t have been further from the truth.

But it doesn’t matter now. My time with Duke and Ramsey Potter is coming to an end, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

“...call it a late *real* birthday present, but I couldn’t wait a moment longer to give it to you.” Apparently, I missed the first part of the conversation as my mother and I exit Vance’s house and cross over the manicured lawn to my parents’—sigh—newly-built house next door, an annoyingly convenient ten-minute drive from the college campus where I supposedly live.

As I said, I have no problem lying—especially when it’s for my family’s own good.

Ramsey opens the door, still pulling me behind her like I’m four and not nineteen. “I hope that wherever you’re taking me,” I drawl, “has ice for my shoulder.” I fake a grimace of pain, which Ramsey ignores.

I couldn’t be prouder of her lack of response.

She’s had a year with me and now endures my sarcasm like a champ.

“You know, Mother,” I continue, like she didn’t just ignore me, “most of the time, people prefer cash for their fake

birthdays.”

This time, she turns, rolling her eyes. “Not you. Money means nothing to you.”

If you ask anyone who knows the Potters, they will tell you I look and act more like my father. While that might be true to some extent, my soul came from this woman right here. She knows me in a way no one else ever has. It’s why she will always be my weakness. No matter what I want to do, the thought of disappointing her always gives me pause.

But I can’t let the what-ifs and fears stop me now.

Ramsey Potter will one day understand that I did what I had to for all of us—including the baby she carries inside her, my biological sibling due next year.

“That’s not what your husband says,” I tease. “He says I’m expensive.”

“Only your smoking habit is expensive. The rest of you is cheap.”

I can’t stop the laugh from bubbling up as my mother stops in front of one of the doors and turns, flashing me a sweet smile. “If I ask you to stop smoking, would you be willing to try? For me?”

She asks with such sincerity that I hate to lie. “I’ll try.” I chuck her under the chin. “But only if this gift is worth the hike over from Vance’s.”

It’s literally next door—far from a hike—but I like to remind her of her husband and be a diva about everything.

“Deal.”

She holds out her hand, and I have to bite my lip not to swear.

“I was joking.” I’m not giving up smoking. It’s the only thing that keeps the demons at bay.

“I wasn’t.” She shrugs.

It’s then I realize I drastically underestimated my mother. The woman is stubborn and completely undeterred when she

wants something. No wonder my father had to get her shitfaced to marry him.

“Are you scared to see what’s behind this door?” she goads, appealing to my base nature.

I have no fear. Not of the man who destroyed me and certainly not of what she’s hiding behind the door.

Flashing her a lazy smirk, I stand straighter, like I couldn’t give a shit what’s behind this door. Nothing will convince me to give up cigarettes. “Open the door, Ray, and you have a deal.”

It was a bad deal.

I realize it a second after she pushes open the door, revealing a bedroom decorated in gray and black.

“I know you’re in college now and will have your own place soon, but I wanted you to know, no matter what happens, you can always come home.”

Home.

The nagging goal I could never achieve. Not when I moved in with Vance and Halle or when I slept in the guest room at Duke and Ramsey’s.

I’ve never had *this*.

I’ve never had a space that was created specifically for me, at least not selflessly.

Not the way my mother is offering.

She doesn’t need anything from me, nor is she blackmailing me into keeping quiet.

She’s offering me...

My chest tightens, and I have a hard time pulling in air. “I can’t—”

I turn to leave—to light up a cigarette until the emotion disappears, but my father appears behind me, blocking my escape. “Take a breath, Remington.” He puts a hand on my

shoulder and squeezes, letting me know that I'm not going anywhere unless I want to make my mother cry.

Honestly, I've avoided this for as long as I could. I've ignored my parents' pleas to stay with them and not live with Vance too many times. They've given me space. They've been patient. And now they're done.

I can't say I blame them.

I've been epically shitty at avoiding the fact that I have a home.

Because that would mean that *she* was right.

I was home.

I found my peace.

And just like before, it's being ripped away from me all because of *him*.

"Breathe, son." It's not a suggestion, especially when his eyes offer me a sad understanding. "Then let your mother show you around." My father—as much as I hate it—is a good man. He's everything I would have wanted in a father, and one day, he'll get the opportunity to start over with a child who won't keep secrets from him like I am.

Finding my strength, I swallow down the emotion and flash him a grin. "I bet you let her drag you to the store and pick out the wallpaper."

It's not a thank you, but my father understands my way of expressing gratitude and matches my energy without missing a beat. "I did. I also let her talk me into trying out the mattress." He grins, and my stomach turns. "You won't have a problem with yours. It's firm and holds up through rigorous movement."

I groan, actually sucking in a decent-sized breath.

"He's joking," my mom rushes out, swiping under her eyes. "We would never do that."

Everything about her splotchy face makes me want to bolt, but she deserves better, so I clear my throat and nod, taking the

first step inside my room.



I promised her I would *try* to stop smoking.

Try being the operative word here.

I don't remember what it's like not to smoke. I especially don't remember what it's like to fight the memories alone.

Honestly, I don't know if I can, but I promised to try—even if she tricked me into that stupid deal.

How was I supposed to walk away from the first real room I'd ever had?

The answer was I couldn't.

Instead, I took out my pent-up aggression on my father, forcing him to sing happy birthday to me in front of his brothers.

I'll admit, seeing his red face and tense shoulders helped a little, but not as much as a cigarette would have.

“Since when do you ask for aquarium tickets for your fake birthday?”

I look up from my phone and cock a brow at my father. “Just because you prefer a mattress store to get your dick wet, doesn't mean the rest of us don't enjoy a little romp against the fish tank every once in a while. To each his own, right?” I almost laugh when he scrunches his face like he's seconds from bolting from this little bonding session on the sofa.

“You're lying,” he says, seeming to recover quickly.

I shrug. “Maybe, but you aren't sure, now, are you?” Seeing how the tickets were a gift from him and Ray after I “accidentally” admitted how I've always wanted to go. But, unlike my mother's innocent heart, my father isn't so easily swayed. He's been a suspicious pain in my ass for months.

“How about Ray and I go with you?”

I laugh. “Don’t get cute, Dr. Drab. I’m not going to suddenly spill my guts next to the sea lion habitat. You know I require a little more foreplay than that.”

He flashes me this intense look that gives me pause. “Whatever you’re up to, I will figure it out. You’re not in this alone anymore. I want you to know that in case you’re thinking of doing something stupid.” Like running, he means.

But I’m not running.

Not anymore.

I’m finishing this—for all of us.

I glance back down at the phone in my hand and reread the last text.

Dead Man: This is your last warning. You don’t want to go to battle with me, boy.

I love how he calls me *boy*. It makes me all giddy and violent inside.

Glancing up at my father, I grin. “I have faith in you, Pops. I’m sure you will figure it out. You’re a smart man, after all. The question is, will you figure it out in time to stop me?”

And then I tap out a response, attaching an image of the night clerk at the Midnight Gardens Motel and pressing send.

Me: I’ll remind you, Congressman. Karma is for those who have something to lose. Vengeance is for those of us who don’t. Your daughter says hi.

I deserved a life with parents who loved me.

I deserved a *future*.

And he took both from me.



CHAPTER FOUR

Remington

I slept like shit.

Let's blame it on Eden eating my fucking food *again* and not because I lied to Ramsey when I told her I couldn't sleep in my new bed because I had a study session with my roommate at the dorms. It's not that I didn't want to stay with my parents—it was my fake birthday, after all—but I had a congressman's daughter to stalk, and that took precedence over sleeping in what was likely a much softer bed than the lumpy one at Midnight Gardens Motel.

But now, I'm crankier than usual.

And that's never an easy day for the public.

“Hi.”

The stranger's peppy voice already annoys me.

“You're Remington, right?” She holds out her hand as if she were talking to someone who is wowed by her big blue

eyes, rosy cheeks, and indulgent smile. “I’m Brittany. I want to welcome you to Havemeyer University.”

Slowly, I pull my gaze from the fry thief lying in the grass and give the overly excited female to my left a lazy look, never answering her question.

Even if I were well-rested, I’m not social. It’s best if Bethany—or whatever her name is—remembers my lack of response and relays the information to the next girl who dares approach me while I loiter on the bench in the quad, watching my mark staring up at the sky with the sun on her face and a smile on her lips.

She looks ridiculous and heavenly and not like the girl who came from a man who ripped children away from their parents. But the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. If Eden Da Luca is anything like her father, she’s no angel.

But neither am I.

So, unlike Brittany, who is looking to bag the new freshman from Texas with more rumors surrounding him than smoke, I’m not the one to fuck with. I’m only interested in one female on this campus—the daughter of the devil. The sole source of my vengeance.

Because I’ve tried therapy.

Done all the daily affirmations and even meditation.

Each yielding the same result.

Plotting and executing my revenge.

The last thing on my mind is befriending or nailing a potential classmate.

I didn’t come to college to indulge in a variety of pussy—I respect Duke enough to not blow what equates to an entire mortgage, just so I can get laid by the Baileys and McKenzies of campus.

If I wanted a girlfriend to keep tabs on me and have me hold her purse while she tries on clothes at the mall, I’d drown myself in the nearest body of water. I’ve seen the most hateful of men grow soft under the hands of the right women. Not that

they weren't good women or that those men didn't deserve to be taken down by a woman, but I am wired differently than they are.

I don't need someone to hold my hand.

I don't need whispers in the night or hugs before class.

I need—no, I crave—only one thing.

Vengeance.

Anything else is simply a distraction I can't afford.

Like Belinda here, who is still trying to hold her smile through the awkward silence and steady blinks I offer.

“So,” she tries again. “Is today your first day? I haven't seen you around campus since orientation.”

Well, isn't that charming? She's watched and waited until I showed up to class, which—spoiler alert—still won't be the day before fall break. I'm only showing my face for two reasons, one of which is now lying on the grass. I have no interest in going to class because none of it matters. I won't stay in Georgia long enough to graduate.

“Listen, Belinda.” I light up a cigarette—Ramsey will have to understand—and take a long drag. “I don't know which rumor you've heard but let me clear up any fantasy that you might have about me.” I flash her a wicked smile and stand, spotting Midnight Garden's Employee of the Year gathering her things and heading to the cafeteria. “I don't *do* the average.” I lean in closer, my voice taking on a threatening tone. “I find they bore me.” No one's pussy is that magical—especially not hers.

Betty smiles, her gaze traveling down my body leisurely, like it's supposed to make me horny. “How do you know if you've never tried?”

Trust me, if bedroom eyes and perky tits were the keys to reviving my cold, dead heart, Betty here would have a claim, but alas, such is not the case.

Betty's tits and lack of respect for herself don't interest me.

The oblivious girl walking across the lawn does.

Without sparing Barbara another look, I turn and head across the lawn. I hope Duke is proud that I've managed to go nearly an entire day without making someone cry. But then again, my mood *is* improving by the minute.

Why?

Because I love conflict.

I eat that shit up like pussy.

And right now, my meals are full of conflict.

Striding into the cafeteria, I pass the *no smoking* sign and take another drag from my cigarette, getting in *her* line. There's something about seeing Eden serve me that has excitement blooming in my chest. Let's call it my kink. Okay, fine. It's not a kink. I'm just an ass, and the thought of surprising Eden at school fills the void of boredom in my dark soul. I knew she went to school here, just like I knew she didn't stay in her dorm at night because she pulled overnight shifts at the motel. My little pawn, apparently, is a hard worker.

"Can you get me a fresh salad from the back?" My head snaps to the left in response to the pretentious voice beside me. A blonde about my age has her nose turned up at the salad in Eden's gloved hand.

"These are the fresh ones," Eden argues gently—a stark difference from how she came at me the other night at the motel. It's pathetic, especially when her lip quivers, unsettling my stomach to the point I need to take another hit off my cigarette.

"No," the girl in front of me barks, "get me a fresh one, or I'll report you to your boss." She smiles. "I'd hate for you to get fired. I know how much you need this job since"—she turns to her friend—"Ashlynn saw you digging change out of the front fountain last week. Did your crazy mommy forget to send you lunch money?"

Tears well in Eden's eyes, and it only serves to shit all over my excitement at threatening her today. I love the conflict and

tension between me and my mark—not power plays from some dick junkie who needs attention.

Leaning over, I grab a salad from the window and toss it onto this no-name's tray. "Enjoy."

Again, Duke should be proud.

"Just who the hell do you think you're talking—" She stops mid-sentence when she realizes just who the fuck *she's* talking to. "Remington."

She says my name like it's a curse. If she isn't careful, it will be.

"I'm sorry," she tries explaining, "I didn't realize you were behind me."

Clearly, but at this point, I don't give a fuck. She's ruined my day.

Inhaling, I blow smoke in her face, flicking ashes over her salad. Let's see how fucking fresh it tastes now. "Are you finished?" I ask rhetorically. She's finished if I have to drag her ass out of this line. There's only one person who's going to make Eden Da Luca cry.

And that person is me.

The girl, whose name I'm happy not to know, nods robotically, already shuffling toward the cashier and out of my sight, leaving just me and Eden alone in the line.

"Room 101." Eden grins, curiosity quickly replacing the hurt in her eyes. "I didn't realize you went to this school."

"I didn't realize you enjoyed being a doormat to plastic Barbies," I offer lazily.

She clutches her chest dramatically. "Aww. If you're not careful with those compliments, I might think you actually like me, 101."

I snort dryly. She's not nearly as funny as she thinks she is.

"Anyway..." She waves off my annoyed look through the serving window. "I was going to hand deliver these to Your Highness later, but seeing as you're here..." She shrugs, and I

don't notice the smooth line of her cleavage as she leans forward, sliding a plate full of fries across the counter. "Consider my debt paid in full."

Yeah, that's not going to happen. Her debt to me is much more than disgusting cafeteria fries.

"Oh. And..." she adds, plucking a fry from my plate and popping it into her mouth. "You're welcome for the new sheets I left tied to your door this morning."

She's not cute.

She's not intriguing.

She's the enemy's daughter.

And the only way I can make things right.

I stare down at the fries and then at the stormy blue eyes that are too trusting for her own good. "Why were you digging change out of the fountain?"

It wasn't what I meant to say. It doesn't matter to me why my mark was playing in the fountain. Maybe she was saving a butterfly. Who the fuck knows with her.

But more importantly, who the fuck cares?

Certainly not me.

And I hope that's evident when I walk away, leaving the fries and her shock behind.



I don't bother going to class, not that I would have anyway. But I have an appointment, and as much as he might grate on my nerves, I desperately need his help. Rumor has it, he's the only one with the connections and the discretion I need.

He's just an asshole—but not as much as me.

"I assume you know how this works." Maverick Lexington, the rumored dealmaker on campus cocks a brow, silently sizing me up.

It's cute.

"I assume you know I'm not some campus groupie overcome with butterflies when you go over this spiel." I motion to the card in his hand—the one he's been flipping through his fingers, hoping I'll be intimidated and leave his apartment.

Newsflash: I won't.

I've seen scarier shit that I'm sure Maverick here has only seen in the movies. If he thinks his elaborate setup of a poker table and NDA agreements scare me, he's sadly mistaken. The last thing I'll fear is an IOU from the underground campus dealmaker.

Matching his amusement, I cock a brow. "Are you scared to make a deal with me, Lexington?" I slide the aquarium tickets Duke and Ramsey gifted me for my birthday across the felt table. "A private tour through"—I lean across the table and glance at the wording on the ticket—"the sea lion habitat." I flash him a smirk. "I hear that's your jam now."

Maverick chuckles, leaning back in his chair, a cigarette dangling from his lips as if he's forgotten to light it.

But he won't.

Because, like me, he's got an agenda, and his lies are part of it.

"All right, Potter. I'll play." He pulls out a marker and scrawls out the letters *IOU* across the playing card. "I can't promise he'll take you on. He's very selective about who he works with."

"I don't need your fucking promises. I need his number."

Apparently, my rudeness amuses my host more than it upsets him because he merely shakes his head and adds the number to the IOU, sliding it toward me. But instead of allowing me to pluck it off the table, he presses his finger on the card, keeping my gaze. "The only reason you're leaving here with this information is because I've been where you are."

Oh, for fuck's sake. I don't have time for a heart-to-heart.

I try snatching the card, but he holds it firmly. "I know who you are, Potter, and they wouldn't want you to do this alone."

Oh, good. For a moment there, I was worried we were going to share childhood traumas.

Standing, I tower over Maverick, who's still seated at the table. "That's the difference between you and me, Lexington. I don't care what people want. I do what they *need*."

I flash him a look that says this conversation is over and hold out my hand. "Do we have a deal?"

With a sigh and another shake of his head, the king of campus places the card in my hand and unknowingly kicks off the beginning of the end of my time as a Potter.



CHAPTER FIVE

Eden

When I was little, my mother told me stories about demons who scoured the earth, searching for those they could corrupt. Good souls. Bad souls. It didn't matter. All they needed was to find individuals' weaknesses, and they had them.

The older I get, the more I believe she wasn't simply telling me a story; she was warning me of what was to come.

Wickedness did exist.

And it was everywhere.

In our homes, our communities, and our schools.

But today was the first day I didn't feel alone among it.

Room 101 stood up for me—whether he meant to or not.

And that deserves, at least, some fresh, steaming-hot fries.

I pluck a hot one from the container and pick up the phone and buzz his room.

He doesn't answer, but I know he's in there. I saw him pull in over an hour ago.

I dial his room again.

And again.

And again.

And again, until he finally picks up. "The motel better be on fire," is how he greets me.

He's an absolute delight. No wonder he prefers to stay at this dump and away from the general public. He's likely to get sniped from the nearest rooftop with that charming personality of his.

"Nope. I've got something better than that."

I can hear his yawn through the phone. "All right, Eve. I'll bite. What's better than seeing this place go up in flames?"

Wow. He really is something.

But not wrong.

Midnight Gardens is a shithole, but it provides me with a paycheck and his hateful ass with a bed—though I don't know why he needs one if he goes to Havemeyer. From what I know of his background, he could easily stay in the dorms or have an off-campus apartment.

Why is he here? Or better yet, why is he such a dick?

"First of all, my name is not Eve. It's Eden." Seems like he would remember that since his nosy ass rooted through my purse.

He grunts like I'm wrong about my own name, but it's fine. I think I'm figuring out a theme with him. He's grumpier when he's hungry.

"I have some fries for you," I taunt in a silly voice, earning an almost laugh out of him.

"You mean, you have the fries *I ordered*?"

I didn't say I *bought* him fries, only that he *deserved* some—hence the reason I only ate one and not the entire box. "Yep.

But you'll have to come get them."

"Don't I always have to come get them?" He sounds pretty put out about it, but it's best he realizes now this isn't some five-star resort. We don't have room service.

"You could always have the driver deliver them to your door and not the lobby." I smile just thinking of his next job, but it never comes because his ass *hangs up!*

Just for that, I'm eating another one of his fries. He shouldn't be eating unhealthy food this often anyway. A few fruits and vegetables might help that attitude of his, but then again, they never help mine. Only something saturated in frosting can do that.

A moment later, the door to Room 101 flies open, and there stands the dark, surly savior of mine. I can't see his eyes because they're covered by sunglasses, though the sun set long ago. But by the way he slams the door loud enough for me to hear, I'm assuming he's in a fantastic mood this evening.

"Evening, sunshine," I tease, as soon as he steps into the lobby. "Tonight's dinner looks like a burger and fries. How very American of you."

He lowers his shades and cuts his classic annoyed stare my way. "Am I to assume you owe me another order of fries?"

I hand him the bag, all proud of myself. "Nope. Your full order is there." Give or take a fry or two, but it's not like there's a set amount. "Consider it a thank you for sticking up for me today."

His hand pauses on the bag. "Is that what you think I did—defended you?"

I take a deep breath. *He doesn't mean for his words to come out that way, Eden. He's a dude. They aren't the best communicators.*

"Maybe not defended me," I clarify, since he seems highly offended by my comment. "More like retaliated on my behalf." I lift one shoulder shyly. "I would have been fired if I talked to Caroline like you did."

He frowns, his eyes narrowing at my interpretation of the events. “I didn’t retaliate on your behalf—she was holding up the line, and I don’t like to wait.”

Well, that’s true. He’s an impatient little shit.

“Regardless of the why, I appreciate you putting her in her place.”

The bag of food crumples in the silence that follows. Then, “*You* should have put her in her place. There are no heroes in this world, Eve.”

Again, with the wrong name. I open my mouth to correct him, but he holds up one finger, telling me to wait until he’s finished.

“You can’t sit back and wait for someone to rescue you from the Carolines of the world.”

“I wasn’t waiting on a hero,” I interject. “I was handling the situation before you got involved.”

He snorts. “If you say so.”

“I say so.” I lift my chin in defiance, and surprisingly, Remington throws his head back and lets out this raspy laugh that is incredibly attractive. Unfortunately.

“I stand corrected,” he finally says, after pulling in a few breaths and stepping back toward the door. “You might survive this yet.” He flashes me a charming wink that I’m sure keeps his bed warm. “I’m rooting for you, love.”

And then he turns and pulls open the door.

“Wait!”

His whole body tenses and I swear he lets out a frustrated sigh. In the seconds that follow, he never responds; he simply waits.

“I wasn’t stealing change from the fountain like Caroline said.”

Heaven help me. I don’t know why I feel the need to explain the situation. I’m positive he doesn’t care, but then he

did call me love. That's an affectionate moniker, like he may care just a little.

"I'm not a thief." I keep going when he just stands there with his head still bowed, as if he were praying. "I was lying on the ledge of the fountain. My necklace has a broken clasp and..." I can feel his attention dwindling by the second. "Never mind." I sigh. "I just wanted you to know I wasn't a thief."

His head dips infinitesimally, and I think that's the only response I'll get from him when he says, "You found your necklace, then?"

It's such a simple question—one a friend might ask, but Remington doesn't intend to be my friend.

I finger the Saint Michael pendant at my neck. It hangs on a string instead of a chain, but it hangs around my neck, nevertheless. "I did."

This time, he does nod, and I can't help the smile that tugs onto my lips as he leaves.

"Enjoy your dinner, 101."



I'm nearly an hour into a true crime episode when the delivery driver pulls into the parking lot for the second time tonight.

"I'm looking for an Eve," he says, while approaching the counter. "An Eve Da Lobby?"

Oh. My. Gosh.

I'm going to soak his sheets in acid.

I flash the confused driver a patient smile and take the bag. "I'll make sure it gets to her. Thank you for coming out at this hour."

He walks to the door. "I'll come out anytime with the amount Eve tips."

Well, at least we know *Eve* isn't a cheapskate.

“I’ll be sure to let her know. Thanks again.”

I close the door behind Eve’s new fan and walk back to the counter, inspecting the bag. Only one person in this motel can afford delivered takeout, and he’s notorious for calling people by the wrong name.

Getting comfortable, I pull the fries out of the bag and call his room, and just like last time, he doesn’t answer.

I call again.

And again.

And—“You know, generally, guests call the lobby when they need something. Not the other way around.”

This ass.

“Eve’s food delivery is at the desk.”

The line goes quiet.

“Did you hear me? Your food delivery is here.”

“I didn’t order food.” His tone is back to annoyed. “And I’m pretty sure my name is not Eve.”

“Neither is mine.”

He makes a noise that I swear sounds like a muffled laugh. “Looks like you have a mystery on your hands.”

Sounds like someone needs a hobby. Who orders food with the wrong name just to be a shit?

Room 101. That’s who.

Sighing, I pop another fry in my mouth. “What do you want me to do with this food?”

Again, he’s playing games. “Have you tried locating Eve? Surely, I’m not the only guest in this dump.”

He’s one of two guests, but Frankie barely puts together his weekly rent. There’s no way he ordered this.

“You know there’s not an Eve at this motel,” I argue.

“Well, then eat it—like you do everyone else’s meals.”

It's like I can hear the smile in his words. Clearly, he's in a better mood after having dinner.

"I had a few of your fries *one time*, and you act like I'm —" The lobby door is yanked open, and the snappy retort dies on my tongue. "Thank—" I clear my throat, while watching the man I never wanted to see again prowl forward. "Thank you for dinner, 101."

I hang up the phone before Remington can say *or hear* anything else. This asshole tends to get mouthy, and I don't need Remington getting any pointers.

"Eden," my stepfather drawls. "It's been a long time."

Not long enough. A few more decades would have been the more ideal time for a visit. "What are you doing here, Gerald?"

I have a good idea why he's here, but asking him buys me time to reach under the counter for the bat that I keep for special customers. I watch enough true crime. I know the evil that lingers in the shadows, and this man and his wretched wife are its king and queen.

Gerald approaches the counter, his grin lazy and manipulative. "Can't I visit my stepdaughter every once in a while?"

No. No, he can't. That would indicate we are some kind of happy family—and we certainly are not.

"You need to leave. Now."

My fingers wrap around the handle of the bat. Just knowing I could catch him in the jaw before he touches me is enough to settle the trembling in my hand.

"You forget that I've already asked you politely." He stares back at me with eyes full of hatred. "I warned you not to make this difficult."

And if he knew me, he would know that I'm always difficult. It's part of my charm. "You did," I agree. "And I wish I could help you. I really do. But unfortunately, my schedule isn't as flexible as I would like right now."

I flash him a smile of faux bravery. “But, I’ll tell you what. I’ll pencil you in when I have an opening. How does Wednesday look for you in about five years?”

I should have seen his reaction coming. After all, it’s one I’m well accustomed to, but it’s been many years since Gerald and I have had one of these bonding moments, so I’m startled when my back suddenly hits the wall, shattering the frame of motel regulations posted for the guests.

“You bitch!” His breath is beyond sour as a fine mist of spittle hits my face and his meaty fingers lock around my neck. “You think you can get away with speaking to me like that? You owe me!”

“I don’t—”

He squeezes tighter, cutting off my airway. “Your mother and I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

Through the silence, I can hear my pulse pounding in my ears. No one would hear me scream at this hour. I’m alone in the middle of the night in a motel lobby that’s miles from the nearest town. It’s not the best situation to be in.

And in the seconds that follow, I almost let instinct take over and beg him to let me go.

But then I hear his voice. The dry, bored tone sends relief shooting through my body as Gerald’s head snaps up, seeing the same shadowy presence as me. The dark lord of sarcasm.

Remington.

He tosses the bag of sheets I left for him on the counter. “You know, Eve,” he muses, his eyes intently focused on the hand at my neck. “I’m a little jealous. I thought I was the only one you annoyed.”

I actually manage a smile as Gerald’s grip eases, and his murderous gaze narrows at Remington. “This is none of your business, boy.”

Remington lets out this dark chuckle, and it’s then I know it’s not me who should be scared.



CHAPTER SIX

Remington

I hate cowards more than I hate the general public.

So, this prick, with his hands around a woman's throat, really pisses me off.

"I need a new set of sheets," I lie, my eyes never veering off the hand around Eden's throat as I edge closer to the man responsible for shitting on my night. "Now, you either get them for me, or she does. Frankly, I don't give a fuck who gets the pleasure. But until I get fresh sheets, Eden's piss-poor hospitality *is* my business."

The man with a death wish turns to Eden, his brows rising in disbelief.

She shrugs, seemingly answering the man's silent question. "I've tried explaining this isn't a five-star resort, but he listens about as well as you do, Gerald."

Quickly, I offer her my trademark look of boredom that I hope she translates properly. I have no reservations about

returning to my room and leaving her here with this asshole. Helpfulness is not a trait I enjoy using.

“Well,” the bastard says between gritted teeth, “he better listen now because I don’t like repeating myself.” He flashes me a glare, which brings out the asshole in me.

“Dude, same!” I pitch my voice like some giggling cheerleader before I drop the façade, my face morphing into something far more menacing than he is.

I live for motherfuckers like this—the ones who prey on the weak and unfortunate, taking what they want regardless of the cost. They don’t care whose lives they destroy in the process. And while I’m no saint, my plans for Ms. Da Luca aren’t near as violent and sinister as this man’s.

“I won’t tell you again, boy. Leave.”

His husky voice doesn’t scare me. In fact, it only ramps up my amusement. I want to test him—see if he’s willing to go as far as I am. Only one of us is going to take advantage of Ms. Da Luca here, and it’s not him.

“And if I don’t?” I can sense his apprehension growing.

“This isn’t your business.”

Oh, but it is.

Before I even moved to Georgia, Eden Da Luca was my business.

I tap out a cigarette and light it in the small space between us. “Maybe not, George, but all this threatening you’re doing has me excited.” Truthfully, it’s been a while since someone challenged me. “Don’t tell me you’re gonna be a cock tease—” I settle my gaze on Eden, who looks less frightened than when I first walked in here. “Like front desk Eve, here.”

As soon as Eden opens her mouth to argue about her fucking name again, I use the distraction and grab Gerald by the hair, yanking his head back and jabbing my cigarette into his neck. The smell of burnt flesh invades my nose as he roars, latching on to my wrist and inadvertently setting Eden free.

“I’m gonna kill you!”

I press the cigarette deeper. “Now, you’re just turning me on, George. Say it again, but this time, say it like you mean it.”

Gerald struggles under my hold, trying to kick out with his legs, but I’m behind him, and without the use of his head, all he meets is thin air. I wonder if Vance would be impressed. He and my uncle Astor love to fight at the gym. Neither of them is very good at it, but I must admit, when Vance offered me the chance to punch him and Duke in the face, I took the opportunity and enjoyed every round of it.

“I,” Gerald gasps out, “Will.”

I lean in closer. “What’s that?”

“I will kill—”

Gerald and I both jump at the sudden commotion as Eden ruins my damn moment by banging a bat on the counter, crushing the pieces of glass from a broken picture frame.

“Where the fuck was the bat?” I scoff, noticing Eden’s chest rising in a way that sends my mind to the gutter, which immediately pisses me off.

She narrows her eyes. “I dropped it when he choked me.” She sounds like it’s my fault or something.

“Well, what are you waiting for? A proposal? Hit him.”

I can’t believe she had a bat this whole time. And why? Does she play softball while on break?

For fuck’s sake. I can’t even with this girl.

“I’m not going to hit him unless he doesn’t leave.”

Always fucking arguing...I flash her an annoyed look. “Don’t you want to send him a message, just in case he has another brilliant idea and wants to come back and finish the job?”

Why am I even trying to save her at this point? Clearly, she’s a lost cause. Her body is going to end up in the dumpster before I can even get what I need from her.

“There won’t be a next time, will there, Gerald?” Eden raises the bat, her arms trembling. Gerald isn’t impressed by

her sudden show of bravado, but he stays quiet and lets her finish. “We won’t tell you again. Leave, and don’t come back here.”

Since when did I give her any indication that I resembled a friend or her personal savior? There is no “we.” I’m here for sheets. Nothing else. I don’t need to be a witness to an assault or murder that gets back to Duke. He’ll have questions about why I’m staying at this motel, and I won’t have answers for him. I made a personal goal this year not to hurt his feelings more than twice a day if I could help it.

But still, I’m intrigued enough to play into Eden’s little fantasy and toss my cigarette, shoving Gerald toward the door like we’re some kind of crime-fighting duo.

“I won’t forget this, Eden,” Gerald threatens, holding his hand over the burn on his neck as he walks to the door.

“Great,” I say, matching him step for step. “We look forward to it, Gomez.”

I take out another cigarette and light it, reminding him I’m close enough to go for his eye, should he decide to linger more than he already is. “Have a great evening.”

He pauses as soon as his back hits the door. “Don’t get cocky, kid. You won’t always be around.”

You know what?

Fuck it.

I reach behind me and bark, “Eden. The bat.” The wooden handle hits my palm in an instant, and Gerald scrambles through the door, leaving me filled with rage in the middle of the lobby.

I don’t know how long I stand there in silence, but it isn’t long enough to scare Eden into being silent.

“Did you just save me for the second time today, 101?” I can hear the humor wrapped around her words. She thinks my saving her makes us friends.

She couldn’t be more wrong.

Slowly, I turn around and pin her with a look that is anything but friendly. “I thought I asked you to get me a new set of sheets.”

Her face lights up with a toothy grin. “I knew you knew my name.”

I don’t have time for this shit. “If you can’t manage to do your job, then I’m checking out.” I reach into my pocket for the room key.

“Gah! Okay. I’ll get your sheets.” She waves me away like I’m being overly dramatic. “Sit down and rest that attitude of yours. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t sit down.

Instead, I turn around and head for the door.

“Don’t even think about it, 101. You’re taking these sheets you and I both know you’re not going to use.”

I pause with my hand on the door and sigh. Why must she irk the fuck out of me?

“Who says I won’t use them?”

I turn and find her grinning like she has me all figured out or something. “I think even Gerald knew you weren’t going to use these sheets.”

She tosses the bag of linens onto the counter. “Fresh out of the dryer for my hateful hero.”

I know what she’s doing.

“This doesn’t make us friends,” I say, just in case another crazy idea pops into her head, like wanting to hang out.

She gasps, and it’s full of sarcasm. “Are you saying that you walked all the way up the sidewalk to rescue me because you can’t stand me?”

I can’t help the glare that she brings on. “You and Gaston were blocking my view of the ugly wallpaper.”

“You’re telling me you sit outside in Room 103’s plastic chair and look at the wallpaper?” The humor in her voice is

unmistakable now.

“I find the pattern soothing,” I lie.

“I’m sure you do.” A dainty laugh slips out of her mouth. If she weren’t the enemy, I’d find it sexy—cute even. But I don’t because Eden Da Luca is nothing but a means to an end.

“Try not to mouth off to anyone else while I’m asleep—I hate pretending to care first thing in the morning.” Leaving the sheets out of principle, I turn and head for the door.

“No way. You’re taking these—ow!”

I turn around on instinct and find her cradling one hand while streaks of blood ooze between her fingers.

Fuck. I groan, seeing her face scrunch up in pain. “Let me see.”

She waves me off. “It’s fine. I’m sure I have a bandage in my purse.”

“You don’t.” My words come out more annoyed than concerned, which shouldn’t matter since her response is just as aggravated.

“That’s right. You know what’s in my purse because you went through it like a psycho.”

Since we’re playing tit for tat and all that while she bleeds out... “And you ate my fries like a psycho.”

“That’s not nearly as crazy as going through someone’s purse!”

I really do not have time to deal with her ridiculous rationale. “Give me your hand.”

“No.”

Fuck it. I tried. “Fine. Enjoy your evening.”

“Wait.” She sighs. “Do I really not have a bandage in my purse?”

I fight back a grin. “Just expired mints and a tampon.”

Her lips purse. “You have one, don’t you? I’m betting the son of a surgeon always has a Band-Aid handy.”

She's not wrong, but it's not the reason I have one in my room. "I see someone has been googling."

Pink spreads across her cheeks. "I get bored sometimes."

Not bored enough. If she knew what I do about her family, she would have plenty to google. But now is not the time to disclose that little tidbit of knowledge. I need something from Eden first.

"I can see that." I sigh heavily, like the fact that she googled my family is annoying, but really, I expected nothing less. Eden Da Luca is all but predictable. "You can always seek professional help," I add. "I hear doctors and hospitals have been known to have antiseptic and bandages."

She bows her head, clasping her hands in her lap. "I can't. I don't have insurance or the money to pay a hefty bill." She sighs. "Besides, I hate hospitals."

Fuck.

I might be a cold-hearted bastard, but a woman hurting is one thing I've never been able to tolerate.

"Leave the sheets and come with me," I bark. I don't wait to see if she follows as I stalk down the sidewalk to my room. I don't have to. I hear her heavy footsteps and panting before she catches up with me at the door.

This is a bad idea—the worst, actually.

But I'm not known for making good decisions. So, without thinking about the repercussions, I slide the key into the lock and motion her forward. "After you."



CHAPTER SEVEN

Eden

I don't move.

I've watched far too many crime shows to just walk into a stranger's motel room without asking the pertinent questions. "Promise you're not gonna chain me to the toilet and chop me into pieces on the next full moon?"

Remington cocks a brow and seems to hold back a laugh. "While that sounds appealing, I don't have the patience for properly disposing of the body."

He's always so freaking snarky. I wonder if he ever gets tired of being an ass.

"Oh, good. I'm relieved to hear your laziness will be my salvation."

Apparently, something in that sentence upsets him because his body goes rigid. "I'm no one's salvation."

Jeez. Someone is being way too literal tonight. “I’m sorry. You’re tired, and the cut has probably stopped bleeding by now.” I shake off the tension as his eyes stay locked on mine and step back. “Goodnight, 101.”

I don’t bother thanking him for saving me. He tends to get moody if I point out any good behavior he exhibits.

“Maybe I’ll see you on campus tom—”

Before I realize what’s happening, the front of my shirt is clenched in Remington’s hand, and I’m yanked forward into his room.

“Close the door.” He nearly growls. Clearly, his mood has plummeted.

I can’t understand him. Why help me if it puts him in such a shitty mood?

“Look, you—”

“Close the door!”

I kick the door closed. Remington doesn’t give me a second to process the situation as he basically drags me into the bathroom, turns me around, and then pauses while surveying the space.

“What?”

I look around, confused.

“Please tell me you aren’t looking for your chains.” After all, we are by the toilet. I don’t know if there is a full moon, but I don’t want to tempt fate. I’ve already had a crappy night and would hate to end it by being such a cliché.

“Be quiet,” he grates out.

I should have risked infection and used a paper towel from the bathroom in the lobby. Anything would have been better than enduring the tension in this room as Remington looks at my hands, tugging at the ends of his short, dark hair.

“You’re leaving as soon as I’m finished,” he threatens, never taking his eyes off my hands. “Do you understand?”

I nod, but I'm not sure he even sees it. Something came over him as soon as he saw I was hurt. But it's not like I asked him to take care of me. I only needed a bandage.

"We are not friends." His jaw works like every word is a struggle to get out.

I try nodding, but he holds my chin firm. "I understand. You need your beauty rest."

He doesn't laugh.

I don't know why I thought he would.

Instead, he drops his hands to my hips and lifts me onto the countertop as if I weigh nothing. "Wash the wound while I get supplies." His tone leaves no room for argument. I can tell he was raised around bossy doctors. He's used to his word being law.

Too bad I challenge everything.

I asked for a Band-Aid, not an angry wannabe physician. I'm perfectly capable of washing my cut in my sink. I don't even know why I came into his room in the first place. Oh, right. He manhandled me in here. Time to remind Mr. Meanie that I'm no doormat. I can certainly take care of myself—right after he gives me a bandage.

Still clutching my hand, I try easing off the counter a smidge when he enters the bathroom, tossing a bag next to me. "You know, Eve. I think you have a talent for making men murderous." He puts his hand on my forehead and pushes me back onto the counter. "Let me burst your bubble. Temptation and restraint aren't my best qualities. Push me far enough, and you'll regret it."

"And here I thought I was exaggerating when I called you dramatic."

He rolls his eyes and snatches my hand, placing it under the faucet. "Move your hand, and you'll see how dramatic I can be."

I don't.

Not even when he turns on the water and it sends a burning pain through my hand. Despite what he thinks, I do have self-preservation—just not a lot.

Without another word, he grabs the bag he tossed next to me and pulls out a couple of bottles and what looks to be packages of gauze.

“Will whatever that is in your hand burn?” I hiss like the mere sight of it already causes me pain.

He tsks, setting down the supplies. “First rule of accepting help: Never complain. It comes off as ungrateful.”

“I’m grateful.” I scoff. “I’m just not looking forward to more pain.”

His eyes lift to mine. “Are you implying you’re in pain often?”

If I knew him better, I would swear I detected concern in his voice.

“Is that your subtle way of asking me if my stepfather abuses me regularly?”

His head snaps up, his eyes razor-sharp with interest. “Gerald is your stepfather?”

I shrug. “We can’t all have picture-perfect surgeons as parents.”

It was a crappy thing to say, especially since Remington has done so much for me tonight. He can’t help that he comes from a better family than I do.

“I’m sorry. That was shitty of me to say.”

He makes this noise in his throat that sounds a lot like a laugh. “I enjoy you being ‘shitty.’”

Taking my hand, which is still under the water, he turns it over, inspecting the damage. “Think I’ll live, Doc?” I tease.

He grunts out a non-answer, while dragging his finger alongside the cut. I know helping me is the last thing he’d choose to be doing tonight, so I don’t understand why he takes

his time being gentle, making sure every inch of my hand is clean before turning off the water and handing me a towel.

“Dry around the cut.” He seems to be taking this minor injury a little too seriously. I would tell him that, but he’s calm and less assholeish for once, so I don’t want to ruin the moment by arguing—even though that seems to be his favorite thing to do with me.

I see the almost-smile he keeps hidden. He may not like me, but he’s intrigued, though I don’t understand why. I’m certainly not interesting. My life is a complete shitshow. I’m the girl who works all night—okay, I nap on the job a little, too—goes for her morning run before class, only to end up back at work at the campus cafeteria. I’ve mastered the art of living off five hours of sleep. But I like keeping busy. It reminds me that I’m moving forward. I won’t always be scared of Gerald or hide from my past. Soon, I’ll be able to move away from Georgia and Gerald, and start a new life, where no one remembers the girl in the fountain.

“What’s wrong?”

I hadn’t realized I had been staring off into space. “Oh, nothing. I—”

Unfortunately, I don’t remember a lick of what I was thinking about. All I can see is Remington’s iconic leather jacket is off and his hands are full of supplies. I can’t tell you what the supplies are, since my attention is solely focused on the muscles under his snug-fitting T-shirt.

“Where do you work out?” The question pops out of my mouth before I have the chance to stop it. I mean, obviously, he doesn’t work out, right? He spends his evenings in a plastic chair smoking—not in the gym with headphones on, but...

Unceremoniously, he drops the supplies into my lap and pushes my knees apart, so he can get closer to my hand. I suck in a breath. “You could have asked me to hold the supplies. I would have.”

He takes my hand in his, those chilling brown eyes slowly looking up and finding mine. “You could have told me to call

the police when Gerald entered the lobby and avoided me altogether, but here we are.”

Here. We. Freaking. Are.

I try yanking back my hand, but he simply holds it tighter, tsking me like I was a fool for even attempting to remove myself from his hold. “You are the one who gets a boner by inserting yourself into my business.”

A faint smile crosses his lips as he drops my hand and uncaps a bottle, placing a rag across my lap. “I’ll give you a free self-defense lesson just for saying the word boner.” He snatches my hand again, holding it in an unyielding grip. “Lesson number one: if Gerald ever puts his hands around your throat again,”—his eyes hold my gaze in a magnetic grip—“you stab him.”

I tilt my head to the side, not quite understanding where he’s going with this.

“With what? My super strong fingernail?”

He swallows and shakes his head, like something came over him for a moment. “Get something better than a bat, Eden.”

If I wanted to ruin the moment—which I don’t—I would tell him that sounds an awful lot like a concerned friend. Instead, I just tip my chin and hide the remnants of a smile, ignoring the tingling swirling in my stomach. I’ve never had anyone stand up for me. I know Remington would rather chew off his big toe than do it again, but he did. That has to mean there’s good inside him, underneath all the rude and snarky comments he makes.

“Okay,” I promise. “I’ll find something better.”

I’m lying. I can barely afford dinner and gas money. The last thing I should be spending money on is a weapon. The baseball bat has always served me well. No sense in upgrading when all I need to do is lock the door if I see Gerald again.

“You do that.”

It was all the warning he gave me before dousing my open cut with antiseptic. Immediately, tears prick my eyes, and I try pulling my hand away, but Remington holds me still as one lone tear falls down my cheek. He takes the gauze and wipes gently around the open area, his gaze intently focused as he pours more of the burning liquid onto my hand.

I'd love to scream, just to distract myself, but I can't. We've gone through too much tonight. I can handle a flesh burn. More than that, I have too much pride to let this man witness another tear fall.

I don't ask for his permission. I simply lean forward and rest my mouth on his shoulder, smothering a whimper.

Immediately, his body goes tense, but after a moment, I feel him douse my hand again, which burns like the devil himself. I don't even realize I've bitten him until he flinches, grunting in what I guess is pain.

"I'm sorry," I rush out quickly. "I didn't mean—"

He wipes my hand gently, taking care not to pull the wound open more than it already is. "I don't think you have any glass in your hand," he says clinically. "But it's probably best to have a doctor check it out to be sure."

"It'll be fine," I grumble into his neck, getting a whiff of cigarettes and something masculine.

He scoffs. "Don't blame me when it gets infected and scars, then." He continues wiping, and I manage to close my eyes for just a moment. How long has it been since someone has taken care of me like this? Never? I can't even remember a time my mother doctored my wounds.

My voice lowers to a whisper. "I won't," I promise. "Thank y—"

"Don't you fucking thank me." He all but growls. "Don't you *ever* thank *me*."

Whew. Okay. Someone has a thing about being thanked. "I guess you're used to this kind of thing, huh? With your dad being a doctor and all."

He doesn't respond, which is fine. I'm sure he would have said something rude anyway. Instead, he smears ointment over my hand that thankfully doesn't burn. "You need to keep these cuts clean and dry if you're gonna be stubborn about getting it checked out."

Stubborn?

I chuckle, lifting my head and noticing the chills along his neck.

Huh. That's interesting.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank—" I'm able to stop myself before I thank him again and then proceed to get down off the counter. "Goodnight, 101. See you around."

I flash him a sweet smile that he doesn't return.

Instead, his hand wraps around my wrist and pulls me to a stop. "Nights with me are never good, Eve. Don't think you'll be the exception."

And then he kicks the bathroom door closed.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Eden

I eye the closed door as my heart rate increases. “Now, now, 101. I asked if you were going to chain me to the toilet, and you said you were too lazy for such entertainment.”

He cocks a brow, and my stomach flutters. “I never said I was lazy. I said I didn’t have the *patience* to *properly dispose* of a body—not that I wouldn’t *improperly dump* a body.” A grin pulls at the corner of his mouth. “Your crime shows should have taught you to pay better attention to detail.”

Gah. Even when he’s insulting me, I find him attractive. Does that make me crazy? This man is basically locking me inside the bathroom with him, and I’m not scared one bit. This feeling of safety definitely isn’t a good thing. But something about Remington puts me at ease. He’s not Gerald. Remington’s threats are merely a glossy lie disguising the real person inside.

Or that could just be me hoping, but either way, I’m not scared of this man.

“I see.” I flash him a smile and hold up my free hand for him to take. “Shall I kneel, then, so you can get on with my murder?”

His eyes flash with something like determination. “You’ll kneel to no man.” His voice is low and threatening. “Especially not me.”

Realizing he’s still gripping my wrist, he drops my arm and takes a healthy step back, folding his arms across his chest. He looks like he’s readying for an argument. Knowing our history when communicating, arguing is a strong possibility.

“Why is your stepfather harassing you?” His tone demands an answer.

I plan to give him one—just not one he’s going to like. “Why do you stay here at the motel instead of on campus?”

Remington’s mouth tightens. I can tell he’d like nothing more than to shake me. Hell, he probably wants to scream at me. But he doesn’t. Instead, he leans back against the door. “Who says I don’t?”

I shrug. “Seems like if you lived on campus, I would see you at school more than I see you here.”

He completely avoids my observation about his sleeping arrangements and answers, “What mistake won’t your mother and stepfather make again?”

Popping a hand onto my hip, I narrow my eyes and blatantly challenge him. “Why do you want to know? It’s not like you’ll defend me if they try to do it again.”

He’s saved me twice now, and every time I bring it up, he makes some excuse that someone was in his way or that he needed sheets. If he wants answers from me, then he’s going to contradict himself and admit that he has defended me. I want proof that he isn’t the terrible guy he wants me to believe he is.

A chuckle slips out from between his lips as he pushes off the door, coming nose-to-nose with me. He’s so close. All I can focus on is how he smells. The deep, masculine scent of

pine and leather saturates the air around me. And then he opens his mouth, and the warmth of his breath ghosts over my lips like a faint kiss as his hand snakes through my hair. I'm basically melting in this man's arms as his body moves closer, consuming the very air I breathe.

"Eden." He breathes along my neck, and chills race along my skin.

"Mm-hmm."

I don't think I'm capable of forming words with him this close—especially not after he took care of me by bandaging my hand.

"I won't ask again. What did Gerald mean?" A faint rumble goes through his chest.

Why is he still on Gerald? Can't we both just enjoy the moment of him not being a shit and me not overanalyzing everything?

"It doesn't matter." I nearly moan when he tugs my head back so I can look at his enchanting brown eyes.

"I'll be the one who decides relevance." His voice is husky, and if I wasn't tingling in a thousand different places, I would tell him that he isn't in control as much as he thinks he is. His persuasion tactics are failing him.

I hold his steady gaze and slide my hands through his hair. Tit for tat has proven to be our favorite pastime. "How much is it worth to you?"

His mouth flattens as his body pulls taut. "This isn't a negotiation."

"It is for me." I shrug. "I have several more hours of an overnight shift. I could stand here all night." I flash him a smirk. "But you, with those dark circles under your eyes, could use the rest."

I swear I can feel the anger rolling off him in waves. If he didn't want the information so badly, I have no doubt he would throw me out of his room without a second thought.

“Fine,” he growls, yanking me flush against him, “I don’t stay in the dorms because I’m not here to get a degree.”

“What are you here for then?”

He flashes me a smile that isn’t friendly at all. “It’s your turn now.”

Goodness gracious. This freaking man.

“Fine.” I sigh dramatically. “Gerald and my mother won’t make the mistake of letting me survive again.”

It’s like the proverbial bucket of ice water is poured over Remington’s head. He drops his hands and jumps back like I pushed him. “What do you mean they won’t ‘let you survive *again*’? Did they try to kill you?”

His entire demeanor has shifted to something more threatening. Something that I should definitely be scared of.

“I’m afraid that’s all the bedtime stories you get for tonight.” I point to the closed bathroom door and smile. “Unless you want to share another story with me...like, what you’re here for if not for school? Aren’t you from Texas?”

Dark eyes stare down at me hard, and just when I think he’s going to shut me down by throwing me out, he answers, “I’m here for revenge.”

My heart literally spasms in my chest. I needed proof Remington isn’t as awful as he wants me to believe, and here he is, freely admitting he’s here for revenge. Granted, Midnight Gardens isn’t an up-and-up place for law-abiding citizens. We’ve had our share of drug deals and brawls, but I never knew about those things in advance. I mean, should I be concerned that Remington is here to possibly commit a crime? But what if he simply just wants to sucker-punch a dude for breaking up with his sister or something? It could be that simple. After all, Remington is a college student. How pissed off could he be?

In order to know that, though, I have to pay his price. “My mom and Gerald tried to kill me,” I blurt out quickly, “by purposely leaving me in a hot car when I was six.”

Remington's hands clench into fists at his sides. "And what? Gerald decided to regroup for thirteen years before he came back to finish the job?"

I shake my head. "No. He's back because my mother is going before the parole board soon. He wants my support."

"Fuck him," Remington spits, seemingly heated over my little tale of horror.

I offer him a friendly smile. "My thoughts exactly. Now, why are you seeking revenge?" I gave Remington more information than he's given me. It's only fair he coughs up a few details, without me having to threaten him.

"A friend," he starts, swallowing thickly, "was hurt by someone. I want to return the sentiment and show him how it feels to lose a future."

"Your friend..." I hesitate. "Did something happen to him?"

Remington nods solemnly. "He died."

My mother was right. There is far too much wickedness in this world.

"I'm so sorry." I reach out to...I don't know, comfort him, but he steps back, his eyes twinkling under the dingy yellow light. I think he's about to throw me out, but he surprises me by turning around and opening the medicine cabinet above the sink.

"It's not a bat," he says, facing me. "But I want you to take it just in case Gerald is stupid enough to come back tonight."

He holds out his palm, and there sits an old razor, like the ones you see in black-and-white movies, where the barber shaves a cowboy's face. It basically looks like a fancy straight blade.

"Oh, no." I chuckle. "I can't take that. I'll probably cut off my finger. You see how I faired with a picture frame."

I hold up my bandaged hand. "I can't be trusted around sharp objects."

“I’m willing to risk it.” He grabs my hand, flipping it palm-side up, and slaps the closed razor into it. “If I’m wrong, you can still swing a bat with nine fingers.”

And he’s back to being an asshole again. It was nice while it lasted.

“How sweet,” I tease. “And you say you’re no hero.”

That gets his attention, as all the “kindness” he offered disappears. “Haven’t you heard, sweet Eve? In the Garden of Eden, even the purest heart was tempted by the wicked. Don’t make the same mistake she did. Trust me when I tell you, your hero is the worst kind of villain.”

With that parting—and seriously creepy remark—he steps past me and opens the door. “Lock the lobby door.”

“I can’t—”

He arches his brows threateningly, and I decide I’ve pushed him enough for one day. “Okay, I’ll lock the door.”

I don’t wait for him to agree or argue. It’s well past 1:00 a.m., and I have a lobby to clean before my shift is over. “Get some sleep, 101, before you convince me that you’re a nice guy.”

He snorts out a laugh that I ignore. No one has time to fall in love with a savior or a raspy laugh—especially someone like me. Remington is here for revenge. I’m here for as long as Gerald will let me live in peace.

Neither of us plans to stay long enough to build anything more than a friendship.

But tell that to the tingles shooting down my spine as I leave Remington’s room and walk down the darkened sidewalk. I can feel his intense eyes on me—watching every step I take. He’s making sure I get inside and lock the door like he demanded.

Maybe I don’t understand the definition of a villain, but I’ve also never known one like Remington. He threatened two people on my behalf and bandaged my hand tonight. As if that wasn’t enough, he went on to arm me with a weapon and stood

watch as I finally made it back inside the lobby and flipped the lock. He's a walking—well, smoking—contradiction that makes me feel safer than ever. Especially when he settles into that damn chair outside his room and lights up a cigarette.

What is it about that chair he loves so much? I mean, I've sat in one, and compared to a bed or the chair inside the room, it's pretty uncomfortable. I have no idea why he insisted on having one. Whatever the reason, though, I'm grateful to feel those hateful eyes watching me as I get to work, sweeping up all the glass.

I don't know how long it takes me to get the lobby back to decent shape, but it's long enough for me to notice that my angry hero didn't go back inside once he finished his cigarette. Not only is he still sitting in that blasted chair, but he's asleep.

And probably cold.

But I'm willing to bet a year's salary he prefers to be left alone.

I take one more peek out the window and notice a cigarette still burning in Remington's hand. If his head wasn't drooping forward, I wouldn't be as concerned, but I've heard horror stories of people burning to death from falling asleep with a lit cigarette. Hopefully, he's just resting his eyes and will wake up any second and put it out.

But he doesn't.

At least not after the minute I give him to do so.

Screw it.

I'm going out there. He may yell at me, but at least he won't be yelling at me with third-degree burns. It's the least I can do after his help today.

Grabbing a blanket from the back, I hustle down the sidewalk and approach the self-proclaimed villain. He doesn't stir at my presence, so I lean down and slide the cigarette from his fingers and put it out on the concrete. I don't know if I should wake him or just leave him be. He's awful moody about, well, everything. Who knows what he would prefer in this situation.

But I remember the dark circles under his eyes today. He was tired, yet he stayed awake to help me—to make sure Gerald didn't come back and hurt me. He'd deny it if I asked him about it tomorrow. But I know I'm the reason Remington is out here asleep in a cheap plastic chair.

So, instead of waking him and making him yell, I drape the blanket over his legs and walk back to the lobby. I'll watch over him tonight, just like he did me, and if he doesn't wake up in an hour, I'll go back and shoo him inside.

At least, I thought I would.

But when I get back to the lobby and lock the door behind me, I notice Remington and the blanket are gone.



CHAPTER NINE

Remington

I couldn't sleep last night—which isn't all that uncommon.

But I blame Eden.

If she hadn't tossed that fucking blanket on me like I was a stray cat, I wouldn't have lain awake, noticing that I couldn't escape the smell of her. There hadn't been enough fresh air or cigarette smoke to mute the sweet scent clinging to my clothes. It annoyed the fuck out of me. If I wanted to smell like a kept man, I would have stolen Vance's soap. And if I wanted an extra blanket, I would have stayed at a different hotel where my last name would score me the softest blanket they had.

But I didn't.

I checked into the shitty Midnight Gardens Motel with the nosiest employee in the universe. Why did I tell her about Stetson? About seeking my revenge? And why, for fuck's sake, did I not know her mother and stepfather tried to kill her when she was young?

My stomach clenches at the thought of someone trying to hurt her.

How long was she in the car, struggling to breathe? Did they sedate her, or did they pick the hottest day in the summer to strap her in and walk away?

I don't know, but I intend to find out.

I didn't come to Georgia to let Congressman Albrecht escape punishment.

He's ruined enough lives, including his own daughter's.

But does she know that?

Something tells me she doesn't, and that fucks my plans all to hell.

I want the girl who's an opportunist and a liar, just like her father. Not someone who suffered and still took care of a stranger.

Fuck!

I toss the rubber ball I found at Vance's after showering this morning into the air. I might be used to roughing it, but after living with Vance for so long, I'm now spoiled with certain luxuries, like a rainfall showerhead and decent coffee.

"I thought you had class this morning." Vance walks past me, ignoring the fact I'm lying on his kitchen island, and heads straight to the coffee pot.

"It was canceled." I ignore Vance's suspicious glare. He knows I showed up at six this morning and let myself in.

"Why was it canceled?"

I grin. "Probably the same reason your therapy appointment was 'canceled' yesterday." I cut him a look that asks *do you really want to do this today?* I might not be his assistant anymore, but that doesn't mean I still don't keep up with his therapy. Someone has to make sure he takes care of himself. Halle needs someone—other than me—to harass.

I toss the ball again, and Vance manages to snatch it midair. "You're already making me consider drinking this

morning. Get off the island. This isn't one of your sleazy motel rooms. We have a sofa if you want to lie down."

I turn my head, tracking the esteemed thirty-eight-year-old plastic surgeon through the kitchen, where he pauses by the trash can, dropping my ball in like a dick. "That wasn't even my ball, by the way." I tsk. "Tatum is going to be very upset when she visits and realizes her uncle Vance tossed her favorite toy."

Vance lets out a long-winded sigh and steps on the pedal, opening the lid to fish out the ball for his almost-two-year-old niece. And I enjoy the pain on his face for all of two seconds before I crack up laughing.

"Something is wrong with you," he snaps, pinning me with a glare as he steps away from the trash can, pissed off for even having to get close to it.

"Something is wrong with *you*," I pop back between snorts of laughter. "I can't believe you were willing to dig in the trash for a twenty-five-cent rubber ball. I'm honestly disappointed in you, Vance-hole."

"You said it was Tatum's!"

I shrug. "And you believed it." I catch his furious gaze. "She's a toddler, Vance. She still puts her toes in her mouth, for fuck's sake. Do you really think your brother would let her play with a ball she could swallow?"

He flips me off without another word and proceeds to pretend like I'm not here.

Tsk-tsk, Vance-hole. I can read you like a coloring book.

"So..." I say to his back, "you want to tell me why you're digging toys out of the trash and not at the office seeing patients?" Vance lives for his practice. There are only two reasons he would reschedule patients at a brand-new practice he and my father just opened. One of those reasons is probably still in his bed, and the other is on his island.

"Don't tell me you and Dr. Drab are still conspiring with the exposé reporter to uncover my secret." I flash him a grin. "Let me guess. Duke's ex-girlfriend has information, and

you're meeting her at the quaint little coffee shop a mile from campus."

Unlike my father, Vance doesn't treat me delicately. It's the thing I admire most about him. "I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but your father and I don't have time to chase down your past felonies. As long as it doesn't cost us money or jail time, bury as many bodies as you want."

He's lying, but damn if it doesn't give me the warm fuzzies that he hides his concern behind rudeness.

"Cool," I lie, jumping off the counter. "Glad we had this talk."

Vance shoots me a glare that makes me smile. He may talk shit about not caring about my past, but I know he and my father are here in Georgia for one reason only, and it's not to expand their practice farther south. They, just like everyone else who meets me, know that the secrets I keep will destroy them. As doctors, they want to stop it from spreading. But they can't because it's already infected our family. It started when Halle found me at the motel over two years ago.

Halle brought me into her life, only for me to destroy the one thing that ever meant something to me.

My peace.

My family.

"You coming by for dinner?" Vance's hard tone pulls me out of my head.

"Probably not."

His eyes narrow. He can smell a lie from a mile away. "You seeing someone?"

I belt out a laugh and clutch my hand to my chest. "Aw. Are you jealous, Vancy-Poo? If I had known you felt that way, I would have asked her how she felt about threesomes."

A slight grin tugs at his lips, but he fights it back. "Your father should be proud that you're more of a shit than he is."

"My mother says it's part of our charm."

“It’s also the reason you’ll get punched one day.”

I wink. “We do like it rough.” I tip my chin and step back toward the door leading to the garage. “Tell Hal to call me when she’s coherent enough to speak.”

“And dinner?” he prompts, sounding like the old man he’s becoming. “Are you coming or not?”

I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth. “You’re sounding desperate, sugar. I told you, next time.”

Wrenching open the door, I chuckle, which was the wrong thing to do. Vance isn’t known for his patience. He tries, and with therapy, he’s become better, but not when someone pushes his buttons.

And pushing his buttons is my favorite thing to do. So, when the rubber ball narrowly misses my head as it bounces off the wall, I take my cue and leave.

I have somewhere to be—somewhere I can’t put off any longer.



The brick building located in the heart of Atlanta is anything but fancy. Barred windows, no lights anywhere, and a scowling man leans against an overturned trash can to my left.

“You looking for Grant?” he asks in a dry, gritty voice.

“Yeah. Is he in?”

I can feel my blood pounding in my veins waiting for his answer. I shouldn’t be here. If any of the Potters found out that I came here, they’d lock me in one of their fancy basements and chain me to an antique chair.

This isn’t a place anyone should have to visit.

The man resting against the barrel, tips his chin. “Yeah, he’s in there.”

Perfect.

I couldn't be more excited. "Thanks," I say, taking the last steps to the door and pushing it open. Like the outside of the building, the room inside is just as dated.

"You Remington?" A middle-aged man comes out from another room, assessing me as he approaches. "You Maverick's friend?"

I wouldn't call Maverick and me friends, but whatever gets the job done. "Yeah."

He nods. "You're late, then."

That I am, but it took a couple of cigarettes to calm me down enough to come here. Vance would love to know that little tidbit of information. I cower for no man; yet here I am, seconds away from having a full-blown panic attack with this one.

"Traffic," I lie. "It won't happen again."

He starts walking down the hall and motions for me to follow. "Did Maverick explain to you how this works?"

I almost laugh. "He failed to mention it."

Nor did I stick around for the details. Maverick was annoying enough just brokering this deal. I didn't need an orientation.

"Figures," he scoffs, "Maverick was a pain in my ass."

I'm thinking he won't enjoy me much more.

"You got the money?"

I nod, swallowing thickly. This is it. There's no turning back—no running from the past. I'm out of options.

There is no asking for help.

Begging won't save me, and neither will pleading.

My adoptive mother once told me that I'm the author of my own story, and even though I can't change the backstory, I can change the ending.

But she was wrong.

Some stories aren't meant to have happy endings.

Some are solely meant to deliver *revenge*.

Congressman Albrecht took my past.

He took my future.

His life is now forfeit.

I'm not the same person Congressman Tooney raised and paraded in front of the cameras. I'm not that weak little boy anymore.

I'm not his *son*.

Congressman Albrecht taught me the game of politics.

And I remember it well.

No one escapes punishment.

Eden may not know the monster she came from, but I do.

I am his end.

And this moment is the beginning of mine.

I'm not the hero in my story.

I am the villain.



CHAPTER TEN

Eden

I haven't seen Remington all day.

Not that that isn't a normal occurrence, but I don't know. I thought maybe after last night we would... maybe... at least say good morning to each other.

But that's not what happened.

Remington left just as I was clocking out and telling Bill about the broken frame and the upset customer we had overnight. I feel bad about lying to the man who gave me a job and doesn't mind if I crash in one of the empty rooms every now and again, when I'm too tired to drive back to the dorms, but I thought if Bill knew that the unruly customer was my stepfather, he might fire me, and I can't have that. I need this job more than anything. I might have a loan that pays my tuition, but it doesn't pay for everything. More importantly, though, this job allows me to stash away the money I need in case Gerald's threats turn into something more substantial.

I wasn't lying when I told Remington my mom is up for parole. Like Gerald, she isn't my biggest fan. Worse, she blames me for her being in prison in the first place. My testimony, apparently, had the biggest influence on the judge. The bad thing is, I can't even remember what I said. I don't remember a lot from that time in my life, only that a man broke the window of the car and pulled me out.

After that, it was a whirlwind of bouncing around from foster home to foster home. I barely remember the trial, but I do remember staring at my mother as she sat at the table with her lawyer. There were no tears, not like the defendants I see in my crime shows. She didn't even try to fake remorse. She simply stared me down like I was a stranger.

She blamed me for my father leaving when she was pregnant.

Although she never spoke of him, she never let me forget that I was the reason he left. He didn't want me, and clearly, neither did she. What she thought would result in a happily ever after, left her broke and alone. She never wanted to be a mother, and when she met Gerald, she thought she had found a way out.

I've never had a family.

I'm used to taking care of myself.

So, Remington helping, by simply standing up for me, stirs a new emotion inside me. I owe him a thank-you or at least a good morning.

But since it's late in the afternoon, and I didn't see him at school or in the cafeteria, I took it upon myself to do the world a favor and get the man some food. If I've learned anything from my time with Remington, it's that he is a lot more temperamental when he's hungry.

I rap my fist against the door, but he doesn't answer.

Again, that's not unusual. Calling him works the same way. He likes to play hard to get.

"I know you're in there," I say loudly. "Your car is here."

I might have been a little stalker-y today.

“I have all night to knock on this door. You might as well open it.”

I bang again.

“Don’t make me resort to calling. You know I will. I have a twelve-hour shift with nothing better to do but dial your number over and over.”

Threatening to annoy the sanity out of guests is probably not the hospitality Bill prefers from his guest services, but Remington is no normal guest. He doesn’t like generosity or kindness. He responds to threats and sarcasm.

Lucky for him, I’m a fast learner.

“I swear I will use my master key and open this door myself, 101. Don’t tempt me!”

The door two rooms down flies open, and Frankie shoots me an annoyed glare. “He’s not in there. He’s down at the laundry.”

Oh.

Shit.

I step back from the door like I wasn’t just being a complete psycho and offer him an apologetic smile. “Thank you. Let me know if you need anything this evening.”

Bless him. He doesn’t say another word. I appreciate him not allowing me to embarrass myself further. “Have a good evening.”

I wave a quick goodbye and nearly sprint down the sidewalk to the self-service laundry we have attached to the motel, which is also where we keep the ice machine. It’s no state-of-the-art laundry facility, but it gets the job done, just as long as you have time to wait for two dry cycles.

I find Remington at the laundry, just like Frankie said. Except he’s not reading some Playboy magazine atop the washer with a cigarette like I expected. Instead, he’s hunched

over with his elbows resting on his knees in the plastic chair that he must have dragged from his room.

“I thought you would take your clothes to the cleaners.”

He lifts his head far enough to meet my eyes. “And I thought you could read a room better than you do. Clearly, we were both wrong.”

I brush past him and set the bag of food on the washer before hoisting myself up. “I can read a room just fine, thank you.”

The deep sigh he lets out would get on my nerves if I wasn't used to his moods by now.

“The head down, squinting eyes, and closed-off vibe emanating from you clearly indicates you want to be left alone.”

He nearly growls. “Bingo.”

“You also probably need a pain reliever for that headache you have going on.” I may not be premed, but I know when someone isn't feeling their best. “I have some in the lobby. I can get you one if you need it.”

“I don't.”

Sure, he doesn't, but arguing with him will get me nowhere. I came to feed him and say good—well, good evening now.

“I brought you something.”

He doesn't miss a beat. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Thanks?

Wow. I expected a ‘leave me alone’ or a ‘fuck off.’ ‘Thanks, but no thanks’ is definitely an improvement.

I open the bag and allow the smell of greasy fast food to waft through the air. “Eating will help your headache.”

“I told you. I don't have a headache.”

I shrug. “Okay. I'll eat yours, then.” Honestly, I'll save it in the break room refrigerator because there is no way I can

eat two chicken sandwiches and a large fry. But Remington doesn't have to know that. All he needs to think is that I'm capable of downing this entire bag of food while he sits there and suffers.

With my legs swinging in front of the washer, I open the bag and start with the french fries. "I didn't see you on campus today."

He grunts out a non-answer.

"I thought maybe I would since you seem to enjoy sitting on the bench at lunch, stalking me."

That has his head snapping up. "I don't stalk you." His forehead wrinkles, and his eyes squint shut.

He definitely has a headache, and I'm not going to sit here and watch him suffer.

Jumping down, I hand him the fries. "Hold this for me. I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

Instead of answering his question, I go with, "Don't eat my fries!" Let this be a lesson to him of how it feels when he doesn't immediately get the answers he wants.

Before he can say something shitty, I sprint down the sidewalk to the lobby. "Hey, Bill. I'll be along to clock in soon—just grabbing dinner."

Bill grunts, never pulling his eyes from the small TV we keep at the desk.

In the break room, I find the pain reliever that Bill keeps for his knees. He swears when they ache, rain is coming. I'm not sure if he's right or if it's a coincidence, but since I've been working here, I've witnessed his prediction come true a dozen times.

Shaking two pills into my hand, I wave at Bill and hurry back to the laundry, where I find Mr. Liar Liar Pants on Fire. "I thought you weren't hungry."

He shoves another fry in his mouth. “Did I say I wasn’t hungry?”

Gah. If he wasn’t both rude and adorable, I’d like to strangle him for a few minutes. Just to make enduring him worth it.

I hold out my hand and offer him the pills. “You said ‘thanks but no thanks.’ I thought that meant you weren’t hungry.”

“You thought wrong.” He takes the pills and eyes me carefully.

“Are you scared they aren’t really pain relievers?”

I mean, it could happen. We don’t know each other all that well. I could be some assassin sent to kill him or something.

I know that’s ridiculous, but really, how well do you know anyone? A few decent hours with someone doesn’t mean they are a good person.

“I don’t have anything to drink.”

His words snap me out of my runaway thoughts. “Oh.” I reach behind him and grab the cup off the washing machine. “Here. I didn’t know what you preferred, so I just got water.”

“Water?” His eyebrows rise, and a ridiculously hot smirk forms on his lips. “I look like a guy who drinks water to you?”

I shrug. “They were out of sacrificial blood of children.”

He barks out a laugh, and I swear to everything holy, it’s the sweetest, sexiest thing I’ve ever heard, but then again, I don’t get out much.

“Be careful, Eve. You’re growing on me.” He tosses back the pills and takes a drink from his cup.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s definitely not a good thing,” he murmurs, more to himself than me.

“Well, it won’t be the first time I found myself with a bad man.” I go to hop back onto the washer when he grabs me by

the waist.

“What bad man are you referring to?” His tone has gone from playful to threatening in seconds. It’s not a fun presence to be in.

“I just meant Gerald.” I struggle to hold his hardened gaze. “You know...last night.”

His grip loosens. “Your stepdad?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s your birth father?”

He drops his hand and settles back into his chair. I use the space to create more distance between us and jump back onto the washer. “Don’t know.”

Remington hesitates before plucking another french fry from the container. “He doesn’t keep in touch?”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t even have a name.” I shrug. “I don’t know who he is. My mother won’t speak of him.” Not that she and I have ever had that many heart-to-heart conversations, but still. My birth father is a no-go zone for my mother. Anytime I’ve ever tried to bring him up, she made sure to put a stop to my questions by screaming and crying and blaming me for how her life turned out. Eventually, I stopped asking.

It didn’t matter who my father was; he didn’t want anything to do with me, and that told me all I needed to know. If I was going to survive this life, I was going to do it alone. I didn’t need a great childhood, only a promising future, and that, right now, is enough for me.

Something hard taps my hand, and I realize I closed my eyes.

“Better eat one before I eat them all.”

It’s like he told me he loved me by nudging my hand with the carton of fries. Remington doesn’t do sweet. Willingly offering me a fry is like a freaking proposal, or at least a hug to him.

“Thanks.” I take two because, well, I need them with the way this conversation is going. “Can we, uh, change the subject?”

I don’t know why I’m asking, but talking about my family, or lack thereof, isn’t something I enjoy discussing.

“Sure.”

I choke at the softness of his words.

Sure! He said sure!

Recovering, I swallow quickly and take the opening he’s giving me. He hasn’t left or told me to leave. He said *sure*, like he’s okay with us changing the conversation to something else.

Something that I decided last night.

“I want to help you get your revenge.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Remington

I can't breathe.

I swallowed potato down the wrong pipe at her offer. "What do you mean you want to help me with my revenge?" I say as soon as I can speak without coughing up a lung.

Eden folds her legs under her, and I refrain from noticing how her tits jiggle from the motion of the agitator banging against the sides of the washing machine. When I used to wash clothes with Halle, she would always complain that I put too many clothes in the basin, which would cause it to be off-balance.

Just like back then, I don't give a fuck. I don't have all day to do laundry. Besides, watching Eden's tits bounce isn't all that much of a hardship.

"I thought since you helped me with Gerald, I could help you with your revenge," she explains, failing to notice that my eyes are not on her face. But the moment only lasts long

enough for me to digest her words and for my blood to run cold.

“We aren’t a team, Eden. Nor are we friends.”

“God forbid.” She laughs, not offended in the least. “No one wants to be your friend or partner, Mr. Villain. Rest assured.”

Something stirs inside me, something like a challenge. And that feeling is insane since the last thing I need from this girl is loyalty. But tell that to my dick, which stirs at the thought of knowing her without the barrier of lies between us. “Then what exactly are you suggesting?”

“Gah, for a surgeon’s son, you sure didn’t inherit his brilliant mind.”

I’m not taking the bait. Eden wants me to argue so that this conversation of ours continues past my liking. Non-friends do not sit around and chat while doing laundry—no matter how hot she looks in a tank top and ripped jeans.

“Fine,” she relents after I just sit there, creating tension through the silence. “Since you need me to spell it out for you...” She flashes me a teasing smile I don’t return. She knows I’m no fool, and soon, she’ll learn insulting me—even teasing—comes with consequences. “I can help you. I know a lot—and I mean a lot—about crime. I could help you research. Not only would my savvy research skills help you seek revenge, but it would also help me.”

I’m instantly on alert. “How would helping me benefit you?” I thought she wasn’t aware of Albrecht.

Jumping off the washer, Eden approaches me and grabs a handful of fries. “I want to get into the FBI Academy when I graduate. Helping you find whomever you’re looking for is great field experience.”

I almost laugh. “What gave you the impression that this revenge story is résumé-appropriate? Nothing I plan on doing is legal.” I grin and steal the fries from her hand.

“So?”

Stubborn is not attractive—especially when it inconveniences me.

“Has no one told you that you are the company you keep?” I flash her a dangerous look. “A pretty little princess like you should be careful with whom she aligns herself.”

“I’m no pretty princess.”

I flash her a devious smile. “No, you certainly are not. You’re a good girl knocking at the Tree of Knowledge.”

She swallows, and I can finally see realization setting in. No matter what she wants to believe, I’m not a good guy. Maybe I once was, but not anymore. “Shall I remind you, princess, how that story ended?”

Straightening her spine, Eden holds my gaze. “You’re no snake, and I’m no Eve. Our story is not the same.”

Oh, how wrong she is.

In the Garden of Eden, the most honest of men are tempted by Eve’s kindness and beauty. But men like me can’t be tempted because nothing tempts us. If we want something, we take it—consequences be damned.

Eden is my Eve.

She’s the lush-filled garden blooming with infinite promises and beauty. She’s the future, offering me an apple of hope.

But I’m no Adam.

I won’t be swayed.

Because the knowledge she seeks, I already have.

I know how the story ends. Not because the devil *tricked* me.

But because the devil *raised* me.

“We’ll see about that,” I challenge, hoping to scare some sense into her. This woman is beyond aggravating. She’s determined to be disappointed. I’m not the hero she wants to

believe I am, and if she continues down this path and “helps” me with fulfilling my revenge, she won’t just be disappointed.

She’ll be devastated.

For the Tree of Knowledge will bear more truth than Eden can handle.

I’m doing her a favor.

I’m keeping her eyes closed.

The truth will not set her free.

Instead, her truth will damn her—just like it did me.

“I’m not asking your permission.” She huffs, propping her hands on her hips.

It makes me smile. “Oh, you’re not, are you?”

She meets my gaze in a daring challenge. “No. I’m not. You saved me, and I am going to pay you back.”

“By being my research assistant?”

“Yes. And you’re going to agree.”

If I wasn’t so turned on right now with her boldness, I would threaten her into backing down. But call me reckless, I actually want to see how far she’ll go.

“Give me one good reason I should let you in on my revenge. Convince me you’re not just going to use the information against me and turn me into the cops.”

She bites her lip, and I have to adjust the front of my pants to accommodate the swelling.

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I’m no narc.”

Unfortunately, I have to address the contradiction in the room. “Gerald seems to think so.”

“Gerald is a fucking liar.”

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm in her face, my hands on either side of her neck, holding her still. "First rule of being my research assistant: never use the word fucking around me unless you intend on doing it. I don't like being teased."

She swallows, and my thumb tracks the motion along her throat. I'm breathing hard, fighting back the urge to draw closer—to devour her right where she stands. This moment alone should concern her. Rarely am I tempted, but when I am, it's not for long. I don't do delayed gratification.

"This is your only warning," I rasp out. "This won't end well for you."

Those startling, innocent blue eyes look up at me. "I heard you the first time, and I'm still here."

So she is.

I can't help but admire her determination.

She wants a bite of the forbidden fruit.

She wants to understand.

She wants to help.

And so, she will.

And we'll both perish.



Eden had to clock in for her shift.

It didn't break my heart.

After our conversation about revenge—and my raging headache—I needed a break and a nap. Now that I don't feel my heartbeat behind my forehead, I'm thinking more clearly.

Like what a colossal mistake it is to allow Eden to willingly participate in my revenge.

It's not like she wasn't already part of my plan in this revenge story, but I misjudged her involvement with the congressman. I don't admit this very often, but I might have

been wrong about Eden Da Luca. From what I know of her, she isn't like her family or the congressman. She isn't even like me. A tragic past didn't dampen her spirit or make her bitter as it did me.

Eden takes the blows she's dealt, and she still stands, facing her competitor with a smile. Those people are rare in this world of greed and betrayal. She dictated her own future, not allowing her past to shape her. At one time, I thought the same about myself.

But that all changed this past year.

And I let the outcome consume me.

I'm bitter.

Angry.

What hope I once had is gone, and there, in its place, is revenge. This plan is the least I can do for my family—for myself. One last 'fuck you' before I admit defeat and let Congressman Albrecht win. Eden doesn't know that this plan of revenge doesn't end in peace or even a happily ever after.

It just ends.

Maybe it stops the congressman from ever thinking about fucking with my family again, but it's not a victory—at least not for me.

Allowing Eden to think she's fighting on the side of good is probably the worst thing I could do to her. While I'm no saint, I'm not evil either. I'm just a bitter asshole trying to deliver punishment to the only man left in the crime against the people I care about. Duke and Ray deserve closure. And if I'm honest, so do I.

The phone in my room rings for the eighth time in the past five minutes. I don't need to answer to know who it is. Eden is the only person crazy enough to interrupt me when the *Do Not Disturb* sign hangs outside the door. If she didn't annoy me so much, her tenacity would make me proud. No man needs a docile woman. It makes life dull and the sex vanilla. Not that I plan on having sex with Eden. I'm simply making a point that submissiveness is overrated.

And so is a landline.

“No,” I clip out, finally answering the phone, “I’m not coming to the lobby.”

I can hear the smile in her voice when she returns, “No one asked you to leave the throne, your highness. I simply have a question.”

“I’m not in the mood to answer any more of your questions.”

“I knew that when I called. But guess what?”

Damnit. I smile. I already know what she’s planning to say. “What?”

“I’m asking you anyway.”

See what I mean? She’s ballsy as hell. No one instigates my wrath like she does.

I give her a minute of silence to rethink her move—but it doesn’t deter her. “Who are we seeking revenge on? You told me before that it was for your friend. That he died. Did the person we’re going after kill him?”

My heart speeds up as the decision to include her in this plot churns my stomach. When all this is over, and she learns the truth, she’ll hate me, and any friendship we develop will be over.

But I suppose that won’t matter.

I won’t be coming back to Georgia when this is over anyway.

“You said you had one question, not many,” I bark, my eyes rolling behind my lids. “Is everything with you exaggerated?”

“Is everything with you moody and hormonal? I’ve heard of man periods, but I think yours is extreme.”

“Don’t get brave, love.”

The term slips out before I can catch it. Thankfully, it seems to silence Eden for a moment, so I can regroup and

change the subject. “Before I tell you this bedtime story, I want you to promise me something.”

“Okay.” Her voice doesn’t sound so sure, but she’s braver than I thought. “What is it?”

It’s the most vulnerability I’ll ever give her. “Promise that no matter what you learn, you won’t let it change you.”

“Why—”

“If you need an explanation every time I say something, we can’t be partners,” I snap. “Now, do you promise or not?”

It takes her a moment until I hear her hushed whisper, “I promise.”

“Good.” I pull in a breath.

I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Remington.

I don’t, but that’s never stopped me before, and it sure as hell isn’t stopping me now.

Exhaling, I look to the ceiling and begin. “Once upon a time, a villain far worse than me chose money over morality. He and his closest colleagues conspired together for the sake of political appearances and ripped a newborn away from his loving parents.”

I can feel the anger growing inside me as the old wounds tear open, freeing the poison for the first time in years.

“This villain hid the child in the arms of a stranger—another monster with his own agenda.”

I swallow and take another breath, steadying my voice.

“That monster paid for his sins with his life. And soon, so will Congressman Albrecht.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

Eden

“Does that frighten you?”

He wanted to scare me, but at that moment, I was anything but afraid.

“You’re no killer,” I argue, hearing him blow smoke into the phone before he clucks his tongue, seemingly disappointed with my answer.

“And you, Sweet Eve, are not as brave as you think you are.”

His observation last night was spot-on, but I would never admit that I’m not brave. Brave people look fear in the face and proceed, even when scared. But that’s not me. When I’m scared, I run.

For years, I’ve evaded Gerald and Natasha. I wanted anonymity and freedom from our tumultuous past. For a while, I had it, but I knew it wouldn’t last long. Even behind bars, my mother haunted me.

So maybe joining Remington on this pursuit of revenge is simply me living out a fantasy that I would never be able to do on my own. I'm not like him. I worry about getting caught after breaking the law. But Remington seems to welcome obstacles. He swore nothing would stand between him and his revenge.

Call me a romantic, but I'm a sucker for an underdog story—especially one who gets payback.

But that was yesterday.

Today is a totally different story.

"I should push you out of that chair." My fists clench at my side as I approach the liar perched upon his plastic throne, a cigarette lit between his two fingers.

"And here I thought today would be a bore." Remington's brows rise as he takes a drag off his cigarette. "Do tell, princess. What did I do to incite such a violent greeting from you?"

I hold up my phone as if it were a news article. "You lied. You didn't tell me everything."

At first, he doesn't respond. He simply leans back in the chair and stares at me like he has all day to do so.

"If you're trying to make this awkward, like yesterday, don't bother. I'm not leaving without the truth."

Remington's eyes flash with a challenge, but he smothers it with a dramatic sigh that sounds more annoyed than angry. "Oh, Eve." He tsks as if I'm some silly kid. "Don't get attached to the truth. It can betray you in the worst way."

"Spare me your philosophical bullshit. I want the truth. Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie to you. I just didn't tell you the *whole* story."

His tone reeks of amusement, and it occurs to me that he wanted me to find out this way. This was all part of his devious, little plan.

In a moment that I will probably regret later, I snatch the pack of cigarettes off his lap and slip them into the back pocket of my jeans.

However, it only serves to incite an amused smile on his chiseled face. “If this is your way of punishing me, Eve, by all means, continue. But remember, I have no problem with crossing boundaries. Be careful where you hold my possessions. You might not like how I retrieve them.”

The threat in his voice sends shivers down my spine. I’m not sure if I’m more scared or excited to test his boundaries. Either way, it doesn’t matter. I need answers, and this aggravating man has them. “You wanted me to find out, didn’t you?”

“You’re going to need to be a little more specific, love.”

I hate that he’s treating this as if it’s a joke.

“Okay, fine. Let me clarify. I did some digging last night and found your congressman.”

Remington chuckles under his breath, acting as if I’m seriously funnier than I am. “Did he post pictures of his chocolate éclair again? I don’t understand the obsession with food over pussy.”

“This isn’t funny, Remington!”

His brows rise. “Remington, huh? No 101?”

I can’t even deal with his shit right now. “Why didn’t you tell me your father married Congressman Albrecht’s fiancée?”

“And miss out on your reaction?”

He takes another hit off his cigarette, unbothered that I uncovered more motive than he admitted to last night.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He stands from his plastic chair and moves so close the smoke from his breath burns my nose.

“Your job is to research,” he says in a bored tone. “If you’re expecting a pat on the back for a midnight googling

session, then you should understand that the only time I'll offer you praise is when you're riding my cock."

My breath hitches, and my womb tightens in response.

"Otherwise," he continues, "I'll treat you like I do everyone else—poorly."

"Being rude and using foul language won't stop me from asking more questions."

A slight grin tugs at his lips. "Well, that's incredibly disappointing."

What's disappointing is that for some sadistic reason I enjoy this push and pull between us. Never have I looked forward to an argument like I do with Remington—even when he uses sarcasm and rudeness to deter me from seeing his truth.

"Why didn't you tell me about your parents?" I try again, softening my tone.

"The same reason I didn't tell you my blood type—it's none of your damn business."

I swear, I could easily hate him. I'm sure he'd rather I did, instead of tolerating his mood swings, but I couldn't. Especially if my theory is correct. If Remington is who I think he is, then he has every right to be angry—to seek revenge.

"The newborn Congressman Albrecht stole and gave to another family..." I face his haunted, vulnerable eyes and blow out a breath. "He didn't take your friend, Stetson, did he? Congressman Albrecht took *you*."

Remington's face never flinches while his hands skim over my shoulders and down my arms. His touch is comforting—a stark contrast to the tension of the moment. If I was brave, I would close my eyes and allow myself to enjoy the feeling of his strength surrounding me. Isn't that ironic? Feeling safe in the arms of a self-proclaimed vigilante out for revenge.

I should be terrified, not comforted.

But I'm not. Not even when his lips touch the shell of my ear, and he whispers, "And now she's eaten from the Tree of

Knowledge and set into motion the beginning of her end.”



I have lost my damn mind—like super-duper bad.

But I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about Remington being separated from his parents. When did he know that his family wasn't the one he was born into? Was he mistreated while he was with them, or did he have a wonderful childhood, despite the horrific crime Albrecht committed?

I have no idea because Remington didn't feel up to sharing.

Okay, he basically finished his cigarette and slammed the door in my face.

I tried calling him an embarrassing number of times, but that only led to him peeling out of the parking lot and not returning until this morning, after my shift ended.

“Get out of my chair.”

I glance up through the rays of sunshine and ignore his bloodshot eyes. “Technically, this is the motel's chair.”

“Technically, I could buy this chair *and the motel* with the cash in my pocket.”

I double over with laughter. “No, you can't. Why is everything such an exaggeration with you?”

“Why are you so hell-bent on pissing me off?” His tone is anything but friendly when I meet his eyes and flash him a hard grin.

“I like it when you're real.”

He arches those dark brows of his. “And you think my annoyance with you is *real*?”

“Not so much your annoyance with me, just your reactions.”

It's as if I shocked him speechless. His mouth opens and then closes before he pulls himself together, revealing the cold, detached man he portrays daily. "What makes you believe my behavior with you is the real me and not me just being polite?"

The fact that he considers himself to be even in the realm of politeness is laughable, but I don't say that. I go with something much more profound. "I just do."

I don't, really, but something inside me feels the authenticity between us. Remington doesn't hide his reactions behind cryptic phrases or angry glares when he's arguing with me. He simply stays in the moment, without analyzing his next move. At least, I think that's what he does.

Remington, not so much, since he laughs. "I don't know whether to feel sorry for you or to recommend a good therapist."

So that wasn't totally authentic, but I get it. I hit a nerve, and he's trying to push me away.

"It's okay if you're charmed by me, 101. I won't tell anyone."

He scoffs and sends me a scathing look. "Don't flatter yourself, Eve. I'm charmed by no one—especially not by a woman who can't follow directions."

Eyeing my position in his chair, he tips his chin. "I won't ask you again. Get out of my chair."

"Why is this chair so important to you?"

"It isn't. I just don't enjoy sitting inside and smelling stale cat piss wafting up from the carpet." He cuts me a sharp look. "You should have the carpets replaced. It can't be good for business."

Midnight Gardens might be bad, but it doesn't smell like cat piss. At least, not in his room.

"You are so dramatic."

"And you should be fired."

Ah, yes. “About that.”

“About what? Did you get fired because of the Gerald situation?” His voice takes on a threatening tone, and everything in me wants to call him out on it. No matter what he says, he cares for me in some way. Otherwise, his body wouldn’t be pulled taut, like my next words could send him on a killing spree.

I stand and pick up the overnight bag he failed to notice on the ground. “I wasn’t fired. I took a leave of absence.”

The way he seems all boyishly confused melts my heart into a puddle of goo. “Why are you taking a leave?”

With the biggest smile I can manage, I throw my arms around his stiff shoulders and squeeze. “Because I found your congressman!”

I manage to get a full two seconds of a one-sided hug before he pushes me away, holding me at arm’s length. “How does finding him have anything to do with you taking leave?”

Why does he look terrified of my answer?

“Because, in order to expose Albrecht, we need proof.” I shrug like he should have known this. “And there’s no better place to start looking than his house and office.”

His eyes narrow. “In Nevada? You’re saying you want to go to Nevada?”

I shake my head, holding back my excitement. “No, I’m saying *we’re* going to Nevada.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eden

“No. Absolutely not.”

I was prepared for pushback. I’m talking to Remington, after all. He’s not the most flexible person.

“Listen, I know you’d rather gag yourself with a dirty sock than spend a week with me on the road but think about it. How do you plan on getting the proof you need for your revenge if you’re here and Congressman Albrecht is in Nevada?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he snaps. “I thought my research assistant would handle that by *researching*.”

Always the smartass.

“Well, your research assistant can only uncover so much online. I doubt Albrecht would post his evil doings on his social media story. We’re going to have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“And what way is that?”

I shrug. “Well, Albrecht is an attorney, and most attorneys I know don’t do their own filing—even if it’s for their illegal adoptions.”

“Still doesn’t answer my question.”

It’s like talking to a brick wall.

“We’re going to break into Albrecht’s office and steal the information we need.”

That plan puts a smile on his face. “Really? You? Little Miss Sweet and Gullible? You want to commit a crime with me?”

“Do you have a problem with that?” My stomach knots, either with fear or excitement. I can’t tell. This is the craziest thing I’ve ever done. “Surely, this won’t be the first time you’ve broken the law.”

He steps forward, his eyes flashing with something like intrigue. “You would be correct. I’ve committed many crimes.”

I can feel the heat of his body churning the intensity in the air. Remington may not like me, but he’s definitely intrigued—or he just enjoys playing games. Who knows, really?

“Are you scared of me now, princess?”

I can taste the challenge between us, and it enthralls me more than it should.

I push in closer. “Are *you* scared, 101? Because your uncertainty screams... pussy—”

It was the wrong thing to say. I realize that as soon as his hand claps over my mouth, and he spins me around, his angry voice at my ear. “Don’t use words I enjoy, love.”

His hips grind into mine, and all coherent thought leaves my brain as his thick length presses into my ass.

“The next time you call me a pussy, I’ll wash your mouth out with my cock and see if you’re still feeling brave.”

Embarrassing heat pools between my thighs.

“Do you understand me?”

I nod under his hold.

“I’m afraid of no one. Not you and sure as fuck not Albrecht.”

His breaths are slow and steady, but I can feel the energy pulsing through his body as he drops his hand and steps back.

But I just can’t leave well enough alone. I love testing his boundaries.

“Then prove it. Let’s go to Nevada.”



It’s fall break, and instead of working, I’m finally going on a trip.

To Nevada—with a man who is currently ignoring me as he throws our bags into the car with unnecessary force.

He’s angry.

I get that.

But I still don’t care.

“Motherfucker! How many bags did you bring?” Remington snaps.

I arch a brow and notice a fine sheen of sweat dotting his forehead. “Those are *your* bags. You already packed my *one*.”

There’s no reason to remind him who the diva is in this partnership.

“Your shit is taking up all the space.” He totally disregards the fact that he has more “shit” than I do.

“So, I’m guessing now isn’t the best time for me to ask if you have room for one more?” I hold up a black trash bag. “Extra sheets, just in case the real reason you bring your own sheets is for an embarrassing reason.”

Those chocolate eyes glance at me through hooded slits, then relax. “I’m scared to ask what you think is embarrassing.”

I shrug, hoping I explain it well enough to change his mood. “Like maybe you haven’t moved out of the wet-dream phase. There’s no reason to be ashamed. I hear it happens to men of all ages.”

Remington chuckles, but it’s deceiving since his voice drops low, and he reaches up and grazes my lips with his finger. “Sweet, sweet girl. You’re right on one account. I do go through sheets like underwear, but it’s not me who gets them wet.”

He steps back and shoots me a smug look that sends heat and tingles down my back. It’s been a while—and I mean, like, never—since I’ve had sex with a man, but what I think he means is the women—who I’ve never seen visit him—are the ones soaking his sheets. And that’s, well, incredibly sexy, even if he is lying. Maybe at one time, he entertained women, but no one has visited Room 101 but him. I know because I watch the ever-loving crap out of this man’s room, trying to find any clues about what he does all day, since going to class doesn’t seem to be how he spends his days.

Faking a grimace, I hand Remington the bag of sheets he’ll never sleep on since they aren’t Egyptian cotton or whatever rich people like. “Those poor girls. I can’t imagine having to pee the bed just so you think you found my G-spot.”

Remington chokes, but I keep going, clucking my tongue as if he were some prepubescent who needs sex pointers. “Lashing out when you can’t make them feel good is ridiculous. Try being nice in bed, maybe they’ll come once in a while. Who knows, you may not have to change the sheets afterward.”

Did I know I was pushing his buttons?

Absolutely.

Hell, I haven’t even found *my* G-spot.

But just seeing the twitch in Remington’s hand, before he yanks me by the arm and throws open the door to the back

seat, is worth it.

“Try all you want, Eve. I’m not Adam. I won’t take a bite from the Tree of Knowledge.” Leaning forward, he cages me in with his arms. “I know who you are, and I know exactly where the sweet spot is—even in a forbidden cunt like yours.” His breath is on my face, and, God help me, I love the intoxicating smell of him—sweet poison disguised by cigarettes and mint.

But I don’t get to relish in his smell because Remington lets out an annoyed growl and shoves me into the back seat of his car, nearly clipping my foot when he slams the door.

“Hey!” I bang on the window as soon as I realize he intends for me to ride in the back the whole way to Nevada.

“You break my window or even try opening this door, and I’ll leave you here.”

Even through the glass, I can hear the threat in his voice. He’d love to leave me and go to Nevada alone. After all, being alone is his favorite pastime.

“Fine.” I settle into the seat, which is pretty comfortable, considering it’s some kind of classic car. “But I want you to promise you’ll stop when I need to pee.” No one needs a smartass tossing a cup and telling me to deal with it. Been there, done that.

Remington’s forehead wrinkles in confusion. “You think I’d rather you piss on the leather?”

“I’m just saying I’ve had a bad experience on a road trip before, and I’d appreciate it very much if you could honor bathroom requests.”

It’s as if I reached through the car and smacked him. His face tightens, and a hint of red stains his cheeks. “Is Gerald the reason you had a bad experience?”

A vein in his neck pulses, and I almost tell him the truth. But Remington has his own problems. He doesn’t need to worry about mine. He’s done enough for me already.

“No. No. Nothing like that. I just get anxious, is all.”

He knows I'm lying. I can see it in his face—the narrowing of his eyes as he tries scaring me into admitting what happened. “Are you going to stare at me all day or get in the car? I thought you were ready to leave.”

The question comes out snippier than I intended, but I don't like how he's looking at me—like he knows all too well what trauma looks like. Or maybe he just feels sorry for me—I can't tell. Either way, it doesn't matter. I'm ready to go and get as far away from here as I can.

With a quick eye roll and a dramatic sigh, Remington yanks open the door. “Get out.”

“What? Why?”

Reaching in, he pulls me out of the car and ushers me to the passenger side of the car. “You're letting me ride in the front now?” Maybe I should allude to more childhood traumas. Seems like that might be a weakness of his.

“You have two seconds to get in the car before I leave you here to pee in as many bathrooms as you can find at this dump.”

Again, *Midnight Gardens* is not a dump.

“Don't get all growly. I'm getting in. I'm waiting for you to open the door like you did earlier.” Granted, he didn't open the back door to be chivalrous. He was manhandling me, but still. He set the standard, and now he has to live with it.

A million different emotions flash across Remington's face before he grits his teeth and opens the door. If he were superhuman, I imagine he'd rip the door off the hinges and throw it behind him. But alas, he's simply an ordinary, pissed-off man.

I flash him a polite smile, which only seems to annoy him more. “Could you also grab my bag in the back? I forgot it in my quick exit from the car.”

I swear he groans, but it's too fast for me to appreciate fully, since he already has grabbed said bag and shoved it into my chest. “Anything else, Your Majesty?”

Aww. Another pet name.

“No, darling. I think that will be all for now. But”—I hold up one finger—“shall I suggest some song choices?”

He rounds the front of the car. “No.”

“Are you sure? It doesn’t look as if you have good taste.”

Those dark brows rise mockingly. “And you do, with your expired mints and trash bags for overnight bags?”

I’m not insulted in the least. Overnight bags are for rich people. “We can’t all be the son of a surgeon.”

Something in his stance changes, almost like someone dropped a ton of bricks on each of his shoulders. His whole body looks weighted down when he says, “I’m going to regret this.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Remington

She sings.

And only gets louder when I roll down the windows, trying to drown her out. It was my last attempt at politeness.

I slam on the brakes and see smoke in the rearview mirror, coming from my tires as I pull the car onto the shoulder. “Do you want me to drive us into oncoming traffic? Because, if so, keep right on singing.”

Eden doesn’t seem disturbed by my dangerous theatrics. She didn’t gasp or grab for the *oh shit* handle when I veered off the roadway. She simply carried on as if I were pulling off onto an exit ramp.

“Since we’re stopped, do you mind if I jump out and take a quick picture? I’ve never been to Alabama before.”

I want to slam my head into the dashboard, hard enough that I won’t remember visiting Alabama—especially with her. “No—”

My phone rings, and seeing the name on the screen means I need to answer it in private. “Fine. Take your fucking picture and, by all means, if someone offers you a ride, take it.”

She flashes me a smile. “And leave you brooding alone? Never.”

I should have dropped her off at a fire station. Surely, they take more than just infants.

When Eden is out of the car, I swipe the screen and answer my phone. “Yeah.”

The male voice I dread hearing spares the pleasantries. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

I suck in a breath while my eyes stay glued on the pain-in-the-ass girl trying to take a selfie with an old-school Polaroid camera by the road sign. “Yeah. Looks like I’m not going to be able to make it.”

“I thought we agreed you would make *every* meeting I set?”

“Something came up.”

His frustration bleeds through the phone with his exhale. “What about this afternoon?”

When I don’t answer, he tries to guilt me into turning around. “Maverick assured me you were ready to comply with my demands.”

Maverick can blow rainbows out of his ass and fuck his stupid sea lions. He doesn’t speak for me. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Grant, but unfortunately, something came up, *again*, and I can’t make it back to your office today.”

Grant won’t be the only one I disappoint with this trip. He might as well get used to the feeling.

“I see. Well, when do you think you *can* make it?”

I wonder if Grant, who is several years older than my uncle Astor, will curse at me if I tell him the truth. My father would. So would my uncles. Worse, they would get in the car and hunt me down like prey. But Grant isn’t my family. He

will honor the confidentiality contract we have. “Not for a couple of weeks, I’m afraid.”

“A couple of weeks?” He sounds more pissed than confused.

“Yeah. A friend needed my help.” It’s not that much of a lie.

“And what about our contract?”

I close my eyes and just breathe. “It’ll just have to wait.”

“It can’t wait, Remington. I’ve already explained—”

I don’t want to hear the terms and consequences again. I lose enough sleep as it is. “I’ll see what I can do and let you know.”

I can hear the resignation in his voice when he says, “Tomorrow, Remington. Figure it out by *tomorrow*.”

Hanging up, I lean back, resting my head against the leather seat, the car rocking as vehicles pass by. I thought this whole thing would be easier. I thought...

“101! Come here! You have to see this!”

Eden’s voice pulls me out of the dark place my mind had drifted, and while I’m quite sure I won’t find whatever she’s looking at fascinating, I get out of the car anyway.

Mainly because I need a distraction.

What if Grant does break our contract? What if he goes over my head? Maverick claims Grant keeps his business with his clients confidential. But if I broke my end of the bargain, who’s to say he won’t do the same?

“Remington! Hurry!”

Her excitement is nauseating, and I let her know it by rolling my eyes when I reach her. “You better have found a dead body or a pack of cigarettes. Otherwise, I’m getting back in the car.”

Totally ignoring me, she grabs my hand and pulls me to the back of the road sign. “Look.”

I squint from behind my sunglasses and notice dozens of names and locations written on the back.

“It’s all the travelers that have stopped here,” she says, like I need it broken down for me, “and where they were headed.”

California.

Arizona.

Las Vegas.

Even Oregon is listed.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

Her eyes dance with the excitement of an adventure, and in the heat of the summer sun, her hair glistens with a bluish tint. But it isn’t her eyes or the blended color of her hair that makes me stupid. It’s her smile—bright despite the trash bag in my trunk and the bandage on her hand.

She’s been through hell, and here she is, in Bum Fuck, Alabama, smiling at the back of a road sign like it’s the Grand Canyon.

That has to be why I say, “I have a marker in my glove box if you want to add your name to it.”

Unlike every other time I speak to her, Eden doesn’t ask any questions or say something ridiculous. She sprints off toward the car, with a speed she should have used to get away from Gerald the other night.

It takes her a moment before she holds up the marker and screams from inside the car. “You have one!”

I take it back. There’s that ridiculous shit I’ve come to expect from her.

“Did you think I was lying?” I shoot her a glare as she returns to my side, out of breath.

“No. I just thought it was going to be a pen or something that I couldn’t use. I didn’t want to get my hopes up.”

She didn’t want to get her hopes up.

I try not to let her admission stir the rage that lurks under my skin. How many times has she been disappointed? How many times has she been let down?

My chest tightens as I watch her uncap the marker and flash me a grin. “I won’t tell if you want to add your name, too.”

And this is why I’m not nice to people. They think just because I didn’t mock their dumb idea that I want to participate in it. “No, thanks.” I nudge her toward the sign. “I only write on bathroom doors at the Gas ‘N Go.”

I deadpan. “It’s better than Tinder.”

She belts out this deep belly laugh. “You’re lying. There’s no way you would give anyone your phone number, let alone strangers visiting a gas station bathroom.”

She would be correct. Talking to people is equivalent to being suffocated by fresh air. I hate it.

“I’m going to leave if you don’t hurry.”

I don’t have time for her thinking she knows me.

“Gah. You’re always so testy.”

Testy isn’t the word most people use to describe me. But, then again, Eden isn’t *most* people, especially when she takes her time writing her fucking name on a street sign. Does she think someone will come by and judge the best handwriting?

“Okay. Done.” She turns and hands me the marker. “I wrote your name anyway.”

She shrugs and then snaps a picture of the back of the sign, then my face—which likely resembles an angry grizzly. But there’s no use in exploding. She’ll just act like a golden retriever and smile anyway. “Get in the fucking car.”

“Yes, sir!” She salutes me, and it’s anything but funny.

“I swear to G—”

“Don’t swear to God, *Adam*,” she chides. “You might not like his response.”

I'm going to kill her.

Lunging, I narrowly miss grabbing her before she darts off to the car, laughing the whole way.

I should turn around and drag myself to the meeting Grant has such a hard-on for. Eden can go back to work, and I can carry out my revenge without her. It's not like I really need her...but she wanted to help. And I want her to hate Albrecht as much as I do.

I want her to hate her *father*.

Albrecht left Eden with parents who tried to kill her.

He left her there to die, just as he did me.

Whether Eden knows it or not, this revenge will be for her, too.

Albrecht screwed us both.

He took our childhoods and scarred our souls.

Now, it's his turn to suffer.

And what better way than at the hands of his own daughter—his own flesh and blood.

I couldn't have written a better ending.



“Why are we stopping? Do you have to pee?”

I pull into a parking space at some outlet mall and turn off the car.

“Wow.” She chuckles. “You really are a diva.”

She turns in her seat to face me.

It gets on my nerves.

“Are you too good to pee at a gas station with us common folk?”

Fuck her.

“Stay here,” I bark, rolling down the windows like I’m leaving my annoyingly loud chihuahua in the car. Maybe I’ll get lucky, and someone will steal her and save us both a migraine.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Eden waves me off, still fucking laughing. “Do your thing, princess.”

My jaw clenches. *Remember why she’s here, Remington: To sweeten your revenge and to...annoy the ever-loving shit out of you.*

I get out and slam the car door behind me. I need some space and a cigarette like yesterday. As if Eden’s singing wasn’t bad enough for the last hour, her playing I spy with herself was worse. She wants me to barrel into a tree and crush my father’s heart with a manslaughter charge.

But I won’t.

I’ve already broken my father.

He just doesn’t know it yet.

The mall I stopped at is one of those outlet malls that Vance says has more fleas than brand names. I can’t say for sure if that’s true. I can only say that Vance is a gigantic pussy for even caring where he gets his clothes.

“Can I help you, sir?” I stand in the doorway, contemplating if I really want to do this. I could always just get her drunk and wait for her to pass out. Eventually, she’ll sleep, and I’ll have blessed silence.

“Sir?”

Fuck it. I brush past the sales associate and straight to the counter where another employee waits at the register. “I want one of those in yellow,” I tell her, pointing at the item hanging behind her on the wall.

“Do you want the set or just the one?”

This is fucking crazy. “The set.”

She nods and grabs a hook from behind the counter and takes it down. “Will that be all?”

“No.”

It takes me ten minutes to check out and five minutes to hang up on Duke thirteen times before he stopped calling me and texted. All of it has put me in a terrible mood—especially when I approach the car and find some asshole at my window, talking to Eve.

“You have two seconds to step away from my car.”

The guy who looks to be a little older than me puts his hands in the air. “Hey, man. I was just asking for—”

He stops when he sees what I’m carrying and grins.

“Don’t let the color fool you,” I explain. “It will still crack your skull.”

“101!”

Eden jumps out of the car and pushes the guy out of the way with the door. “Is that for me?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s certainly not for me.”

She glances at the yellow monstrosity in my hand and then at my face. Her lips start to quiver, and it takes every ounce of control for me to stand there and face the emotions passing through her eyes.

“Why would you buy me a suitcase?”

I can’t stand it—I can’t fucking stand to see her cry.

“Because you needed one.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eden

This time, I *choose* to sit in the back seat—after all, I have a trash bag to unpack.

“I can’t believe you bought me a suitcase!”

It’s only like the twentieth time I’ve said this to Remington, but since he turned up the radio about ten minutes ago, he doesn’t hear me.

And that’s fine.

I also asked him a million questions that pissed him off, too.

Questions like:

Did he use the bathroom?

Did he know he would buy the suitcase when he went into the mall, or did he see it on his way out and thought of me?

Was he really planning on hitting that guy? He really was just asking for directions.

Does he threaten everyone he meets, or is it just special people?

But I never got the answers. Remington simply lit a cigarette and turned up the radio so loud that even thinking became hard. I managed, though, because nothing, not even a rude Remington or loud music, would stop me from enjoying this moment and committing it to memory.

No one has ever given me a gift before—like ever. And Remington gave me a three-piece luggage set! I don't even have enough clothes to fill this thing or the smaller bags that came with it. My clothes are basically moving out of a studio apartment and into a mansion. It's wild. To think this guest, who started out rude and distant, gave me a gift. And not even a basic gift, like a stick of gum.

A suitcase—a *yellow* suitcase.

I knew, deep down, he was sweet.

“Stop,” he barks from the front seat, his eyes on the road. “I can feel you smiling back there.”

I am smiling, but there is no way he knows that unless he's been sneaking glances in the mirror. “And I can feel you staring. Should I tell you to stop, too?”

I never noticed before, since Remington doesn't really give you the chance to just gaze at him, but now that I'm behind him, admiring him in the rearview mirror, I can see everything he tries to hide behind those clouds of smoke.

Haunting chestnut eyes that have shouldered an unimaginable past.

A jawline that is sharp and hardened—just like the walls he's built around him.

Skin that has seen the sun but prefers the shadows.

A mouth that holds a softness yet promises lies.

Everything about this man is alluring and tempting. He's an exciting thrill ride that promises fun and danger. But the fun rides aren't regulated. They are unreliable and break down,

leaving you hanging in mid-air, reading the warning label right before you plummet to your death.

Remington might be flawless and gorgeous on the outside, but deep inside, a war of light and dark battle for his soul. I know, because I've been where he is. I used to hate everyone and everything. I was full of what-ifs and regrets on a daily basis. My soul couldn't decide where its loyalties lay. It certainly wasn't with me.

But now...well, my soul and I are still working on it. I'm just saying I know what it's like to fight yourself, to build walls that even you can't knock down. It's a lonely life.

"I swear, Eve—"

I meet Remington's hateful stare in the mirror and laugh. "What? You're looking at me!"

Remington yanks his gaze away and reaches over to the passenger seat. "Here." He throws a book that narrowly misses me. "Find something to do for the next hour besides stare at me."

Honestly, I really want to just keep watching him to see what he does, but I won't. Because, well, I just realized what he threw. "You want me to color?"

He tosses back a pack of colored pencils. "I want you to keep your eyes down and your mouth shut."

"That sounds like a practiced line. Is that what you tell your dates when you bring them home?"

Those eyes flash just for a second in the mirror. "I don't bring women home."

He says the word *home* softly, like it means more than the rest of the words he says. I want to ask him if that means he has never brought a girl home to meet his family or if he's never felt at home anywhere. Either one would make sense. From what I know about Remington's past, Congressman Albrecht carried out an illegal adoption, and Remington didn't get to know his real parents until recently. I don't know how recently, though. I only know that his real mother was engaged to the congressman a little over a year ago.

I doubt she loved Albrecht, since she ended up marrying Remington's father on the eve of her wedding to the congressman. I think she knew something. I think she was trying to find her son. But that's just a hunch. There were only a few articles on the wedding scandal. But adding Remington's revenge story about his friend being taken at birth made it easier for me to put two and two together. And while Remington didn't confirm it in so many words, him allowing me to figure out the truth and to help him exact his revenge speaks volumes.

His family was wronged.

He was wronged.

Everyone deserves a home—everyone deserves love.

And the more I get to know the man behind the smoke, I realize he might just deserve it the most.



Somewhere between coloring three pages and staring at Remington for a solid thirty minutes, he finally has enough of me.

“I'm tired,” he clips out, pulling into a roadside motel.

It's not exactly the Hamptons, but then again, I've never been to the Hamptons to compare.

Remington, though, seems particularly unimpressed.

“Do you want to stay here and rest?” I hadn't wanted to discuss sleeping arrangements since Remington would have likely had a cow at the slightest inconvenience and called the whole thing off. But here we are, him tired, staring angrily out the windshield like I spit on the unlit cigarette pinched between his lips.

“No,” he snaps back, “I don't.”

“Okaaaay. Do you want me to drive so you can rest, then?”

He doesn't even spare me a glance. "You're never driving my car."

Is it just me, or is he not making any sense? "All right. We're staying here."

I open the door and wait for Remington to follow.

He doesn't.

"Is there a problem with the motel?" I ask, when he just sits there, gripping the steering wheel. "It looks nicer than Midnight Gardens."

"It isn't."

I take a look around, scanning the area for anything that stands out as to why he wouldn't want to stay here. I was serious when I said this place isn't any worse than Midnight Gardens. "Why not? We brought sheets, if that's what you're worried about."

"Fuck the sheets."

He starts the car, so I hurry back and jump into it before he leaves me, while backing out of the lot like a Formula One racecar driver.

But it wasn't until we had ridden in silence for five miles that I realized the problem he had with the motel.

They didn't have any chairs.



Two hours later, Remington's stomach growls for the fourth time.

"We should stop. You're hungry."

His tone doesn't carry the same edge when he's tired. "Are you my nutritionist or research assistant? Because you seem confused."

I can see the fatigue in the way his shoulders sag against the seat. He's tired, and he's hungry. And we all know how

shitty Remington can act when he needs a snack and a nap. So, I don't take his words personally.

“I'm your partner—and I'm hungry, too.”

He opens his mouth, like he wants to say something epically crappy, but then closes it. “Can you wait? There's a motel and diner twenty miles ahead.”

So he does intend to stop? That's a good sign. “Sure. I can wait.”

I only hope he can, too. He seems awfully tired all of a sudden. “This is a nice car,” I say, when silence descends on us. “What kind is it?”

A tiny quirk hitches his lip. “You trying to make small talk, love? Why not ask me about the weather instead? It seems a little more in your wheelhouse.”

And...he's back.

“Well, Mr. Rude, I find the weather boring.” I admit, holding back the smile that's forming. “I also find talking about your old-ass car boring, too, but I don't want to die when you fall asleep at the wheel.”

I jump when he barks out a laugh. “Don't get me hard, Eve. Brutal honesty just so happens to be my love language.”

The fucker makes me smile. “Well, there's no sense in you thinking I actually care about your car when I don't.”

He nods, seemingly more awake. “Are you saying you don't care about cars in general or just ‘old-ass’ cars?”

Shifting, I lean forward, getting a closer look at the dashboard. “I've just never understood the fascination guys have with their cars.” I shrug. “To me, a car is just a way to get you from one place to another.”

“But you think I have a fascination with mine?” He cocks a brow.

“Well, yeah.” I wave my hand at the dash. “Obviously, this is an old car, but you've had it completely restored so that it looks brand new.”

“And that proves I’m fascinated with it?”

The way he asks the question gives me pause. Is there another reason he loves this car?

“You also won’t let me drive it.”

This time, he nearly doubles over with laughter. “Just because I don’t want a brain injury while you’re too busy playing I spy instead of paying attention to the road doesn’t prove my devotion to my car. It proves I have common sense.”

Okay, he has a point there. I have played I spy more than necessary, but I was bored. There’s only so much you can do in the car. “So, you just bought this car totally restored?”

He takes a moment, probably considering if this is a good place to toss me out, and sighs. “No. I didn’t buy it. The car was a gift.”

“From your dad?”

His eyes slide to the mirror—we’re wading into personal territory here. “From Vance—my...”

I know that name. “Your uncle? Dr. Vance Potter?”

He nods. “Yeah. He gifted it to me on my eighteenth birthday.”

For a moment, all he does is stare out the windshield, seemingly deep in thought. “It was the first gift I’d ever received.”

I swear my heart stops. This car was his three-piece luggage set. “It’s a very generous gift.”

He snorts. “Vance only did it to score pussy with his fiancée.”

Something tells me by the way his face softens that his statement isn’t true. “Maybe he just cares about you.”

Remington rakes a hand through his hair, mussing it in a way that my vagina appreciates very much. “Or maybe he needed the tax deduction,” he clips, but it lacks his usual bite. “Don’t try to humanize me, Eve. You’ll only disappoint yourself.”

For the rest of the drive, Remington and I don't speak—that is, until we pull into another motel.

“Wow. You sure know how to pick them.” This motel is worse than Midnight Gardens, with its peeling paint and a couple of boarded-up windows.

“They don't ID.” The moment the words leave his mouth, Remington freezes and adds, “For the drinks, I mean.” He sighs and clears his throat. “They don't ID for booze.”

Yeah, that's totally what he meant. “Well, I hate to be the one who educates you on the difference between hotels and motels, but *motels* do not have bars or room service. If you want a beer, you're gonna have to bribe the clerk at the gas station. You're out of luck here.”

Before he even barks at me to get out of the car, I know I've pissed him off.

“Look.” I get out and look at him over the roof of the car. “You're hungry and moody. Why don't you let me secure us a room? I don't want us getting thrown out of here because you didn't grab a Snickers bar when you had a chance.”

My joke falls flat, since Remington doesn't even crack a smile. But he also doesn't argue. At least he knows he's an asshole. “Fine.” He pulls out his wallet and tosses me some cash across the roof. “I want one with a ch—”

I cut him off. “A chair. Yeah, yeah. I know.” Grabbing the cash, I back away from the car, shooting him a sly look in the evening light. “You aren't as hard to figure out as you think you are, 101.”

My heart does this little shiver when he flips me off.

If brutal honesty is Remington's love language, then rude and crude behavior must be mine. “Don't try and leave me, 101,” I warn, walking away. “I'd hate to blackmail you.”

Those devilish eyes jump with delight at the threat. “You can't blackmail someone who has nothing left to lose, Eve. But I'd love for you to try.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Remington

Unfortunately, no one kidnaps her in this shithole. “Our room is around back,” she says, approaching the car.

It takes a moment for her words to sink in, and when they do, I grab her by the arm, pulling her to a stop. “What do you mean ‘our’ room?”

Eden’s eyes track to where my fingers are wrapped around her delicate skin. “You know, you could have just asked me to stop walking instead of manhandling me.”

I drop her arm and snatch the cash from her other hand. “And you could have requested two rooms with the money I gave you.”

“Newsflash, princess,” she snaps, with a tone I haven’t heard since she caught me going through her purse, “I’m not looking forward to sleeping in the same room with you either, but they were booked.”

“The sign says they have vacancies.”

She folds her arms and gives me this look like she thinks I'm stupid. "They did—one." She points to the sign that now glows *No Vacancy*.

"Fuck!" I spin around and tug at my hair. I can't sleep in the same room as her.

I can't.

"Get in the car," I clip. "We'll find another motel."

I'm not sleeping in the same room with anyone—let alone with Albrecht's daughter.

"Calm down. We can make this work. I'll just sleep in the car."

The compassion in her voice has me in her face in seconds. "Do not talk to me like that!" My chest rises, and my heartbeat pounds in my head.

"I'm not trying to argue with you," she says calmly. "I'm saying I understand your hesitation."

I hate that I've lost control. I hate that I've let her see me as anything but indifferent. "You don't know me. And I'm not fucking hesitating."

I'm *not* hesitating. I'm not. I just need...space.

"Okay." She puts her hands on my chest and makes this soothing noise like she's dealing with someone unstable. "You're *not* hesitating."

She flashes me this smile that I want to hate but can't. It's honest and pure—it sucks the anger right out of me.

"Listen, I've slept in more cars than motels. Don't worry about it. I'm not particular about where I sleep." She pulls the key from her pocket and dangles it between her fingers. "Go take a shower and grab something to eat. I'll see you in the morning."

I'm already shaking my head, which she ignores. "I won't steal your car, if that's what you're worried about, but take the keys if it'll make you feel better."

I take the key and step back, already feeling better now that her hands are off me. “What would make me feel better is you being quiet so I can think!”

“Fine. I’ll be quiet, but while you’re thinking, remember that there’s no guarantee the next motel will have any vacancies either. We aren’t in the city anymore.”

Though I’d never admit it, she’s right. We aren’t in the city, and if I don’t get food soon, the lives of people in this stupid town are in danger. Hunger triggers nothing but raging anger inside me.

It reminds me of *him*—shoving food down my throat, forcing me still so they could... *I need a chair*. And a cigarette.

Glancing at the room number on the keychain, I brush past Eden and lock my car with the key fob, so she can’t even think of getting in—*sleep in the car, my ass*.

“Where are you going?”

I can hear her coming after me, but I don’t care. All I can do is scour the motel for a chair.

“There’s a chair at the door to our room,” she says, like she knows what I’m thinking. “The clerk assured me the room had one.”

How considerate of her.

I still don’t care—not even when she stops talking and her footfalls quiet as I round the corner.

I just need...

A chair.

And as she promised, one sits next to our room.

I don’t wait to see where Eden went or apologize—I simply sit in the cheap plastic, letting all the tension in my shoulders relax into the hard back.

Some people prefer to snap a rubber band on their wrists to keep them grounded in the present. I don’t want some bracelet; I want the cold, hard chair chilling my bones, reminding me

that this throne is mine. The person who sits in this chair is the *real me*.

Not the Stetson that *he* paraded in front of his socialite friends.

Not the face every parent could relate to.

In this chair, I'm not some social experiment. I'm not the face of a cause.

I'm simply Remington. I'm the king of nothing and the warrior of everything.

And nothing helps me remember where I've come from more than the simple reminder of being expendable.

These chairs aren't built to last.

Their life span is a matter of a few short years before they are replaced with a newer, stronger version—one without weak legs and broken backs.

He might have broken my legs and taped me back together, but what he didn't know is that broken pieces cut the deepest and may never heal.

Albrecht may not have been the one to have physically strapped me to these chairs, but my broken pieces are his reckoning.



“Hey.” Eden’s voice startles me awake. “I brought you some food.”

Blinking, I take a look around me, noticing the sun has set, and I’m still sitting in the chair outside our room. “How long have I been asleep?”

“An hour, maybe?” She sits down at my feet and crosses her legs. “I would have let you sleep longer, but your food is getting cold.”

Pulling out a container, Eden sets it on my thigh. “The diner didn’t have much of a selection. I hope you like

chicken.”

I want to throw the container.

Not because I hate chicken.

But because I want to shake her.

But I don't.

Duke would be proud.

“You walked alone?” I nearly growl. “To the diner?”

She fingers that fucking necklace at her throat nervously. What did she say it was? St. Michael? Maybe it's Saint Naïve because that's exactly what she's acting like.

“I feel like the answer should be quite obvious to you, 101. You were here. I wasn't. Now I have food.” She shrugs like I'm a moron, and I'm about to lose my shit.

“Be brave and say what you really want to.” I lean in, getting in her face as much as I can while sitting. “I don't do catty. And the only catty pussy I'll tolerate is one full of my cock.”

Her eyes flash with amusement and something else I can't catch before she pops back, “Are you calling me a pussy like a scaredy cat, or are you trying to make some weird sexual innuendo? Either way, I don't understand what you're trying to say.”

It's like she wants me to smoke two packs today. “What I'm saying is a woman like you is a fucking target!”

How does she not understand this?

She shuffles the food off her lap, stands up and meets me nose to nose as she rises on her toes. “A woman like me?”

Bored, I blink, calming my breathing and easing back into the chair, creating the space I desperately need.

“What kind of woman am I, Remington?”

Rolling my eyes, I go for the cigarettes in my pocket. “An annoying one. You'd be murdered the minute you asked for

directions. No one has time to draw you a fucking map and answer a dozen questions.”

A grin stretches across her face. “I see you, Remington Potter.”

Oh, hell. I knew she was crazy. “Well, I would hope so, Eden Da Luca.” I fish out my lighter and slide the cigarette between my lips. “Otherwise, you’d make for a shitty research assistant.”

“You can hide behind the threats and snark, but I still see you.”

And...we’re done here.

“Move,” I bark. “I’m going inside.”

She doesn’t move. Instead, she cuts me a determined look and puts her hands on my knees like that is going to stop me. “Eat, Remington, before I smother you in your sleep tonight.”

I’m leaving her here. Fuck her finding danger. This woman will annoy someone to death before they have the opportunity to murder her.

“Take your hands off me.” I flash her a look that scares most men, but it only makes her laugh.

“So, you can bark orders and manhandle me, but I can’t do the same?”

“No.”

There’s no equality here.

“Tsk. Tsk, 101. That’s not how a partnership works.”

You know what? Maybe I’ll just say *fuck Albrecht* and go back to campus. Boring-ass finger painting, or whatever they teach, has to be better than spending one more second with Eden.

“You keep forgetting, Eve, we’re not partners.”

“We are.” She drops one hand and opens the container containing a chicken sandwich. “Now, eat, *partner*. I won’t tell you again.”

And because she has a fucking death wish, she snatches the cigarette from my lips and tosses it behind her.

“You’re getting brave, love. Don’t let my tolerance confuse you.”

With nerves of steel, she eases back onto her ass and winks. “Don’t threaten me, 101. You might find I can fight dirtier than you.”



I ate the fucking sandwich. It was dry and tasted like day-old onion rings, but I ate it.

Not because she demanded I did, but because I was tired of fucking talking to her.

“The shower is all yours,” she says, her slick skin glistening under the dim lighting in the motel room we are fucking *sharing*. As if that isn’t bad enough, she’s practically naked.

“Where’re your fucking clothes?”

The steam billows out from the small bathroom as she approaches me, wearing nothing but a towel. “Right where I *fucking* left them.”

I grab her and not delicately. “What did I tell you about using that word around me?”

Her eyes flash with something dangerous. “I have a theory.”

“And I have a boner. No one fucking cares.”

I don’t even give her the courtesy of looking up from her tits pillowing out from the edge of the towel. Her skin is... pink and... warm.

I shove her back, sucking in a breath to calm down. “Put on some fucking clothes, or you really will sleep in the car.”

She cocks a brow. “Are you a virgin, 101?”

Clearly, her tits scrambled my brain. “Are we sharing here? Should we sit in a circle and braid each other’s hair and talk about our first times?” I roll my eyes. “Spoiler alert, Eve. Like you, I don’t even remember her name.”

“You’re lying,” she says. “You know my name, and I’ll bet you remember everything about the girl who took your innocence.”

Fuck this.

Who does she think I am? Some hormonal, love-sick schoolboy? “Eden,” I warn, “if you’re not dressed by the time I get out of the shower, I’ll do it for you. Trust me when I tell you, neither of us will enjoy the process.”

I can’t afford to lose focus.

I can’t afford to close my eyes and see her tits and imagine her heated skin pressed against mine.

I. Just. Can’t.

“Your demands are noted.” Eden’s eyes slide down to my tented pants. “Now, go enjoy your shower, 101. I won’t wait up.”



The cold water and the most aggressive hand job ever didn’t help my attitude. In fact, it’s worse.

“Why are you on the fucking floor?”

Eden has made a fucking nest or something with a sheet and a pillow on the carpet that is nastier than my father’s love for fucking my mother on the dock at our lake house, but at least she’s dressed.

“I thought you should take the bed since you’re driving and paid for the room.”

I’ve had absolutely enough of this woman today.

Barreling forward, Eden at least has enough sense to scream when I get to her and scoop her up off the floor and

toss her onto the bed.

“If you move from this bed or even cut a look that annoys me, I will leave you here.” I dare her to fucking test me. I’m not a patient man, and when I’m tired, even less so.

Her eyes narrow like she paid no attention to my warning. “Where are you going to sleep?”

Honestly, the car sounds fucking fantastic right about now, but I don’t give her the satisfaction of answering. She’s gotten way too comfortable with me. It’s time to remind her that I’m not like the idiots she meets on campus. A warm body and companionship don’t mean shit to me.

Being alone is safe—it’s where I feel the most alive.

Opening the door, I drag the chair inside and move it to the foot of the bed. “Toss me a pillow.”

She doesn’t.

“Did you hear me, or would you prefer I repeat myself?”

Her mouth opens and then shuts before opening again. “Are you really gonna sleep in the chair?” She looks at the thrift store chair the motel claims as a sitting chair. “Why not sleep in that chair if you’re going to be ridiculous? It has padding.”

Telling her that I won’t sleep won’t make a difference.

“Fine. I’ll get it myself.” I take a step toward her, and she snags the pillow, holding it captive between her arms.

“At least turn your chair around. I won’t be able to sleep with you staring at me all night.”

Leaning over her body, I allow my knuckles to graze her chest, now covered with a T-shirt, and grip the pillow. “Good. Then we’ll both suffer.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eden

Twelve.

That's how many questions it took before Remington dragged his chair outside, so I could fall asleep without feeling his scathing glare on my back. He wanted to play games by propping his feet on the edge of the bed and striking his lighter over and over just to annoy me.

I fought back the only way I knew how.

I talked to him.

But now, as an eerie sound startles me awake, I realize I'm *still* alone.

"Remington?" I whisper in the darkness. "Are you on the floor?"

Another thump against the wall has me scrambling upright, clenching the sheets to my chest. "Remington?"

What if he fell asleep in the chair again? What if someone hurt him? I know I said I wanted to smother him, but I don't really. He's rude and moodier than a cat, but I'm weird and find him endearing anyway. He's like a chain-smoking feral animal. All he needs is someone to be patient and scold him every now and then.

Unfortunately for him, I'm a cat lover.

"Remington," I whisper once more as I slide to the edge of the bed and put my feet down. The drapes are closed, and I can hear the traffic racing by.

Traffic.

For a split second, panic runs through my veins.

Remington left me.

He finally left like he'd been threatening.

I shouldn't have asked him those questions. I should have just let him stare at me like a weirdo. I would have eventually passed out. I didn't need to drive him outside, so he could think about leaving me stranded.

Finding my phone, I press the button to turn on the flashlight and edge my way to the door, finding it locked with the chain latched on the inside.

Remington had to have locked it.

Frantically, I swipe my phone through the air, using the light to illuminate parts of the small room. The chair isn't inside, but Remington's bag is.

And it's open...

"Remington?"

That same eerie noise that woke me earlier happens again. I whip around.

Where is it coming from?

Better yet, where is Remington?

"Please, don't."

The words stop me cold.

That's no animal. That's a plea from a man that would leave me on the side of the road just for blinking wrong.

Remington.

I clutch my heart as his voice drifts through the humid room again. "I promise I'll be good now."

Oh, God. No. I remember dreams like that.

Shining the light in the direction of Remington's tortured voice, I come up empty.

Where the hell is he? This room is literally the size of the lobby at Midnight Gardens.

The bathroom! It wouldn't be the first time someone slept in the tub, though I consider it a last resort. Unless it's a newer plastic tub, the basin is too cold—even with a ton of blankets. Remington might want me to think his blood runs cold, but he's no match for this 1960s porcelain bathtub.

Switching on the light, I pull back the curtain and find nothing but a tub in need of an update.

Please tell me Remington isn't a vampire or something nesting in the rafters of this old building. I'll do a lot of things, but climbing in asbestos-coated ceilings with vermin isn't one of them.

"Remington," I hiss. "Where the fuck are you?"

If anything will rouse him, it'll be my usage of the four-letter f-word.

But it doesn't. Instead, he calls out with that same tortured plea again. "Please, please don't."

My entire body seizes at hearing him beg off some invisible monster.

Please, Lord, let me find him. I can't stand to hear him suffering.

Raking a hand through my hair, I give the room another once-over. The bed is too low for him to lie under, and he's not on the floor or the bed.

But then I see it—slatted doors.

The closet.

He's in the *closet*.

Padding over, my heart absolutely shatters as I inch the door open and find my hateful hero curled up on his side, sleeping on...the extra sheets.

Oh, God.

He doesn't bring his own sheets because he's a diva. He brings them because he sleeps on the floor in a closet where he's...safe.

Easing the door shut, I lower to the floor and fight back hot tears.

Maybe I'm reading way too much into this situation. Maybe Remington just wanted to watch porn or something in privacy.

But my heart knows.

I've seen what broken looks like.

I've called out for a savior.

I've drowned in the pain until I couldn't breathe.

Broken people are most vulnerable when we sleep.

When the walls we've built come down without our approval.

When we search for control in a mind that is no longer ours to control.

It's in those dark hours that all we can do is find shelter and weather the storm until the sun rises.

Remington curled into himself, pleading for mercy on the floor of a moldy closet, is the definition of weathering a painful storm.

And I can't stand it—not one more second.

Inhaling, I pull in a deep breath and pray Remington won't hate me when this is over. The last thing he'd want is for me to

see him like this, but I can't just crawl back into bed and listen to him suffer when I can help him.

I can rescue him like he rescued me.

I ease open the double accordion doors wider and creep into the closet. He's turned and is now facing the wall, his body shivering in a cold sweat.

"D...ad," Remington's voice trembles as he says the moniker aloud.

I pause, my hands clenched around the door. Surely, Remington's father isn't the cause of this nightmare.

It wouldn't be the first time a parent has been the cause of nightmares, though. My stepfather and mother have haunted mine for years.

"Don't. Please. I'm not sick."

That's it.

"Remington." I slide in next to him and run my hand through his wet hair. "Hey, it's me. I'm here. *You're* okay."

His taut muscles still, and I can't tell if he's awake. "You're safe," I say, just in case he hears me. "Everything is okay."

Without knowing the details of his past, I'm not sure what else to say. I can only hope that my touch is enough to reassure him that he's not alone.

"Remington." I stroke up his back until I reach his shoulder. "Remington? Can you hear me?"

He doesn't respond. Instead, another shiver wracks his body, and his breathing speeds up as he moans something that ends in a whimper.

"What was that? Your name?"

I only catch a little of the word, but I swear it sounded like the word *name*. "Remington, wake up." I brush along his arm until I get to his hand, which is balled into a tight fist. I manage to pry his fingers apart, and when I try to take his hand, I find something rough and hard in his palm.

Is it a rock? I can't tell in the dark, but it doesn't feel sharp like it could hurt me. "Remingt—"

The breath whooshes out of me as I'm yanked farther into the closet, lying on top of a heaving and very much awake Remington.

"Hey," I breathe, unable to see his eyes in the darkness. "It's me."

Something hits the floor.

"You were dreaming."

It's like he hadn't been breathing until now as he sucks in a harsh breath, his body shuddering beneath me.

I know that feeling—the moment when you aren't sure if you're still trapped in the nightmare or if you're awake and afraid to face the light.

So, I do what I've always wanted someone to do for me.

I lower my head to his chest and hold him until morning.



When I open my eyes the next morning, I'm alone in the closet, but a sheet covers me.

I didn't mean to fall asleep. I just wanted Remington to know I was there—that I could wake him when he slipped into the abyss of a nightmare that held him captive.

But as his chest rose and fell rhythmically, his body warmed beneath me, and I drifted off to sleep. Remington was my angry lullaby that filled the small closet with something I'd never felt before.

Safety.

With his knees pressed into the back of mine and his arm draped over my waist, I felt protected.

But more than that, it was when my fingers intertwined with his that I felt *cherished*.

All my life, I lived knowing my parents never wanted me.

I wasn't the apple of their eye—their little angel.

I was an inconvenience—a drain on their finances and the last bargaining chip they had.

Unlike me, my parents had hoped my biological father would meet their demands and come for me.

They thought he loved me.

They thought I was worth more than I was.

They were wrong.

My father never came, and I became expendable.

I don't know what demons Remington fought in this closet last night, but I'm grateful he thought I was worthy enough to fight alongside him. I was glad he didn't yell at me and shove me outside. Maybe we really can be friends—at least in the dark.

Sitting up, I kick off the sheet and stretch out the kinks in my neck. Sleeping in a cramped space with no way to straighten out my legs wasn't the most comfortable I've ever been, but it wasn't terrible—though Remington may disagree.

If he's still here.

He may have woken up, realized our bodies were pressed together in an intimate position, and bolted.

I wouldn't blame him.

Well, yes, I would. I have no way of getting back to Georgia.

But I would have understood once I was safely back at Midnight Gardens. Vulnerability in front of others can be more traumatic than the event that caused it. I wouldn't blame him, though, if he needed to disappear for a while. I'd be disappointed, sure, but I understand the need to recalibrate.

All these thoughts, though, end up being unnecessary because when I open the doors, I find Remington's phone

vibrating on the dresser—right next to his keys. He didn't leave, but he isn't in the room, either.

I grab his phone and see he has twenty missed calls—all from different people, but the majority are from a Dr. Depressing. I'm not sure who that is, but whoever it is, they very much want to speak with him. Knowing Remington and his social skills, I would bet he knows that, too, and is purposely ignoring the calls.

Still, I take his phone with me to look for him, which isn't all that hard since I find him as soon as I open the door.

"I'm hungry," is how he greets me from his plastic throne. "We're leaving as soon as I finish this cigarette."

I nod and glance at his feet, where several cigarette butts lie. "Are you sure you don't want to smoke another pack? I think there's still a little oxygen left for the kids next door."

Those darkly haunted eyes flash up at me, and I know in an instant, the guy who held me last night is gone. "You have until I finish this cigarette." He flicks the ashes on the ground as he holds my stare. "I suggest you hurry."

"And if I don't want to come with you anymore?"

Call me a hopeful moron, but I thought after what we went through last night that his reaction to me would be a little gentler this morning.

Remington chuckles darkly. "Then I suggest you dress comfortably. I hear long trips in the trunk can get cramped."

I'm freaking warped.

That's the only thing I can think when I flash this bastard a smile.

He isn't going to leave me—even if I wanted him to.

There's definitely something wrong with me for thinking that's some kind of weird sign of affection from the king of rudeness.

"Fine," I say, dropping his phone into his lap, "but I want pancakes for breakfast."

The corners of his lips twitches. “And if I don’t want pancakes?”

I shrug, fighting the urge to laugh. “Then I hope those cigarettes have enough calories to sustain you until lunch.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Remington

I fucked up.

Not only did I fall asleep, but I also slept like the dead.

In. The. Fucking. Closet.

With the daughter of the man who gave me away to another man who taught me that the only place for me was a four-by-four space meant for accessories.

Because that's what I was—an accessory to the wealthy.

When the audience permitted, I was taken out and shown off like an ugly Christmas sweater. I was created to appeal to heartstrings and wallets.

I was the poor boy who couldn't be saved.

But I could save others.

I was a placeholder for those who matter—those the world couldn't live without.

The world didn't need a boy born to two teenagers, who hid away and birthed him in secret. Those parents were scared children who couldn't care for me even if they wanted to.

I was a Tooney now—a symbol of their charitable contributions to the world.

At least, that's what my adoptive father told me as he locked me in a room designed for the child they always wanted. That room might have been for me, but it wasn't mine—the closet was.

Because I was a mistake.

“So, who's Dr. Depressing?”

It's the first question Eden's asked since we packed our stuff up in the room and checked out. Thankfully, she hasn't mentioned the closet incident, where I basically spooned her all night and felt like a giant vagina.

“Probably none of your business,” I say between bites of mediocre pancakes, eyeing the beer I ordered with breakfast on Eden's side of the table.

She isn't getting any answers until she acts like she has some sense. No one takes my beer because “I'm driving” and “underage.” I'm in no mood for her smiles and morals.

“Does he work with your dad and uncles?”

I flash her an annoyed look that she ignores for the fiftieth time since we sat down. “You caught me.” I grab her plate and pull it over to my side of the table, stabbing my fork through three layers of pancake. “I'm getting butt implants. Dr. Depressing thinks it's time my ass matches the size of my personality.”

She lets out a boisterous laugh, snatching the fork from my hand, and takes a bite for herself, like we share food on the regular. “Maybe you should look into a penis enlargement. Then both your heads would be big.”

My dick jumps in my pants. “Now, now, Eve. Don't make me do something stupid like stand up and let you measure it with your mouth.”

I fight a smile as her cheeks flush pink, and then wait for her to scold me for being crass. She doesn't. Instead, she uses my favorite tactic and changes the subject. "You know, Remington, sometimes friends share things over breakfast. Things like an explanation as to why Dr. Depressing is *still* blowing up your phone."

She points to my phone on the table. I turned off the notifications earlier, but it still lights up every time Dr. Doesn't Get the Hint texts me his angry messages.

"Well, I would, cupcake," I tease, like the asshole I am, "but we're not friends."

I don't know what her definition of a friend is, but keeping myself from grinding my cock into her ass for hours is certainly not mine.

She's not my damn friend.

She's my annoying enemy.

My innocent and supple pawn.

"We are friends *and* partners, 101. Just admit you like me."

She's so easy to fuck with. "What makes you think I like you?"

She shakes her head and looks to the ceiling, like it has an instruction manual for dealing with me. "Uh, you haven't left me on the side of the road yet..."

"Don't get too excited, love. Just because I don't kick puppies, doesn't mean I don't want to occasionally."

"You're so full of shit. You're totally a dog person."

I wouldn't know. I've never had a pet to compare. The closest I ever got to one was watching Halle's goldfish when she spent the weekend with Vance at some convention. Even then, I overfed the shit out of him. Who knew fish could gain weight?

"Remington, are we going to talk about last night?"

Now, she's just making it too easy. "What happened last night?"

“Remington.”

I cock a brow. “Eden.”

“Are you serious right now?”

It’s hilarious that she expected better from me. In what universe have I ever been an easy person to deal with?

“Are you really going to act like nothing happened last night?”

Her innocence is adorable. “What happened? All I remember is you coming outside and climbing onto my lap and begging me to fuck you while the neighbors watched.” I shake my head and cluck my tongue. “And here you were scolding me for smoking in the same hemisphere as their kids. At least I wasn’t trying to flash my tits and scar precious little minds.”

She doubles over and laughs so hard she has to rest her forehead on the table.

“You are a fucking liar,” she finally manages when she can breathe.

“I am a fucking saint, is what I am. I could have let you embarrass yourself, but instead, I held you until your horny ass fell asleep.”

Her mouth drops open. “You are unbelievable.”

“That’s what I hear.”

She shakes her head and picks up her fork. “We’re never going to talk about it, are we?”

“After the way you threw yourself at me, I would think you would want to put the whole embarrassing ordeal behind you.”

Finally, she realizes she is playing a game with a master—one she will never win.

“Fine. I’ll save myself from further embarrassment and drop it.”

I fight off a smile and take a sip of my coffee. “It’s what I would do.”

Not really. I almost took off and left her sleeping in that fucking closet.

But I didn’t.

And I still don’t understand why.

She found me in a state that only two others ever have, but unlike them, she reacted differently. She didn’t laugh. Her fingers didn’t wrap around my arm and haul me to my feet. Even when I caught her touching me. I didn’t realize it was her at first. I was still locked in the past that my mind won’t let me forget.

But then she spoke so gently, like finding me on the floor was completely normal. I froze, and then she laid on my chest, and I...didn’t want her to leave.

Maybe I was just fucking tired.

She’s an exhausting creature.

“Okay, so if we’re avoiding the topic of last night, then let’s discuss our next destination. I was thinking maybe if it’s Mississippi or Louisiana, we could stop and take a picture by the river.”

I can’t tell if it’s the questions or the fact that I can see her pebbled nipples through her shirt that makes me snap. “It’s just a river. It looks like—you guessed it—another fucking river.”

“But it’s a big river,” she argues, like that makes better sense.

“My apologies. It looks like every other *big* river.”

I can’t fucking stand it. Her nipples are making me crazy.

Shouldering off my jacket, I toss it at her. “Put it on. The middle schooler at the counter is about to stab his mom with his boner.”

Her eyes flash to the counter where there is, in fact, a pre-teen boy, but he’s not looking over here at all. “I’ll put this on if you agree to stop so I can look at the river.”

“I’m not stopping.”

She shrugs. “Then I hope you don’t poke a hole through your jeans.”

I nearly jump across the table and bend her over the fucking booth. Instead, I take a calming breath and think of that time I walked in on my parents painting each other’s naked bodies in front of the fireplace. It was more traumatic than wearing khakis.

“Why is seeing a stupid river so important?”

It’s probably something weird, like the pollution smells like home or some shit.

“I just want to see it is all.”

She’s hiding something. I can hear it in her tone.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a river?”

To give her credit, her smile isn’t what gives her away. Her eyes do. Those wide ocean-blue eyes flinch infinitesimally, but it’s there—the pain she hides behind her good deeds and fake smiles.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” I lean forward, sliding the plate out of my way. “You’ve never seen a river before, have you?”

She masks the pain quickly. I should have known then I was fucked.

“Friends share tragic pasts over breakfast. Are we friends, 101?”

“No.” I don’t want to know that bad. She can keep her little secret. She can see the river through the car window.

“Okay.” She shrugs with this confident little smirk that has my blood boiling.

“Tell me why you want to see this river or so help me, God...” I bang my fist on the table, and she doesn’t even flinch. “I won’t ask you again.”

I’ve been patient and even sweet this morning. She owes me a fucking thank-you for it.

“You see, I would—I really would. But if we’re not friends, then we’re strangers. And I was taught not to talk to strangers.”

I’m going to put something in her smartass mouth right here on the table. I won’t need to make up a story about scarring the minds of the young. I’m going to shove my cock so deep in her throat that her eyes water. She’ll have to beg me for a break in sign language.

But I don’t threaten her with any of that because her warped mind would think I like her or some crazy shit. Instead, I find a middle ground.

“Dr. Depressing is Duke, my father. Now, tell me what I want to know.”

“Why do you call him Dr. Depressing?”

Motherfucker. “Because it’s more respectful than calling him Dr. Dumbass. Now, tell me, or I’m leaving.”

“You won’t leave.” She flashes me a wink. “You like me too much.”

Unfortunately, she brought this on herself.

Standing, I pull cash from my wallet and toss it on the table. “There’s a man in the corner that looks dumb enough to offer you a ride. Flash him the blade I gave you and threaten him when you’re on the highway, and you should make it back to Georgia in one piece.”

Fuck her assumptions.

I’m not her puppet or her damn friend.

“You are so dramatic.”

She has the nerve to belt out a laugh and grab me by the waistband.

“Blowing me in a family establishment is a little beneath you, don’t you think?” I eye her fingers, and for a split second, I imagine her undoing the button, sliding the denim down to my ankles, and taking me into her mouth—begging for me to stay.

“Is that what you need, 101?” She stands and pushes me back, getting in my face. I can smell the sweetness of syrup on her breath mixed with a whole lot of fake bravery. “A blowjob to soften that attitude of yours?”

A growl erupts from my throat, and before I can stop myself, my hands are in her hair, yanking her head back and giving me access to her neck. “Don’t offer me something to ruin.”

Her fingers graze the skin of my abdomen. “You were right. I’ve never seen a river before.”

Chills break out along my skin as warmth spreads through my chest. I drop my hands from her hair and step back, but she holds me still as her gaze finds mine. “You can’t ruin what’s already been destroyed.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Eden

“Did you know the Mississippi River is 694 miles long?” I ask Remington, ignoring the scowl he’s held all day. “It ends in Minnesota, if you were wondering.”

He rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t.”

Not that Remington is ever in a great mood, but he’s been especially growly since we left the restaurant. When we stopped for lunch, he made sure we went through the drive-thru. I’d like to think that’s because he didn’t want another breakfast boner incident, but most likely, he’s just being an asshole and making sure I’m just as uncomfortable as he is.

But I don’t need to stretch my legs to enjoy the scenery. I’d endure each and every leg cramp, just to watch the landscape change—a reminder that I am free. I’m not in Georgia. I’m not watching my back, waiting to see where Gerald turns up next. For the first time in my life, I feel freedom from the past that has held me back all these years.

“We’re not staying long,” Remington barks, pulling into the park that claims to have river access. “I suggest you be quick.”

I don’t let his negativity kill my high at seeing the huge river. It’s as long as my eyes can see and rushes over every stone that dares to hinder it. It’s a beast—a force the land couldn’t contain. “It’s magnificent,” I praise softly.

“If you say so.”

I turn to Remington, the sour puss, and sigh. “It was a boner, not a monster zit. You don’t have to obsess over it all day. It happens. Get over it.”

A hint of a smile plays at his full lips, but he doesn’t let it go. “Your river awaits, or have you lost interest already?”

I tsk him just like he does me. “Always trying to change the subject.”

“I’m not changing anything. I’m simply reminding you that your time with your *magnificent* river is limited, whereas your time with my monster cock isn’t. I suggest you prioritize accordingly.”

I swear. I don’t know how he’s lived this long. Surely, someone has tried to smother him.

“You know,” I say, opening the car door, “you might not need so many cigarettes if you tried smiling every once in a while.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Dr. Phil.” With a smile that I bet strains his cheek muscles, he turns up the radio and drowns out anything else I consider saying.

But it’s fine.

Because the river awaits me.

I don’t wait another second before I sprint to the edge of the water and take it all in. The wind in my hair, the sun on my face, and the mist from the water on my skin. The whole moment feels surreal. This isn’t some dirty pond or backyard creek—this is a startling entity that is nothing but pure untethered power. I can’t even put into words what—

“It smells like bad tuna.”

Whipping my head to the left, I find Remington standing with his hands in his pockets, his nose turned up in disgust.

I smile. “How often have you had bad tuna?”

Even I haven’t had the privilege of smelling that.

His gaze never leaves the water. “Six times.”

For a second, I don’t have control of my muscles. My mouth drops open, and my entire body freezes. “What? I—” The words just aren’t coming as I turn to the man at my side.

“Now, who’s being dramatic?” he teases, taking one look at the shock on my face.

“I mean—how?”

One time, sure. But six? How does that even happen?

“I haven’t always been a surgeon’s son” is the only explanation he offers, and my heart absolutely crumbles in my chest. Is he saying he chose to eat expired food? Was he hungry when he hid in closets? I have no idea, and I’m not brave enough to ask. So, I stick with what he’s used to.

Teasing.

“So you’re saying bad tuna made you grouchy for years.”

He flashes me a grin that feels genuine. “Exactly. I recommend sticking with chicken.”

And this is why I can’t stay away—he’s adorably sarcastic. While that might be a defense mechanism to keep people away from him, I find it only reels me in closer. Remington and I are similar. We’ve both seen harsh realities, but we survived. We might have scars and wounds, but we made it through. Maybe not whole, but we made it. We still have time to replace what was taken from us.

We may not have had happy childhoods, but our future isn’t determined by our parents.

Our future is determined by our decisions, and while we may make the wrong ones from time to time, they don’t cause

permanent scars unless we let them. I don't want to always be the face of a heinous crime. I don't want to be remembered as a tragedy. I want to be known for what I gave to the world despite my circumstances.

"You're making this awkward for everyone," Remington says flatly. "Even the fish are scattering."

I shake off my thoughts and face Mr. Rude Ass. "What am I doing to make things uncomfortable?"

He picks up a rock and tosses it from his hip into the water. "You're smiling at a river."

Was I?

"You think smiling is awkward?" I step toward him as he leans down and picks up another stone.

"I think smiling at inanimate things is weird, yes."

Grabbing my own stone, I pick it up and balance it in my palm. "What about stones? Do you find them awkward?"

Just last night, I found him asleep with one in his hand. Stones must hold some sort of significance to him. The question is, will he tell me what that is?

Chuckling, Remington casts the stone into the river, watching as it skips once over the surface. "I don't find stones awkward. I find them especially useless."

He's lying. I know it.

"Then why were you holding one last night?"

The muscles in his neck go taut before he relaxes, plastering on his mask of indifference. "I forgot my teddy bear."

I don't know what comes over me. Maybe it's the pent-up tension between us or the fact that I am just sick and tired of his shit, but before I can think it through, I shove Remington.

And he stumbles.

It's not pretty.

Especially when his mouth falls open and he loses his balance. He reaches out for something to keep him on shore, and he finds...me.

Cold water catches us in its rough embrace, ripping our tangled bodies apart with one rush of its powerful current. My legs flail over my body as I try to find my footing, but I only end up inhaling a crap-ton of water as I panic and scream out.

It's not that I can't swim—I just never swam against a current in the country's second-longest river. What if I end up in the Gulf or, worse, drowning in water that actually does smell like bad tuna? That would be awful, especially if—

Remington!

What if the reason he didn't want to see the river is because he can't swim?

Oh, no.

I'll never be able to live with myself if something happens to him.

I just wanted to see the river, not kill the only person who's ever been semi-nice to me. He might be fuck hot and a vindictive little shit, but deep down, he has a good heart—I know it.

Remington is my antihero. He doesn't deserve a death by drowning in tuna water he hates so much.

A few tumbles and ninety-five years later, I finally find my footing and break the surface of the water, looking incredibly sexy with tangled hair as I heave with violent man coughs, attempting to clear what is likely fish guts and bacteria from my lungs.

“Remington,” I yell with a rasp I don't recognize.

God, please don't let him have drowned. Maybe just a little water in the lungs because he could stand a little humbling. But don't kill him. He has potential.

“101! Stop playing. I'm not in the mood for any more of your theatrics.”

Panic roars in the pit of my stomach as I take a few steps upstream to where Remington and I fell in, but the current sends me onto my ass again before I make any progress.

Choking, I fight to the surface again and again, until I find calmer waters and can stand.

“Remington!” I scream at my first inhale as my hands search wildly for something to hold on to so I don’t drift farther downstream.

But then I see a head of dark hair, and everything inside me smiles.

My hero can swim.

But he’s not happy about it.

Remington’s dark head rises from the water, completely alive and beautifully soaked.

His infamous glare immediately finds me.

“I thought maybe you couldn’t swim,” I tease as he stands, giving his dripping tresses an angry shake.

“And I thought you didn’t have a death wish. Guess we were both wrong.”

He moves through the current like it’s nothing—like the river knows the devil is in its midst and willingly parts around him, so he can corner his prey without hindrance.

My vagina loves it.

“I thought you drowned,” I say when he draws closer, flashing him a wicked smile that shows his little glare does nothing but excite me. “I was coming to save you, but I should have known the river had no chance against you.”

Fury reigns in his dark eyes as he comes to stand in front of me. “What you should have known is that I would come for *you*.”

He’s not in a playful mood. I get that. This water isn’t the warmest. “I’m sorry for pushing you in. I—”

Like a viper, he strikes quickly, yanking me against him with one hand while the other fists my hair, snatching my head back and exposing my throat. I'm pinned and helpless, shivering in a current powerful enough to drag me under for miles.

And. I. Don't. Care.

"Tell me something, love." The warmth of his breath skims my jaw, sending chills over my skin. "Do you enjoy provoking me?"

The tip of his nose drags along my cheek, and for a moment, all I can do is feel.

Feel the pressure of his hold—the unrelenting strength ensuring my compliance as he milks the truth from my exposed body. The coolness of his soaked clothes and the hard lines of muscles hidden beneath them. The scruff that has grown since his morning shave against the smoothness of my face. His heartbeat as it pounds against his chest into mine.

It's a moment that seems to fade everything around us into fine mist along our bodies.

We are trespassers in the Garden of Eden, tasting the forbidden fruit.

"Answer me."

He grips me tighter until I have no choice but to relax into his hold.

"Do you enjoy provoking me, Eden?"

I try shaking my head, but it doesn't move. "No," I rasp, swallowing harshly. "I *love* it."

If we weren't alone in the middle of a river, I would swear the fish gasped in shock. But then I realize the noise I heard through the buzzing in my ears was Remington, growling like something primal lived inside him.

"I'm going to destroy you, love." His teeth scrape against my skin, and it's as erotic as it is exciting—especially when I lean into his bite, daring him to go further.

“Do you promise?”

I’ve already told him he can’t ruin what’s already been destroyed. But what he can do is ravage the broken and make all the jagged pieces unite in pleasure.

We are one and the same.

My brokenness longs to share his pain—to protect the fragility of the goodness hidden beneath our scars.

We were meant for this moment.

A moment of being craved.

A moment where we can be...restored.

“You’re a brave little thing,” he muses, his lips curving against my skin. I wish I could see his smile, see the pleasure he’s gleaning from my body.

But I can’t.

I can only surrender to his power and...*provoke*.

“And you’re hesitating—*again*.”

His arms stiffen, and his muscles clench against me. “Don’t be so eager to sacrifice yourself. There is no greater good to fight for.”

“I’m willing to risk it.” My body trembles as I fight the frantic need to beg for more. More of his touch. His threats. The aching rawness of his heart.

I just need *more*.

“You’ll hate me,” he whispers, grazing his lips against my neck then back to my cheek.

“Only when you’re being sweet,” I promise softly, letting my hands linger on his hips.

A groan falls from his lips, and it urges me forward. My fingers slip inside his soaked tee, lazily exploring the beautifully sculpted hills of muscles beneath.

He sucks in a breath, and I feel the anguish saturate the air before he releases it. “You deserve better, love.”

“But I don’t want better,” I whisper. “I want *you*.”

It’s as if the air around us stills, fearful of when his head lifts and his brows scrunch with pain.

But not me.

I know what’s hidden behind those warm, mocha eyes.

A man stitched together by hate and pain.

A man strengthened by revenge and retribution.

A man who loathes surrendering.

His hands come up to cup my cheeks in a firm and unyielding grip. I can see every emotion flash through his haunted eyes, but nothing is as satisfying as when he shakes his head and tsks me with a hateful smile. “Brave, stupid girl.”

And then he crushes his lips to mine.

My lips part on impact, as if they know he isn’t asking permission for entrance. His tongue, like him, is equally ruthless as it claims every moan that leaves my body as he works, exploring the innermost parts of my mouth. Parts that I never knew existed. Parts that prompted fantasies of him burrowing deeper inside me, pulling out the pieces trapped behind fear and pain.

And I let him.

I pour every ounce of hope and promise through the wounds he left exposed.

And when he is ready, I let him go.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Remington

“Remington!”

She’s fucking laughing, and that pisses me off more than her banging on the passenger side window of my car.

“You cannot be serious.”

I hate that she finds this situation hilarious, but more than that, I hate staring at her swollen lips.

Lips that I nipped and sucked until I was satisfied they were thoroughly ravaged. If I could have signed my name on those fuckers, I would have. At that moment, I wanted the entire planet to know Eden Da Luca had chosen the dark over light.

She deserved better than a kiss from the enemy.

But she chose it anyway.

Fuck, if that didn’t mess with my head—both of them.

But now that I have space and my dick isn't doing most of the thinking, I'm more in control.

“Remington!”

Her tits bounce when she laughs.

“You cannot keep me locked out of the car.”

I want to hate her, but she's wearing my leather jacket, and, well...locking her out of the car is for both of our safety.

And likely the public's.

I can't promise that the next time something smart comes out of her mouth, I won't fuck her into silence on the hood of my car.

“It was just a kiss! I didn't even enjoy it.”

She's a terrible fucking liar and a gigantic pain in my ass.

I can't believe I ate the forbidden fruit she offered. What's worse, I want another bite. Hell, I want to chop down the whole fucking tree and feast on the fruit as my plan of revenge crumbles around me.

I fucked up—hard.

I want to regret it, but her smug smile keeps taunting me.

“If it will make you feel better,” she continues like the brave girl she is, “I'll kiss someone else at the next motel, so you don't think you're special.”

I lift my gaze to her navy-stained eyes. “How very noble of you—putting an innocent in danger for the sake of a lie.”

She shrugs. “Someone once told me not to get attached to the truth.”

Fuck me. This girl is just as twisted as I am.

“Get in the trunk.”

She barks out a laugh that only annoys me further.

“*You* get in the trunk. You're the one pouting because you couldn't control yourself.”

What the fuck is wrong with her?

I'm not capable of love. The only reason I would willingly kiss her would be to prove a point—which I still can't figure out yet, but I will.

“Eden, get in the trunk, or I'm leaving you here.”

Her hands go to her hips. “The only way I'm getting in that trunk is if you *make* me.”

She wants me to lose my shit.

She wants me to tame that defiance of hers in front of witnesses.

“I won't ask you again,” I grit out between clenched teeth.

“You don't need to.” She cocks a brow and grins. “Because I'm not going anywhere but into that seat next to you.”

I'm going to kill her—everyone, say goodbye. The revenge plot ends here, with my foot up Eden's sarcastic ass.

“Oh, hang on.” She holds up a finger and reaches into her—my—jacket, pulling out something black.

Shit.

“No!” I rush to open the door and forget the fucker is locked. “Do not answer that phone!”

How could I have been so stupid to forget my phone in my jacket pocket? I should have just looked at her soaked T-shirt clinging to her tits. But nooo. I was trying to be somewhat of a fucking gentleman.

“I swear to God, Eden, I will throw you back into the river if you—”

A sinister smile crosses her face, and I know in that moment that Eden Da Luca is about to pay me back for locking her out of the car.

“Thank you for calling Remington's phone. This is Eden Da Luca. How may I help you?”

Finally, I manage to calm down enough to unlock the doors. “Give me the fucking phone.”

I'm not playing with her ass. She has no business answering my phone like a shitty receptionist.

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Potter.”

I stop cold.

No.

“Hang up the phone,” I whisper hatefully as I lunge for Eden, but she's able to sidestep me and switches the phone to her other ear. “Oh, no. He's fine. Just sitting in the car pouting, but I'm sure you're used to such theatrics.”

She laughs like she and my mother are best friends sharing a funny joke at my expense.

“He fell in the river—apparently, you can't get him wet because it washes off the attitude. It takes him a little while to get it back.”

That's it.

I love my mother, and I wanted to protect her, but unfortunately, she will have to live with the trauma of hearing me kill Eden on the phone.

“What river?” Eden turns, her eyes widening. “*You didn't tell her where you were?*” she mouths.

Me not telling people my business should not come as a surprise to her.

“Too late now,” I say, extending my hand for her to continue. “Go ahead and finish breaking her heart.”

It won't break Ramsey's heart. Likely, my father is the one who orchestrated her calling me in the first place. She is always considerate about giving me space. My father? Not so much. And considering he's called me well over a thousand times in the past few days, I'd say he's gotten pretty desperate to reach me. He knew if anyone could get through to me, it would be my mother.

But had Eden not answered my phone to be a little shit, I would have sent my mother to voicemail. There's a reason I've been avoiding calls from my family. They are nosy, and they

have the financial means to find me and figure out what I'm up to. And right now, I'm not ready to have that conversation with any of them. For all they know, Eden and I are out here attempting to give them a grandchild.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Potter. I thought Remington would have told you that I asked him to give me a ride to Nevada."

No. No. No.

Fuck, Eden. Just shut up.

"I have...an uncle there who needs my help, and my car's been acting up. He was just doing me a favor. Please, don't blame him."

Well, how fucking sweet that she's trying to shoulder the blame. But my family and I don't work like a normal family. Not only am I a grown-ass man, who gives zero shits about taking off without telling them where I am, I also don't mind being an asshole to protect them.

I snatch the phone from Eden's hand and eye her with silent threats as I address my mother. "I realize your husband is clingy, but this is next-level desperation. Tell him I have to spend time with other people. I can't just sit on his office desk and rub his head when he's feeling needy."

"Remington!" She laughs, and I would never admit it, but I missed the sound. "Your father and I are worried about you. The dean called."

About time. I wondered how long it would take them to realize I never intended on showing up to class.

"Why aren't you at school?"

I hate the concern I detect in her voice.

"Is something going on?"

I sigh and look to the sky. *Fucking Eden...*

"Nothing is going on. I'm just giving a friend a ride."

The line goes silent for a beat as if she's figuring out how to phrase her next question. My mother is no idiot. "To Nevada, where Eden has family?"

I smile. “From your tone, Mother, you sound like you’re calling me a liar.”

She scoffs, and I can hear her fingers snapping as if she’s getting the attention of someone else in the room. “That’s exactly what I think, sweetheart.”

And they say I get all the sarcasm from my father.

“Why don’t you try again?”

I love this game. “Okay, fine. I’ve been kidnapped again. I tried to get away, but she threatened to torture me with restraints and a blow job. You know I can’t turn down a good time.”

Someone sighs on the phone, but it’s not my mother. “Hi, Hal,” I greet, knowing now that my mother has me on speakerphone. “I’m so happy to hear Vance let you out of the cage. I was worried he was confused that vitamin D came from the sun and not his—”

“Remington!”

Halle chuckles. “Where are you, asshole? Your dad and uncles are driving us crazy.”

“I warned you both to run, but no. You thought they were ah-maaaaazing.” I shrug, wishing I could see the eyerolls I’m likely getting. “Don’t blame me for your bad decisions.”

“Seriously, Remington,” my mother tries again. She’s a pro at ignoring my attempts to avoid the topic. “We just want to know where you are so we won’t worry.”

She’s lying. She’ll still worry, even if she has a room number. “Why does it matter?”

“You know why.”

If anyone can understand my need for revenge, it would be my mother.

“Let me help you, son. Let’s do it together.”

I knew she would figure it out before her husband. She’s always been smarter than him. She’s smarter than all of us. She was the one who figured out Albrecht forged adoption

papers and took her son. She was the one who managed to get him to fall in love with her, so she could get into his files and find clues. My mother has always been the queen of revenge.

But now, her reign is over.

It's time for the prince to claim his birthright.

"I'll send him your love, Mrs. Potter."

And before she can say anything else, I hang up.

"Holy shit. How much trouble are you in?" I cannot catch a fucking break.

Turning around, I move toward Eden, a ball of lust and aggravation fighting for control as I take in the way her body looks wearing my jacket and how her pert nipples strain against her wet shirt. "I'm not in near the amount of trouble that you are, love."

She backs up as I eat up the space between us. "You think you can answer my phone without permission?"

Halting mid-step, she smiles. "You think I'm scared of you?" She moves closer until her chest is shoved up against mine. "You think I give a shit about your empty threats? Well, guess what, sugar?" She grabs my chin like a psychopath and spits, "I. Don't."

I warned her, right?

Ripping her hand away from my face, I haul her over my shoulder and walk to the car, setting her down not so gently on the hood.

"Say it," I bark, grasping her chin as she did mine. "Say you will never answer my phone again."

This crazy woman pinches her fingers together and slides them over her lips as if she's zipping her mouth shut. My dick goes rock-fucking-solid in seconds.

"Don't say I didn't give you a chance to make this right."

Without another word, I flip the button on her shorts and yank them to her knees.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes go wide. “Someone could catch us.”

I’m not even shocked that her warped brain isn’t so much upset by the fact that I might be about to fuck her on the hood of this car, but she’s more upset that someone might catch us doing it. She deserves what’s coming to her for that reason alone.

I enjoy the excitement in her eyes just long enough that I’ll remember it later before I flip her over on her stomach and whisper, “If you don’t want anyone to see us, then I suggest you stay quiet.”

Shoving her chest against the cool metal of the hood, I skim down the leather jacket, using only the pads of my fingers. With each pass, her breathing grows more erratic than before. “Are you scared, love?”

“No.”

“Should I stop, then?”

She shakes her head as goose bumps appear along the backs of her thighs.

My cock jumps at the sight of my enemy lying exposed across my most cherished possession while wearing my leather jacket.

“Good,” I whisper against the shell of her ear as the length of my body covers hers. “Because the next time you think of disobeying me, I want you to remember that it wasn’t the sun that left your cheeks pink today.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Eden

As soon as his finger slips under the edge of my panties, I gasp.

“Should I stop, or are you a brave little lamb?”

The humid air kisses my exposed skin as Remington moves the fabric aside, exposing more of my bare cheek. I’ve never been spanked before, but that doesn’t mean I’m not completely thrilled to be in this position, taunting the most hateful man on the planet while I break down his walls one comment at a time.

“Depends,” I goad, “are you going to teach me a lesson, or are you going to keep stalling by asking stupid questions?”

Remington’s returning growl sends tingles throughout my body. I love when he’s this way—unhinged and angry that I don’t cower at his threats.

“I wish you could see how beautiful you look beneath me,” he whispers into my ear. “A sacrificial innocent atoning

for the sins of the guilty.”

The seductive words swirl in the pit of my stomach.

Sacrifices.

Innocents.

Guilty.

A tragic story ending in hope.

“You called me your friend earlier,” I note boldly. “Which is it? Am I your friend or your sacrifice?”

Our relationship seems too good to end any other way.

We met at a motel that houses maybe four guests a week. The odds of one of those patrons being a man my age with an attitude the size of Mars is slim. Not to mention, Remington is possibly the hottest man I’ve ever seen in Georgia. So, for me to actually love his warped sense of humor and share a painful childhood that only he could understand, I’d say fate is stepping in here—making our story seem too good to actually end well. This friendship is likely something else we will inevitably lose—a sacrifice we’ll have to make to be able to live through another year alone.

The weight of his body bears down against me, bringing my focus back to his sweet anger seeping through my skin and coating me from the inside out in something like contentment.

“I’m disappointed in you, love. You should know better than to analyze my words. They are nothing but a Trojan horse.” The feather-light touch of his finger runs along my spine. “They lure you in, play on your dreams, and promise you a future. But those words become lies, and those lies become promises. And just when you think you’re safe in their presence, those false promises turn into truths that stab you in the heart.” He moves my hair off my shoulder and kisses the space between my collarbones. “Beware of pretty lies, my love. They are as ruthless as the truth.”

I groan, relishing the feel of his lips on my skin and the lies he’s telling himself. “You kissed me...”

His fingers drift to the curve of my ass. “A mistake that won’t happen again.”

I smile. “I beg to differ.”

“And beg you will.” An animalistic sound rumbles through his chest right before his palm comes down and smacks my butt cheek, sending a blissful tingle throughout my center.

“Are you going to answer my phone again, love?” He’s panting, trying to maintain his mask of indifference. “Are you going to take what isn’t yours?” he asks again.

I turn, finding his eyes alight with intensity. This is the Remington I know—the one who gets off on my defiance. “Every chance I get,” I promise.

Another smack smarts my behind, and this time, I can’t suppress the moan that leaves my lips.

“You’re so brave,” he praises, massaging the tender spot with his hand. “So trusting... So determined...”

Roughly, he grips my hips and nips at my ear with his teeth. “But you will never disobey me again.” It’s not a question. “Swear it, Eden.”

“Never,” I whisper. “I will never *obey* you, and you...you like me that way.”

The air seems to settle around us, dusting our skin with lingering lust and unspoken needs.

Love is a commodity we can’t afford.

Even if we could, we wouldn’t know how to care for it—not with the fortresses we’ve both built around ourselves. The broken are always readying for war. We are built to defend—not open the door for the slaughter.

But this feels different.

Being with Remington feels different.

I’m not on guard. I’m not worried about tomorrow or the horror that awaits me in Georgia.

I’m...alive.

I'm no longer the girl in the fountain but the girl in the river.

I didn't jump in the water for a broken necklace. This time, I was pulled under by a broken boy.

A boy drowning in his revenge.

A boy full of compassion behind the hard walls of his hatred.

A boy worth the risk of heartbreak.

Remington slowly moves down my body until I feel his breath fan across my stinging skin. "So beautiful," he murmurs, as his lips press against the heated flesh of my behind. It's so incredibly gentle that I almost beg him to do it again—kiss me one more time before he finds his control.

But I'm too late.

He moves to my ear and reminds me that while I may enjoy the gentle side of him, I *love* the twisted side more. "Get in the car, love, before I drive across the country wearing your innocence on my cock."

My breath catches in my throat as his weight and gentleness disappear in an instant.

"Hurry up. I'm hungry."

Be still my freaking heart.

I love a pent-up man acting like he's unbothered by kissing my ass and threatening to take my virginity on the hood of his car in a public park.

This is why we work.

He's rude and evasive, and I'm patient and intrigued.

Remington might believe all words are manipulations of truths and lies, but for me, words are just words.

They hold no truth or lie.

Spoken promises are empty shells of hope.

Words are useless.

It's actions that speak to my soul.

Remington says he's the villain, yet, he saved me from Gerald.

He bought me dinner.

He stood up for me in the cafeteria.

He worried that I didn't find my necklace in the fountain.

He went along with the idea of this trip. Not because he needed proof for his revenge—or had the need for a research assistant—but because I think, deep down, he wanted an escape, too.

He didn't want to be alone.

He didn't want to leave me behind.

So, while he may gripe and roll his eyes at my questions, he listens, and he acts.

Remington cares.

And the yellow suitcase he pulls from the trunk is proof.

I don't need his truth or his lies.

I know Remington is a good man—even if he disagrees.

We were meant to find each other at that motel. We were meant to take this journey, and if he decides to walk away from me at the end, I will know what it felt like to be wanted.

“Eden! Don't make me repeat myself.”

Gracious, he's so dramatic. “I'm coming! Don't get your panties in a bunch.”

I try to stand and pull up my shorts, but they don't budge. “Uh.” I debate if I should continue.

“What?” Remington snaps, setting my suitcase down. “What is it now?”

He acts like I've been demanding this whole trip.

Newsflash: I am not the diva in this relationship.

I roll my eyes and point to my pink panties—the only thing preventing any onlookers from getting a peek at my shaved beaver. “I can’t get my shorts up,” I explain. “I’m too wet.”

Remington arches a brow, a boyish smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “I have to admit, you’re good for my ego, love.”

“I’m good for shoving my foot up your ass, too.” I put my hands on my hips, not giving a shit who sees me. “Come over here and help me.” After all, it’s his fault I’m wet, with my shorts at my knees.

That damn brow of his stays cocked. “And if I don’t?” he dares, fighting back his amusement. “What are you going to do about it?”

Threats and promises are his favorite way to communicate, and you know what?

I think they are my new favorite, too.

“Never mind,” I pop back, unruffled. “I don’t need your help after all.”

If he doesn’t want to help, then he can sit back and watch.

He can *watch*, with the entire park, as they drink in my nakedness. Stalking toward the car the best I can with my shorts at my knees, I snatch my suitcase off the ground.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

There’s no lightness—no playfulness left in his tone.

“I’m changing.”

“The fuck you are,” he snaps back angrily.

“The fuck I’m not.”

A growl tears through Remington as he wrenches the suitcase from my hand. “Walk,” he barks, as if I’m some pet he hates.

He takes a step, his hips brushing mine in the process. “You can walk on your own,” he threatens, “or I can help you.

Only one of those options is fun.”

Somehow, he’s managed to turn this whole situation around. Here I was, thinking I would force his hand into being more compliant, and now I’m the one following orders. It’s not fair, but it is sexy. I’ll give him that. Demanding Remington is way hotter than asshole Remington.

“Where would you like me to go, sir?”

He doesn’t bother answering me. Instead, he forces me backward with his strides until we reach the driver’s side door.

“Get in,” he orders, opening the door.

I flash him a charming smile that he doesn’t appreciate. “Such a gentleman you are, Mr. Potter. I’m impressed.”

“You should be,” he clips, tossing my suitcase onto the hood, rooting through my clothes like they are his property. “I’ve been practicing just so a stranger would give me a sarcastic compliment.”

He is such an ass.

But I laugh anyway. “How are you still single?”

He shoves a pile of clothes at my chest and leans in as his breath grazes over my ear. “I’m single because no one has ever been able to survive me.”

I roll my eyes, not intimidated in the least. “Who are you? A mafia prince?” I shove my clothes back into his chest. “Hold these, mafia boy.”

He starts to object, but then I hook my fingers around the band of my underwear and push them down to the ground with my shorts. All that’s audible is the sound of our breathing as our chests rise and fall with the beat of our erratic hearts.

Maybe it’s the adrenaline or some kind of shock from him spanking me on the hood of his car, but whatever possessed me to get naked in front of Remington Potter is clearly having its way as I stand mostly bare before him.

“A gentleman would turn around,” I note, as butterflies swirl in my stomach at his hooded gaze.

“I’m no gentleman,” he counters.

And I’m no fucking lady.

“Fine.” I shrug and hold his gaze, remembering to be brave. “Get your fill, then.”

“I will,” he murmurs, his tongue slipping out to wet his lips as I pull off my shirt, revealing my wet bra.

“Hand me a dry pair of underwear,” I whisper between us.

His eyes never leave my chest. “No.”

No.

Okay, then.

Gathering even more courage, I suck in a breath and slip out of my soaked bra. His gaze travels from my pussy up to my chest, flicking between each breast with careful intent. A strong, euphoric sensation zings down my spine, heating me from the inside out.

Remington Potter is looking at me—truly looking. Not like a friend or even a research assistant. Remington is looking at me as if he could devour me without hesitation.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, he stands there for several minutes, admiring my body in a way that he’s never allowed himself before.

And. I. Let. Him.

Until he snaps out of his lustful haze, shoving the dry clothes at my chest and turning around as if nothing happened.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Eden

“Are you still uncomfortable?”

We’ve been driving in silence for the past few minutes.

I wasn’t sure what to say after I basically got naked in front of Remington and let him have his fill—he didn’t extend me the same courtesy, though. Then again, I didn’t have a raging boner when I stripped. I imagine wet jeans and a hard cock don’t mix well. Or maybe when Remington disappeared behind the car to change, he gave it a little tug to tide him over—just not enough since his bulge is still there.

Remington cuts his eyes over at me, a sarcastic smirk playing on his lips. “If I say yes, will you suck me off to alleviate the ache?”

He’s so crude.

It’s the most attractive quality he has.

“I hadn’t planned on it. I just thought maybe I’d do a sympathetic welfare check.”

And I just wanted to point out that his body is reacting to my nakedness, whether he wanted it to or not.

A throaty chuckle bursts from Remington’s throat, seeming a little lighter than he was earlier before I pushed him into the river. “There’s a restaurant about five miles ahead, smartass,” he says, moving on from the dick topic. “Let’s stop and get something to eat.” His voice sounds a little tired. Like maybe the river swim took more out of him than it should have.

“Sure,” I agree with a small smile, “I could eat.”

He cuts me a sly grin. “I could eat, too.”

I don’t think he means food.

Maybe that’s just my imagination, though.

“But then again,” he muses, “my dick might get upset.”

He definitely doesn’t mean food.

“I’m happy to hear you consider someone else’s needs.”

He grins. “I try.”



We arrive at the restaurant a little while later. It’s not fancy, but neither am I. Remington, on the other hand, is a straight-up diva, especially when he eyes the diner with contempt.

“We’ll get the food to go,” I say, cutting off any shitty remark he might add. “There’s a motel up ahead. Maybe it has a vacancy.”

Remington shrugs, like he doesn’t give a shit, but the dark circles under his eyes suggest otherwise. He’s more exhausted than he’s letting on, and I can’t have my hateful hero more exhausted than necessary. I, too, try to consider my dick’s needs. The world doesn’t need that kind of assholeism running around tired and hungry.

“I’ll run in and grab us something,” I say when Remington just stares at the dangling open sign that’s missing several bulbs. “Do you want a burger?”

Remington seems to consider it for a half second, but then his lip curls.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I tell him carefully, spotting a *Live Bait Sold Here* sign in the window. “Well, let’s put it this way, it can’t be worse than bad tuna.”

An amused noise slips out from Remington’s twitching lips, but he manages to hold back the smile. “Fine, but if it sucks, you’re not allowed in the closet tonight.”

I can’t help it; I bark out a laugh. “How dare you ban me from the cool-kid closet!”

For some reason, I find this threat my favorite one.

“The closet is for people with good taste in food,” he explains, like this is the most normal conversation to have with someone. “Not for people who play Russian roulette with their digestive tracts.”

“Oh, my gosh.” I fall back into my seat and clutch my chest. “You so sound like a doctor’s son right now.”

He shoots me a glare that is downright adorable. “Unlike my ‘doctor father,’ there’s only one way I’ll get on my knees in a sleazy motel bathroom, and food poisoning isn’t it.”

Well, that sounds both epically hot and disgusting, but I would never counter his bullshit with a blush. “So, you want one order of the fresh bait fish, then?”

“You’re getting on my nerves, Eve.”

I flash him a smile and grab the door handle. “I might annoy you, 101,”—my eyes drift to the bulge emerging in his pants—“but your dick *loves* me.”



“Don’t say a word,” I whisper. “It was an honest mistake. I was just trying to be friendly.”

Remington side-eyes me as a playful grin tugs at his lips. “I’m not sure our postpartum clerk would agree with you there.”

I groan, burying my face in his shirt. “I thought she was pregnant,” I explain.

Remington laughs. “She *was* pregnant—just not anymore.”

“Stop talking about it. I feel terrible.”

A light touch feathers across my back.

Is the take-no-mercy Remington Potter actually consoling me by rubbing my back?

“Don’t feel terrible,” he whispers as the clerk comes back with our room key. “Feel encouraged.”

I pull back to look at him. “Encouraged?”

He nods, plucking the key from the clerk’s fingers without a thank-you. “Yes, encouraged,” he repeats, holding the door open like the gentleman he is, “to be *unfriendly* from now on.”

I whip my head around and find a big-ass smile and a whole lot of smugness on his face. “Thank you, but I think I’ll get my conversational tips from people who don’t inspire murder on a daily basis.”

With a chuckle, Remington brushes past me. “Suit yourself, but you don’t see me leaving here feeling terrible.”

Somehow, I manage to follow him out to the car, without strangling him or staring at his ass—for too long.

But then he had to impress me with his chivalry.

“I need to shower off your river sewage. Do you think you can steal that chair four rooms down for me? Or is that too unfriendly for you?”

Why?

Why does this behavior turn me on?

“I can handle it,” I promise.

His brows rise, challenging me. “Are you sure? It might make you feel *terrible*.”

I can’t even deal with his shit right now. Well, I can, but I’m afraid my body might give me away since the last thing I feel in the presence of this man is terrible.

Turning, I flip him off. “Don’t drown while I’m gone. But should you find yourself swallowing water, remember: go to the light.”

I don’t wait for his response before I storm off, but I don’t need to. I can hear his answering laugh from here.

And. I. Love. It.

There’s no doubt that I’m enchanted by Remington Potter.

Never have I wanted—nor trusted a man to bend me over the hood of his car and spank me. I also would never trust a stranger enough to volunteer to join him on his quest for revenge.

The thing is, though, Remington isn’t like any man I’ve ever known.

He claims he’s a liar and a villain, but to me, he’s only ever been himself—a rude savior, who will use any excuse to justify touching me.

He didn’t spank me to punish me. He spanked me because he needed a reason to put his hands on me again. I can sense the tension—our shattered pieces pulling us together like magnets. There’s no denying we have a connection we don’t understand.

I feel safe when we’re together, and I’ve never felt that way with anyone—even the foster parents I stayed with once my mother went to prison.

Maybe it’s my broken past, or maybe it’s just fate stepping in and taking the reins.

Whatever it is, there’s no denying that I love the fearlessly reckless woman I am when in the presence of the dark lord of sarcasm.

Remington inspires the girl who's been hiding for so many years to emerge and take back her life.

She no longer needs to live in fear or run from conflicts.

Today, I'm not Eden Da Luca, the daughter who was hated. I'm Eve, the mother of all women—the woman who was made for one man to reign over the world.

My mother doesn't deserve parole. And when I return, Eve will stand before the parole board and say just that.

I'm done hiding.

I'm not responsible for her shitty decisions or her inability to love.

I didn't ask for these experiences or the family I was born into, but I can sure as heck change my future.

Eden Da Luca is gone.

In her place stands the woman who steals a chair for her insufferable hero.

This woman is brave.

Independent.

And shameless.

I don't have to be anyone else when I'm with Remington. I don't have to say all the right things or be friendly.

I can be snarky.

I can be rude.

And I can steal a plastic chair for no other reason than because Remington wants it.

Maybe that's not the right way to be, but for someone who has lived her life trying to please a mother who hated her, it's nice to have someone accept me for me—all the ugly parts included.

Scanning the area, I make sure no one is looking and grab the chair and then nearly sprint back to our room. This new me might be braver, but maybe not as brave as Remington.

And that's okay.

I'm a work-in-progress.

"Honey, I'm home!" I yell, finding the door cracked when I leave the chair outside. "Did you drown?" I laugh, noting steam billowing out from the bathroom. "What am I saying? Even if you died, Satan would give you back." There's only room for one fallen angel in this universe, and Remington claimed that title when he ascended the plastic throne.

"Eve," he calls out, his voice muffled like he's in the middle of brushing his teeth. "I hope you don't think I'm actually listening."

I bark out a laugh. "Of course not. I would never dream of having your attention."

The water turns off, and I hear him spit before he appears in the doorway. "Good," he claims. "As long as you're realistic with your expectations."

I have no idea what he just said. I mean, I heard the words, but I didn't digest them because...damn.

Standing before me is no man.

No, this being is God's most prized creation.

Remington is a flawed masterpiece as he stands there with a towel hanging low at his hips. His shoulders are sculpted with lines of sharp bones and strong muscles that flow into a chiseled chest, complete with rock-hard pecs.

"Wow." I breathe, not bothering to conceal my assessment of his exquisite perfection. "You're beautiful."

He scoffs, but he doesn't move or say anything shitty. It's like he wants me to look at him—to pretend this moment is for my benefit and not because he wants to know what I think of him. Remington is showing me what I showed him earlier. He's baring a part of himself that he normally hides behind smoke and leather.

My eyes drift lower, taking in the ripple of his abs that look as if they, too, yearn to make him proud by being sharp and stunning against his smooth skin.

But it's the distinct scar that runs from his hip bone and disappears under the waistband of his towel that is the most extraordinary feature. An exquisite specimen of scarred perfection. I want to reach out and drag my finger along the faded skin that contrasts so drastically against the rest of him, but I keep my hands at my side, knowing he'd like nothing more than for me to ask him about the scar, so he can use it as an excuse to shut me out like he always does when things get too personal.

So, I don't.

I speak his love language—sarcasm. “I knew someone tried to kill you.”

The tension between us seems to deflate the instant he grins. “I told you...” he quips, heading to his bag sitting on the ugly bedspread. “I'm the villain. I can't be killed.”

But he can be hurt.

And that thought alone erases the smile on my face, but not before I fake an amused sound. “I'll find us something to watch while you finish primping.”

“Can't wait.”

I ignore the disgusted look on his face and choose to watch his tight ass walk back to the bathroom with his clothes before he shuts the door, cutting me off.

Locating my suitcase, I slip into pajamas and hide the surprise I picked up under my pillow.

I'll take a shower later when Remington isn't in such a fun mood. I've never been one to pass up a gift, and Remington actually being playful is the best gift after a tension-filled ride from the river.

“Found the remote,” I holler, flopping down onto the bed.

“Don't care,” he answers just as enthusiastically.

Gah, he's a keeper.

“How's *48 Hours* sound?”

“Like a snooze fest.”

I'm taking that as an excited yes.

"*48 Hours* it is!"

About five minutes later, the king emerges dressed in—heaven help me—sweatpants and a form-fitting tee. "You planning on watching this shit all night?"

I meet his frown with a grin. "That's exactly what I plan on doing all night, Mr. Crabby. But"—I sneak out a pack of mints from under my pillow—"if you're a sweet boy, I'll share these *not* expired mints with you."

"Where'd those come from?"

He throws his wet hair forward, splashing water everywhere, the cool water making me squeal as it hits my bare legs. "You would know if you had come into the diner."

I swipe away the few drops of water as he rolls his eyes. "You asked me to stay in the car."

I did—and he listened, which is a freaking miracle, but I don't point that out. I'll let him keep living in denial that he kind of likes me.

"Well, I figured it was time to replace the expired ones in my purse, considering how awful your breath was in the river."

"My breath was bad?" he questions with an arrogant smirk, stalking forward like a predator.

I nod. "Worst kiss I've ever had."

He hums and eyes the little shorts and tank top I'm wearing. My breath hitches as he plucks the mints from my hand and pops one between his lips. "Perhaps, I should kiss you somewhere else and see if I'm terrible there, too."

I cock a brow, just like he's done to me a million other times, and shrug, "Maybe when the show is over—it's just getting good."

Everyone needs a chase—especially Remington. Hunting is one of his favorite games. While I'd love for him to tell me

I'm beautiful and love me with his mouth, I think it's more fun to deny him.

“Okay, Eve.” He chuckles darkly. “I’ll play your game, but just know I’m a very sore loser.” I can read the threat and promise underneath it. I will pay for this defiance.

“I look forward to it, 101.”

I’m not scared—I’m thrilled.

“Are you gonna lie down or just stare at me all night?” I ask nonchalantly.

He grins, but it’s anything but sweet when he lies down beside me, keeping his hand on my thigh.

For the next hour, we watch TV side by side in comfortable silence until Remington’s hand slides off my leg, and I find him sleeping soundly, looking every bit like a beautiful fallen angel.

I’m not sure if I should wake him or let him be. I don’t know what the rules are about the closet, but just in case, I slip out of the bed and find the sheets in his bag. If, for some reason, he wakes up and I don’t hear him, I want to know he’s not sleeping on dirty carpet.

And I was right.

A few hours later, the bed shifts.

He doesn’t say anything when he stands or finds pillows and a blanket in the closet.

He simply stays silent as he lies down and opens his arms for me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Remington

What the fuck am I doing?

Eden squeezes into the closet next to me, her body molding against mine.

This is such a mistake.

I don't let people see this side of me—the dark truth that haunts me. I've allowed Eden to get too close. I've allowed her to become something more than just a pawn in my revenge scheme.

Eden Da Luca has managed to do what no one else has done in decades: She's managed to break me by crawling under my skin, slowly wearing me down by poisoning me with her sweetness.

And I let her.

Hell, I welcomed her sugary venom.

I want to drain the very essence from her and leave her as broken as she will leave me at the end of this.

Kissing her in the river was a mistake—a grave error on my part. I didn't expect the feel of her lips to bring about this visceral desire to claim and protect, but it did, and now, all I can think about is protecting her from me.

I almost let myself steal her innocence on the hood of my car.

She would have been devastated—maybe not now, but later, when she learns the truth.

I'm like all the other horrible villains in her past. I take what I want, despite the casualties.

Eden deserves better.

Better than me and, most certainly, better than Albrecht.

Eden Da Luca deserves a good man in her life—not one who sleeps in closets at rundown motels. She deserves a life of luxury, filled with ballrooms and tiaras—not a life where she wields the villain's blade as if it were a hero's sword.

But, like me, she's stubborn. She's choosing to roam in the shadows, knowing it steals her light.

“Why the closet?” Eden's hands slip beneath my shirt. “Why is it your sanctuary?”

For some reason, I don't want to lie. I don't want to shut her out like everyone else.

“The closet...” I start, inhaling the scent of her hair. She showered at some point tonight, and no longer smells like me.

How disappointing.

“In order to tell you about the closet, I must first tell you about the congressman.”

She rubs my chest gently. “I'm listening.”

She's listening.

She's standing at the Tree of Knowledge, begging for the secret that will destroy her.

But I can't do it.

Not tonight.

"You already know that I was stolen at birth and given away to a family who wanted a child."

She inhales as her fingers dance along my skin, offering me a distraction and the strength to continue.

"I come from a world of the politically wicked," I explain. "But I was never meant to. I should have lived in the world of plastic surgeons—born to the youngest son of Harrison Potter. He had steep dreams for his three boys—all but one living up to his standards."

"No," she teases softly. "Not another Potter rebel."

I chuckle. "Dr. Depressing would love to hear you call his lame ass a rebel, but yes, Harrison wasn't impressed with his youngest son. Unlike his brothers, Duke preferred spending his evenings buried inside my mother instead of books."

"Sounds like someone else I know."

I give her the side-eye, but I doubt she sees it. "The only thing I bury myself in is nicotine."

"But is that because you haven't found the right woman?"

She's searching for answers that will destroy her.

"The right woman destroyed my father for nearly two decades. I might enjoy a little misery every now and again, but I'm not sold on the whole lifetime idea yet. I'm sure it has perks, but right now, I enjoy a little variety of painful experiences."

"Something is wrong with you." She laughs. "You know that's not what I meant."

I know what she meant, but it still doesn't change my opinion. A decade is too long—two is impossible.

"So, what happened? With your parents, I mean. Obviously, they found their happily ever after."

“Did they?” I challenge. “I’m not exactly a ten-carat diamond and a honeymoon in Milan.”

I can’t see her smile in the dark, but I can feel it. “Something tells me your parents prefer something a little more exciting than trips and jewelry.”

Maybe, but I hope not.

They deserve a happy ending—one they should have been given years ago.

“My father knocked up my mother their senior year of high school.”

“How romantic,” Eden whispers.

“They seemed to think so,” I agree. “But their fathers? Not so much—especially when they ran away during their last semester of school to birth their unplanned baby in an abandoned cabin.”

Turning my head, I breathe her in. “My mother is a dreamer. She thought their love could conquer any obstacle that stood in the way of the family she wanted.”

I don’t need to add that she was wrong; we already know how this story ends.

“I was born not breathing in an abandoned cabin as my mother frantically called for help, watching in horror as my eighteen-year-old father breathed life into me—something his ass will never let me forget.” I shake my head. “He seems to think he deserves some kind of an award for restarting my heart.”

Eden chuckles softly. “I can’t blame him. No wonder you go around saving motel clerks. Heroism is in your DNA.”

“You’re delusional.”

I’m no one’s hero.

“Anyway...” I change the subject. “When the ambulance arrived and took us to the hospital, the medical staff notified my grandparents, who weren’t all that excited to expand their respective families. My mother’s father was a congressman

and couldn't afford another scandal, and my father's father didn't need his son dropping out of school to play Daddy. So, they called Congressman Albrecht, a friend of the family, and walked away, telling my parents that I died."

My heart beats faster as I think of the pain my mother endured and the devastation that followed my father over the years. They were victims—destroyed by the very love they thought would save them. "Congressman Albrecht knew of a colleague and his wife who wished for a child."

I chuckle darkly. "But what isn't written in my baby book is that Congressman Tooney and his wife *had* another child—and they killed him."

Eden gasps, rubbing my chest comfortingly. "What did they do to him?"

"Likely, the same thing they did to me: pumped him full of medicines he didn't need and paraded him in front of the cameras as they pleaded with the community to support their cause by donating money to their many foundations."

"That's horrible!" she cries. "Where can we find these people?"

I laugh. "Six feet under. Fate beat me to them."

"How disappointing."

It's like the universe loves to taunt me. No matter how much I want to keep this murderous woman, fate requires my sacrifice. I can't keep Eden, and once she finds out the truth, she'll want to kill me.

Eden's hand finds my tangled hair, fingering the locks that are now dry. "What did Congressman Tooney do to you?"

I go quiet, taking a small breath and focusing on Eden's soft touch. "Sometimes, I can still feel the needles pierce my skin as I thrashed against the bed, begging for someone to listen—to realize I wasn't sick like he said."

Her cries are muffled as she burrows her face in my shirt. "I hope they both suffered when they died."

They didn't, but I don't have the heart to tell her that.

“I was a pawn in the congressman’s end game—where he could retire with the sympathies of the community and millions of dollars in campaign contributions to dry his tears with when I died, too.”

“I hate him,” she cries. “I hate him more than Gerald.”

And she keeps impressing me with these sweet nothings.

“I spent my entire childhood in the same bed that Stetson died in.”

“Stetson is a real person?”

I nod. “He was their first son and died before he could finish fulfilling his purpose of making his father rich.”

I pause, feeling her tears soak through my shirt. “I used to envy Stetson when I spent summer vacations in bed and not with my friends. I thought he got off easy by dying young. But not me. I couldn’t die even when I prayed for it. Dreams were nightmares, and hope became torture.”

A sob wracks her body. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

I pull her hand from beneath my shirt and thread my fingers through hers. “But I haven’t answered your question yet about why I sleep in the closet.”

“I don’t want to know,” she says through tears. “I can’t take it.”

“Yes, you can,” I whisper, “because you’re not like me. You still believe in happy endings.”

Maybe I’m no better than Albrecht for making her suffer through this, but I want her to understand why this revenge matters to me—why I am keeping her birth father’s identity a secret until I exact my revenge. I want her to—Understanding hits me like a bitch slap to the face. I am telling her this story because I hope, one day, she can forgive me.

“Can you be brave, love?” I ask, realizing that I want her to know me—to see the worst scar I carry. “Can I finish your bedtime story?”

She chuckles, but it's watered down with tears. "You're demented."

And so is she.

"Anyway, as I was saying before you insulted me, I started fighting back when I got older. I made Tooney and his wife, Angelina, work hard for every drug cocktail they shoved down my throat. Some days, I even won, sending Tooney into a rage as he strapped me down and told me that I was worthless—a cheap replacement of Stetson. The toys in my room weren't mine because the room wasn't mine. It was Stetson's. I was nothing but a paycheck to Tooney, and eventually, he would cash it in."

A sob catches in her throat. "I want to set fire to his bones and make Albrecht drink the ashes until he chokes."

That's my dark and twisted girl. "Don't distract me by talking dirty, love. I'm trying to finish this story without getting hard."

She squeezes my hand. "Take mercy on me and finish quickly then. My heart can't take much more."

I can do that. I can grant her this one thing.

"I discovered that the closet was my greatest defense against Tooney sneaking into my room and drugging me while I was asleep. The walls became my fortress—the kingdom I would never have. The closet was void of reminders—of Stetson—and the love I would never have. A small storage space became my home—the only place I found peace in the world crumbling around me. It was my protector—or, as you like to say, my hero."

A sob bursts from Eden, and it takes her several minutes to calm down. "You promised a happy ending."

I chuckle, ignoring the anxiety rushing through my body. I've never shared this story with anyone, not even my parents. The last thing I want is anyone looking at me differently. I haven't achieved my happily ever after yet. That's what revenge is for, but pretty lies make Eden happy. "I escaped and lived sarcastically ever after," I tease. "Happy?"

She smacks my chest. “How did you escape?”

I flash her a glare she doesn't see. “You and your fucking questions.”

“Remington,” she demands, undeterred. “Tell me, or I will stab you with my fingernail.”

What does it say about me that I'd actually enjoy seeing her try?

“Fine,” I huff. “But this serves as my good deed for the day.”

“Remington. I'm not joking. I will stab you.”

I'm sure she will, but then she'd spend the rest of my life apologizing to me, and that's a level of torture I can't endure.

“One day, I started feeling better. My strength began to improve, little by little. I thought maybe Tooney had a change of heart, but that wasn't the case. Come to find out, my adopted mother had been giving me half doses, allowing me to grow stronger until the time came for me to run.”

“How old were you?”

I shrug. “A teenager? I don't remember. Birthdays aren't something you keep up with when you're waiting to die.”

She whimpers but manages to hold back her tears so I can finish.

“One weekend, Tooney was away. Angelina handed me a backpack and pressed a white stone in my hand. She told me to run, change my name, and stick to the motels that didn't ask for ID.”

“So, your name hasn't always been Remington?”

I shake my head in the dark, but she doesn't see.

“I was born Jude Potter. I became Stetson the third when the Tooneys adopted me. When I ran, I became Remington—someone strong who would never be held down again.”

“And your adoptive mother?” Eden asks, “What happened to her?”

Silence falls over us in the small space.

“She died the day I ran away.” I don’t feel the need to explain how the guilt of torturing me caused her suicide. There will always be a part of me that loves Angelina. For years, she was the only mother I had—the only hero I had ever known. But then again, she and Tooney were the only villains I had ever known, too.

“So, if it wasn’t for Congressman Albrecht, you would have never been tortured by the Tooneys. You would have lived a good life with Dr. Depressing and Ramsey.”

“Yes,” I admit. “Congressman Albrecht stole my childhood and robbed me of the life I should have had. He is a killer—someone who destroys lives for a price.”

Eden sits up and takes my hand, her voice turning serious. “And so, we’ll destroy his.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Eden

Rolling over, I find myself alone in the closet, which I expected. After all, what Remington confessed earlier tonight couldn't have been easy to admit, let alone face in the light of the morning.

I understand now why he desperately craves revenge against Congressman Albrecht. Hell, now *I* want to kill Albrecht *and* his dog—not that I know if he has one, but you get what I'm saying. Albrecht deserves more than just a knee to the nuts.

This man deserves to spend years writhing in pain for what he did to Remington.

A fucking closet...

Remington's home—his fortress—is a sixty-four-square-foot room.

What kind of heartbreaking shit is that?

I'll tell you—it's the kind of shit vengeance is made of.

Congressman Tooney might have escaped my wrath, but Albrecht won't be that lucky, not after last night. No one fucks with my hateful hero and gets away with it.

Remington is done being used.

He deserves a life where hope isn't painful, and love isn't a reward but something that is freely given.

He deserves to sleep in a bed and not where last year's wardrobe hangs, waiting to be used.

Albrecht will pay for his sins, even if I must become a villain, too.

Sitting up, I crack open the closet door and find the room enveloped in a warm glow, its light seeming to gravitate around the dark angel sitting upon his plastic throne, watching as the rain soaks his kingdom in a vengeful cleanse. It's hard to imagine anyone could be so cruel to someone so...majestic.

Remington wasn't created to serve.

He was created to rule.

Standing, I smile when I see Remington's hand hanging off the chair, an unlit cigarette between his fingers. And he says we aren't friends...An enemy would have smoked if he wanted to. He wouldn't refrain for the sake of anyone's health but his own. But here he is, stuck inside during a thunderstorm, denying himself...for me.

I've never seen such chivalry.

I take a step, coming to a stop when something crinkles under my foot. What in the world? Reaching down, I grab what looks to be the motel's stationery and gasp at the sight.

It's an angel.

An angel with his sword raised high in the air, protecting the world from evil.

It's the image that's been burned into my mind for years.

St. Michael, the archangel—the very man I wear around my neck.

He drew him.

He drew him for *me*.

Aw, hell, he's mine now. Villain or not, this complicated man is mine—every shattered piece of him.

“I’m warning you now,” I say, approaching his still form with the drawing clutched in my hand. “How you answer my next question will determine your fate.”

I come to a stop between him and the window, blocking his view.

“I’ll admit, love, you had me at *warning*.” His mouth twitches as he fights back a smile.

See? So fucking charming. Every man should take notes. This is how you find a wife who will follow you to the throne and bow at your feet. She will show a kingdom how to serve their king.

She will show them true loyalty.

True love.

And true devotion.

I find Remington’s brow cocked as he stares at me, rolling the cigarette between his fingers. “Should you come back later?” His gaze drifts to my hard nipples straining under my thin tank top. “Possibly when you don’t look so innocent and appetizing.”

I fucking love him.

I know it’s too soon and possibly a touch insane, but my gut has never steered me wrong. This man is my hateful king—the kindest villain I’ve ever met.

“No,” I tell him. “I won’t come back later.”

I force his knees apart and step through them, pushing the small paper up against his bare chest. “Did you draw this?”

He never looks down—he simply holds my gaze in a challenge. “No, I didn’t draw anything.”

What a beautiful liar he is.

“You drew this,” I correct, plucking the unlit cigarette from his fingers and placing it between my lips. “And you left it for me.”

Those fathomless eyes are hooded with desire. “You’re mistaken.”

“I’m afraid I don’t agree.”

The muscles along his cheek twitch as his hands clutch the armrests of his chair in a tight grip.

“What did you tell me before?” I ask, holding his eyes as I let the drawing tumble down his chest. “Don’t believe pretty lies?” My fingers toy with the edge of my tank top, watching as he fights every need in his body to touch me. “What was it again?”

I grin as he swallows thickly. “Wait, I remember.”

Without hesitation, I rip off my top and toss it to the floor. “Pretty lies can be as ruthless as the truth.”

I don’t give him the opportunity to deny the words as I push down my sleep shorts and panties and kick them out of the way. “I warned you that your answer would determine your fate.”

I take the drawing, and his eyes flash to it briefly before coming back to me. “Did you draw this for me?”

He doesn’t blink. “No.”

I love his games, just about as much as I love his denial. “Such a shame.” I tsk. “I thought you didn’t care what anyone thought of you.”

“I don’t.”

I let the drawing slip from my fingers and flutter to the floor. His eyes follow it the whole way. “I think you do.” Pushing closer, I stroke the scruff on his face. “I think you care a whole lot about what *I* think of you.”

He scoffs, and it's weak, nowhere near as sarcastic as it usually is. "Then prove it," I dare. "Tell me the ruthless truth—be brave, 101, and risk your fate."

I've spoken his language. I've issued him a challenge that he can't refuse. "Villains don't care who they hurt with the truth. Are you a villain, Remington? Or are you a hero?"

Like a viper, he strikes, snatching the cigarette from between my lips and tossing it behind him. "You want to know the truth," he grits out between clenched teeth, his eyes fighting to stay on mine. "You want me to tell you the truth?"

My chest rises as a flush spreads across my skin. "Yes."

A growl rumbles through his chest right before his arms circle my waist and pull me onto his lap. "Fine. I drew your fucking angel," he spits out, his words full of venom as I ease lower over his hips. His cock jumps under his boxers, and I smile.

"Why?"

There isn't much room for my legs to straddle Remington comfortably or decently.

But Eden would be decent.

Not Eve.

Eve is brave.

Eve is made for this one man.

I ease my legs over the armrest, spread completely open for my dark king.

Remington's eyes flash to my center, aching for his touch, dripping for his cock.

"Are you going to answer me, 101?"

His eyes never leave my pussy, his hands flinching along my back as he holds me on his throne. "Do you want me to tell you what I think?"

The muscles in his neck are coiled tight. "No."

“Too bad,” I whisper, leaning into his tense neck and placing a gentle kiss just below his jaw. “I think you hate that you can’t treat me like everyone else. That you can’t say mean things to me, without making it right with thoughtful gestures, like a drawing or suitcase.”

This time, I kiss his jaw. “You are a man of action, Remington. Pretty lies are merely your favorite kind of foreplay.”

His hand spasms against my back, but he holds still, continuing to deny what’s between us.

“So, I’ll tell you pretty *lies*—I’ll play your game.”

Remington shudders at my words and pulls in a harsh breath. The tension between us is thicker than desire. “I’m *not* a virgin. I do *not* believe in saving myself for a man—for him to take what *no* man has tasted. To claim what is *his*—a gift of purity for the impure.”

Thunder rumbles outside, rocking the lights above us as I play his game and tell him pretty lies. He knows I’m pure. He knows I’ve saved myself for the right man. The question is: Is that man him? “What am I to you, Mr. Potter? Am I a pretty lie or your ruthless truth?”

My challenge snaps the last of his restraint as one hand delves into my hair, snatching my head back and exposing my neck to the predator.

“You want my truth?” He all but growls the question.

“Every painful word.”

This animalistic noise erupts from his throat as he drives his hips upward, grinding against my aching center. “You are foolish.” His teeth sink into my shoulder for a split second before he follows it up with more harsh truths. “You are reckless and impulsive.”

I smile, loving the uninhibited side of him. “That’s all you have? Those are the ruthless truths that I should be afraid of?”

I’m pushing every button he has. I’m dangling the truth in his face and daring him to cower. “Hurt me with your truths,

and heal me with your actions.” It’s like even the storm outside knows this is the moment of truth, a monumental revelation that will change the course of history. “Tell me, 101. Who am I to you?”

Remington’s chest is heaving, his eyes locked with mine as his lip curls, and his anger wraps us in its suffocating wrath until he breaks. “You’re mine!”

Lightning strikes, and the thunder follows, orchestrating the tempo of our breaths as Remington grinds his hips into mine once more. “You. Are. Mine.”

I feed off his anger, soaking up his heartbreaking truth. He loves me, and he hates himself for it. I am his exception.

I am not like all the others.

I am different.

I am his.

My hands slip through his hair, forcing his eyes to stay on me. “Then accept my gift—claim my innocence as yours.”

For a moment, I think he’s going to turn me down, but then he exhales, his voice becoming gentler. “Guide me in.”

I still at his words. They weren’t at all what I expected. I thought he would drive his cock so deep inside me that tears would fall down my cheeks. I was prepared for it, but not for this. Not for his gentleness.

“What?”

I catch his gaze and then let my eyes drift between my open legs where his cock strains against the slit of his boxers, begging to be released.

“Guide me in,” he repeats, “and take me instead. I don’t deserve your gift.” I press a kiss to his mouth, letting him part my lips with his tongue and lavish me with moans of pleasure as he explores my mouth with fervor.

“I don’t think it works that way,” I say between breaths, creating space between us. “You need to stretch me,” I whisper, securing my hands around the back of his neck for

stability. “Ready me so I can take all of you. I want all of you, Remington.”

His eyes pinch shut, and I can tell his demons are rushing to the surface, fighting for the upper hand as his now-bare cock nudges my entrance.

We came from families that told us we deserved nothing, but we aren’t those kids anymore.

What I’m giving Remington doesn’t come with stipulations.

“You are worthy of precious things,” I remind him. “You are worthy of love.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “You don’t under—”

I don’t give him a chance to say more. Instead, I steal our breaths with one quick push of my hips.

His cock slides inside me, parting me painfully as it breaches the barrier no man has ever claimed before.

“Fuck.” His arms tremble as he stills his hips from moving. “Don’t move, love.”

I knew it would hurt, but it’s bearable. “I’m okay,” I tell him. “You can move.”

He doesn’t.

“You won’t hurt me. I’m strong, remember?”

Slowly, he absorbs my words, and eventually, his hips start to move as his arms wrap around me. “So strong,” he agrees, sliding in again. It doesn’t bite nearly as bad as the first push. He must see it in my face because he picks up speed, moving more steadily inside me.

“Touch yourself, my love,” he demands, driving deeper inside me.

I let go of his neck and reach between my legs, massaging the bundle of nerves at my apex. A wave of pleasure washes over me as I increase the pressure, matching my speed with his thrusts as my body warms all over.

“You’re so beautiful,” he declares, watching his cock disappear inside me.

“So brave.”

I can feel the knot of tension building inside me as he thrusts deeper—harder.

“So...mine.”

My stomach clenches, and Remington pistons his hips inside me, his strong arms driving me down onto his cock furiously until we both snap, tipping over the edge in orgasmic bliss, watching as the blood of my innocence drips down his cock—redeeming the villain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Remington

I took to her pussy like nicotine.

I didn't care if it killed me. I lived for another taste—especially after she told me she was on the pill. I, of course, am clean since the last time I could tolerate anyone, let alone a one-night stand, was years ago.

I made lov—I fucked Eden all night long, stretching her to her limits, literally and figuratively. Watching my cock slide between her folds, claiming what I wanted but couldn't admit...

It fucked up my head worse than a concussion.

One moment I was euphoric and possessive, and the next, I was guilt-ridden and remorseful.

I'm not the man Eden thinks I am.

I'm not worthy of her trust and devotion, and I'm damn sure not worthy of the gift she gave me.

Selflessness isn't something I've witnessed often, so I was captivated by the thought of her giving me a gift that no one could ever claim but me.

I craved to own a piece of her that I could keep forever—a piece I could always love, even when she hates me.

It's the most selfish thing I've ever done.

I tried to stop myself.

I tried staying detached, but I couldn't keep Eden at a distance. I couldn't protect her from me. Instead, I devoured each hour with her like it was my last. She intrigues me to the point of madness. I love her fight. I love her twisted mind.

But most of all, I love her loyalty—her need to seek vengeance on my behalf.

For years, I had no allies—no friends to take up my cause. I have always been alone. I had no sidekick or hero—just hopelessness.

Until I found the Potters—and found Albrecht.

Vengeance should drown the hopelessness inside me.

It should make me feel better.

But it doesn't.

Instead, the hopelessness consumes me, suffocating me with its heavy weight. Revenge no longer excites me. It only tortures me with reality.

No matter what I do, it won't change the past.

Nor will it change the future.

Using Eden would have been blissful revenge against Albrecht—to let his own daughter put him away for the rest of his life.

It would have been an epic ending.

But I can't do it.

Not now, not when I lo—like her.

Eden is nothing like I expected. She isn't some spoiled, political brat living off Daddy's money.

She's strong.

Brave.

And hopeful.

I can't take hope away from her, too.

I made the mistake. I ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

I doomed us to a life of pain.

But Eden still has a chance to heal.

I can't let her be part of destroying her biological father. She's already been through that once with her mother. I can't let her do it again.

This is not her fight.

It's mine.

And I need to do it alone.

"You're awfully quiet this morning," Eden notices, rolling over, her breasts splaying across my chest. "Did you not like breakfast?"

I flash her a glare, like I'm already bored with her ridiculous questions this morning.

"No," I admit. "It wasn't what I ordered."

She barks out a laugh. "You couldn't eat my pussy for breakfast."

I cock a brow. "It would have been more filling than the yogurt and fruit you bought from who-knows-where." I make a disgusted face at the grape she pinches between her fingers. "I prefer a breakfast that will keep me satisfied throughout the day."

"Oh my gosh. You're ridiculous."

I'm not ridiculous. "No one wants a fucking grape when your pussy is on the menu," I argue petulantly.

“I told you I was sore,” she protests, pushing the grape past my lips.

“And I listened and allowed you to rest earlier this morning.” What more does she want from me? I hear the best way to get over soreness is to stretch. Makes perfect sense to me.

She laughs. “Poor thing. I’m sorry you’re insatiable,” she teases, kissing my neck and rubbing down my chest.

“And I’m sorry”—I kiss her nose lightly—“you’re tighter than a nun’s ass.”

A satisfied laugh escapes her. “Not after last night. You broke me in well.”

I damn sure tried.

Just the feel of her parting around me, clinging to me like a second skin, messed with my focus. It felt like we were one body, one person. It fucked with my head.

“I can try to help you out this morning.” Her fingers skim across my chest, sending chills down my spine as she presses a kiss to my pec.

My eyes close, relishing the feel of her lips skimming down my exposed hips, driving me wild with each kiss.

“How did you get this?” She kisses the scar above my hip bone, tracing it with the pad of her finger.

I flash her a look of regret. “One of many Congressman Tooney’s doings.”

Pity passes through her eyes as she places another kiss on my abdomen. I can’t stand it. I can’t handle the guilt that comes with her concern.

“Let me ask you a question.” I grab her by the hair, running my fingers through her tangled locks.

She laughs. “Are you seriously asking for permission? That’s a new one for you.”

She’s right. Her pussy has fucked with my head.

“You’re right,” I start, tugging her head back and exposing her throat. “Then tell me if you’ve ever seen the ocean.”

My question shocks her for a split second.

“Why? What does it matter?”

Her and her fucking questions. “Because I want to drown you, and sharks provide an easy cleanup.” I roll my eyes. “Don’t ask me stupid questions unless you’re going to sit on my face while you do it.”

“You’re an asshole,” she teases. “But a cute one.”

I’m not cute.

I’m just an asshole.

“Answer my question, Eve, or I’ll take out my aggravation on *your* asshole.”

Her eyes widen. “That sounds painful.”

“It can be,” I say, “but not for you—unless you keep avoiding my question.”

“So vulgar...” She laughs.

I’m going to bend her ass over my chair and spank her senseless. “Eden!”

She holds up her hands, still fucking laughing at my dramatic ass. “Okay. I haven’t seen the ocean, but you knew that, didn’t you?”

I shrug.

I assumed if she’d never seen a river, then she likely hadn’t seen the ocean, either. It didn’t take a surgeon to put the pieces together.

“How do you feel about a little detour today?”

“Are you trying to court me, Remington Potter?” Her hand flies to her chest dramatically. “Like, are you seriously trying to be swoony right now?”

I nearly upchuck my disgusting breakfast. “Don’t let some dick make you delusional, sweetheart. I’d rather suffocate in wet cement than associate myself with the term *swoony*.”

She ignores me—a habit she needs to break—and climbs up my body, completely naked, and straddles my hips. “So, you’re saying we’re going on a date to the beach?” She leans down, not close enough to kiss me, but enough to hover over my greedy lips. I brush her hair behind her ear. “I’m saying I’ll try not to drown you in the Gulf.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Eden

“If you fall out, just know I’m not circling back.”

I grin at Remington and all his sun-kissed hatefulness as he lowers the window so I can stick my head out. The air of the coast mesmerizes me with its tangy scent of ocean air and blue skies. I let the breeze woosh through my hair, filling me with sheer joy.

Well, for a moment, at least. Until Remington pulls off onto the side of the road.

“You better not need to pee again,” I threaten. “We’re literally steps from the entrance to the public beach. I’m sure they have bathrooms close by.”

Ignoring me, Remington reaches across me and opens the glove box like I’m not even speaking.

“I swear we are stopping for diapers on the way back to the room,” I tease.

“I don’t have to pee.” He glares, shutting the glove box and dropping something in my lap. “I thought you might want to remember this moment.”

I nearly cry at the sight of the black marker. “You pulled over so I could write my name on the back of the sign?”

It’s like my brain is trying to catch up with his goodness—the small window he gives me into his wonderful soul.

Even though I might not know everything about Remington Potter, I know this man is made for me.

I’m calling it early.

He’s the one.

“If you don’t get out of the car right now, I’m going to burn your fucking sign.”

I snatch the marker from my lap and grin. He’s such a diva. “Are you gonna sign it with me?”

“No,” he clips, getting out of the car and rounding the front before opening my door.

See? He’s the sweetest asshole ever to exist.

Taking his hand, I let him lead me to the wooden sign welcoming us to Little Florida. “What do you think we should write?”

Unlike one of the last signs, this one hasn’t been signed multiple times by different visitors. It’s bare and untouched. It’s ours, and ours alone.

“Say whatever you want,” Remington barks, his tone screaming how unimportant all this is to him, but his actions speak otherwise.

He didn’t have to stop here.

He didn’t have to remember the sign.

But he did, because, deep down, no matter what he wants people to believe, he’s thoughtful.

“Hurry up,” he demands, urging me forward. “I don’t want to be out here after dark.”

That stops me.

“What happens after dark?”

A groan falls from his parted lips. “You have until I get to five, then I’m leaving.” He holds up his hand and starts counting. “Five—”

“Gah, you’re even moodier after pussy. How does that happen?”

He sends me a glare. “It’s a talent.”

“It’s a whole pout, is what it is.”

I guess he really did want pussy for breakfast.

“Four,” he continues, “three.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going.” *Geez.*

Taking the marker, I draw a heart in the bottom corner, before writing my name in the center. “Your turn.” I shove the marker at Remington’s chest.

“No.”

He folds his arms across his chest, refusing to take the marker.

“Remember this feeling tonight,” I threaten, “when you’re eating food and not my pussy. Ask yourself if your defiance is worth it.”

I, too, can play this game.

“Don’t threaten me, love.” His cheek twitches, fighting back a smile. “You might enjoy the consequences.”

He steps forward and plucks the marker from my fingers.

This isn’t like last time, when we were in Alabama and coincidentally discovered that sign with all the other travelers.

Remington chose to come here.

He chose this sign—a blank canvas just for us.

My villain, the hero, who charms me with his lies and loves me with his truths.

“Stop staring at me,” he snaps, positioning the tip of the marker inside the heart, “or I’ll scribble out your name and draw a dick instead.”

He’ll do no such thing, but I love the threat all the same. “Now, you’re just making me blush, 101.” I clutch my heart. “Who knew you were so romantic?”

I did.

I knew he would make me feel like the most cherished girl in the world.

“There.” He shoves the marker at me. “I signed my fucking name.”

Leaning around him, I take a look at the wooden sign and gasp.

He didn’t *just* sign his name.

I didn’t *just* sign mine.

When we’re together, we aren’t Eden and Remington.

Here, on the coast, away from everyone we’ve ever known, we’re simply us.

We’re Adam and Eve.

“Oh, wow.” I breathe in sharply, taking in every detail like it’s a rare piece of art.

The way the last letter of his name goes outside the lines of the heart I drew just to be a rebel. The way our names look together, next to each other, with his sharp lines and my soft loops.

We can’t be defined—we are but a contradiction.

But here, at this beach, with our names written in ink, we are eternal.

Shrugging, I shake off the feelings clouding my head and lighten the mood. “Look at that. You didn’t explode.”

He cuts me a look that says I should hush and leave this alone. “Maybe you should come closer just in case karma is late.”

He's so freaking adorable with his sweet talk. Maybe he should write a how-to book for single men. He has this flirting thing down to a science.

"Why are you looking at me weird?"

His awkwardness only makes me smile bigger as I continue to 'look at him weird.'

"Eden," he threatens, "go get your fucking camera and take the stupid picture I know you want. Otherwise, we're leaving."

Gah, I love fucking with him. "Will you get in the picture with me?"

I may never visit the ocean again. I want to remember this moment with the man who made it happen.

"Fine, fuck it," he clips. "Whatever it takes to make you move faster."

"That's my boy." I wink, and he makes this sound like he's not impressed with my usage of the word *boy* in association with him.

I agree. He's no boy. He's all man.

And he's mine.

Grabbing the Polaroid from the car, I pull Remington to the sign and ignore the hateful pout he's sporting and shove the camera into his hands. "Press this button, but make sure you get all of the sign in the picture with us."

He groans, acting like I'm asking him to dig a six-foot ditch in the summer heat. But he opens his arm for me to stand next to him and holds up the camera.

"Say Eve," he teases, taking the picture just as I open my mouth.

"I didn't even smile!" I smack his chest, pulling the instant photo from the camera.

"How is that my problem?" He grins. "You should follow directions quicker."

“I did! You took the picture fast on purpose.”

His gaze travels down to the developing photo in my hand as the images take shape. I was wrong. My mouth wasn't open. I was smiling just like the man next to me.



“What are you waiting for?” Remington kills the engine. “Go!”

He doesn't need to tell me twice before I jump from the car and race across the blistering sand, heading toward the endless miles of ocean.

It's so calm and peaceful out here—almost dreamlike.

But then I feel it—fear.

Quickly, I look behind me and see the dark lord of sarcasm freaking sprinting behind me, his eyes dancing with delight as he comes for me.

I scream, pumping my legs faster, but it's no use. Remington scoops me up like I weigh nothing and tosses me over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

His hand clamps down on my ass. “I changed my mind.”

Changed his mind?

Like a replay, his threat from earlier plays back in my head. “*I'll try not to drown you in the Gulf.*”

This nut. “Remington!” I beat on his back, but it only makes him laugh.

“Hold your breath, love!”

It is the only warning he gives me, but it wasn't soon enough. Salt water shoots up my nose as the undertow drags me across the sandy floor. Gasping for air, I choke as Remington pulls me up and to shallower waters.

And then something crazy happens.

He laughs.

It's a laugh I've never heard from him before—it's boyish and carefree. But then he ruins the moment.

"No wonder Gerald caught up to you at the motel. You're a terrible runner."

"I am not!"

His eyebrow arches skeptically.

"I'm not slow. I run around the motel in the evenings sometimes when I'm bored," I argue.

"Maybe you should run every day," he tells me, whirling around me in the water, like a shark circling its prey. "Then you could run for help instead of allowing Gerald to corner you in the lobby."

"Maybe you should stop smoking," I retort. "Then your lungs could expand like they need to."

"My lungs are kinky." A grin pulls at his lips as he teases me. "They like to struggle. It makes the experience more exciting."

He's absolutely hopeless. "Why are we even having this conversation?"

Remington seems to draw closer. "Because one day, it won't be me behind you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He plucks something from my hair and tosses it into the water. "It means you need to be able to save yourself."

I cock a brow. "You say that like my hero is going to be out of commission soon."

Remington's eyes darken, and he closes his mouth before opening it again. "I told you, I'm no hero. I need to know you'll be able to protect yourself from the Gerald's of the world. The smarter you are, the longer you'll live."

He moves in closer, looping my hands around his neck as the sand shifts beneath our feet.

"Why are you so worried about Gerald?"

Our foreheads touch as he leans down. “I just want you to take care of yourself, okay?” It’s as if the idea of something happening to me bothers him.

“I have taken care of myself.”

He shakes his head. “I mean when you leave Georgia. Living alone isn’t easy. You can’t trust everybody, Eden.”

“I don’t,” I argue. “Where is this coming from? You’re totally ruining the beach experience.”

“You’re right, never mind. Forget I brought it up.” He steps back and flashes me a fake smile. “Watch for sting rays. I’m gonna dry off.”

I don’t know how long I let the waves crash into my back before I decide to approach Remington while he doodles in the sand with a sour look on his face.

“You want to build a sandcastle with me?”

“No.”

Okay, rude ass.

“Can I bury you in the sand, then?”

Maybe a different approach will work.

“No.” He’s quick to snap again.

“What if I sit on your face? Then can I bury you in the sand?”

I don’t know where the words came from, but Remington’s eyes flash to mine instantly.

“You lie down in the sand, and I’ll bury you up to your neck. Then, I’ll sit on your face,” I propose with a coy smile. “And if you can’t make me come, you have to smile and be sweet the rest of the day.”

I hold out my hand, but he swats it away, already pushing to his feet. “I’ll help you dig the hole.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Remington

I couldn't dig that fucking hole fast enough.

You would have thought a carton of cigarettes wrapped in pink pussy was waiting at the bottom. I was possessed by the thought of being restrained as she rode my face, taking what she needed from me.

“Eden!” I snap, pushing her lame-ass handful of sand out of the way. “Move.”

“I'm hurrying,” she lies, her laughter giving away her strategic delay.

“You're cockblocking is what you're fucking doing.”

I scoop an armful of sand and dump it next to her feet. “Just stand there and ready your pussy,” I order. “I do not want to hear that you're overstimulated when I drive my tongue inside you and make you come on my face.”

“So vulgar,” she chides as a faint blush tints her cheeks.

I roll my eyes. “I thought you said I was romantic.”

“You are.” She laughs. “You’re vulgarly romantic.”

“At least I’m not swoony.”

No one needs that word floating around, killing my boner.

“All right.” I stand, eyeing the hole. “I think the hole is deep enough.”

Even if it isn’t, I’m not waiting any longer.

Easing down into the shallow grave, I snap my fingers. “You have five minutes to bury me. If I were you, I would start with my hands, because when time is up, I will grab you and claim my reward.”

I don’t play in the sand for free.

She tsks like I should be ashamed of myself.

Spoiler alert: I’m not.

“I don’t believe those were the rules, 101.”

My eyes narrow. “What gave you the impression that I follow rules?”

She’s delusional if she thinks I will let her tease me with my own possessions. After all, it was just yesterday that she told me to claim what was mine.

I did.

She better get busy burying.

“Time’s ticking, Eve. Don’t make me prove how healthy my smoke-filled lungs are. You’ll be disappointed.”

“Oh my gosh.” She doubles over with laughter. “Pussy has made you crazier.”

Hence the reason I haven’t indulged in years. I have enough addictions to obsess over. I didn’t need another, but she provoked me until I popped the seal. My behavior is all on her.

“Eden!” I bark. “Bury me, or I’ll bury you and shove my cock down that pretty little mouth of yours.”

Don't worry, she finds my crassness romantic—I'm just speaking her love language.

“Okay, fine.” She kneels, flashing me a smug smirk that makes my dick throb. “But you better not disappoint me.”

This is a prime example of someone who has no self-preservation. She literally challenges me to fuck her into a coma to prove a damn point.

“Eden,” I growl. “You have three minutes.”

It takes her two.

“That's good,” I bite out. “Come here.”

She straddles my face, looking around the beach, finding it empty. “What if you get sand in your mouth?”

“I'll build you a sandcastle,” I deadpan, unable to grip her thighs with my greedy hands. “Your pussy. My mouth, now.”

It's like I have lost all sense of manners. Not that I had any to begin with.

But for the past two hours, as Eden played in the water, all I thought about was how I don't want to let her go.

But I know it's the right thing to do.

She deserves better than me.

But that doesn't mean I don't struggle with wanting her.

I've never met someone like Eden. She challenges me in a way that no one ever has.

The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

I've never given a shit about what people thinks of me. Not my parents, not anybody. I learned a long time ago that pleasing others was the killer of joy.

Living by my own rules has become an outlet to get through the day.

But for once, I don't want Eden to hate me.

But she will.

It's inevitable.

And that bothers me more than it should. I haven't wanted something or someone in years. I've grown accustomed to being alone, and now, I'm being tortured with hope.

Hope for a future that doesn't end on the floor of a closet with nothing but memories and shadows.

I can't bear it, so for once, as she pulls her bottoms to the side and lowers down onto my face, I give in to the moment. I make a memory that will keep me warm in the shadows.

"Oh, shit." Her hands go to my hair, her fingers tightening as I slip my tongue into her tight folds. "Oh, shit."

I applaud her word choice with a groan as I suck the sensitive nub harshly between my teeth. Her legs quiver around my ears as she bears down, pulling my head to meet her center, as she smothers me between her sweet folds.

Pressure builds in my chest—a sedating sensation consuming me in an instant. I'm warm. I'm safe. I'm...in love.

"This is crazy," Eden chants. "Are you okay? I mean, can you breathe?"

Honestly, no. But it's not because she's riding my face.

"Remington?" She pulls away and finds my eyes.

Fuck.

I can't be in love—not now.

"I can't do this," I say, my voice void of emotion.

"Did I hurt you?" She moves off me quickly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Yeah, you made me feel.

You made me want.

You made me love and doomed us both.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I confess, freeing myself from the sand.

"What's wrong, then?" She offers her hand to help me up.

I don't take it, preferring to stay where I belong—beneath her in a shallow grave.

“Remington, what's wrong?”

She can feel the distance seeping in between us, creating the space that I should have kept all along.

Sighing, I rake my hands through the sand, pulling strength from the ocean. “I need to tell you something.”

Not even the ocean breeze stirs.

“Okay,” she says, sitting down next to me and pulling her knees to her chest.

She looks so small and fragile that I almost change my mind.

I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to be the villain. I want to be her hero.

I want to keep her.

But that's not my life—my story doesn't have a happily ever after.

“Remington,” Eden prompts softly—too softly for my liking. “You're going to confess a ruthless truth, aren't you?”

“Yes.” I blow out a harsh breath. “I'm tired of pretty lies.”

She nods like she knew this was coming, and it breaks my heart to let her down.

“In another life,” I start, swallowing past the lump in my throat, “I would keep you. I would be everything you deserve.”

Her eyes find mine as she blinks back tears.

“I would be your Adam.”

“But not in this lifetime,” she confirms, her voice raspy.

I nod. “I haven't been honest with you, Eden.”

“Tell me,” she says, staring at the water as if she's finding strength, too. “Tell me like you would anyone else. Tell me as the *villain*.”

My heart seems to stop.

I can't breathe.

I can't be the villain—not to her. Not now, after everything we've been through.

“The truth is...” I toss a little sand, hesitating.

“Like the villain, Remington! Don't pretend to be someone you aren't.” Her harsh demand snaps me to attention.

She's right. I don't deserve the title of hero—not when I've carried the secrets of a villain.

“I didn't check in to Midnight Gardens because I hate the dorms,” I explain, emotionless. “I picked the motel because I knew you worked there.”

She sucks in a gasp. “How?”

I swallow, remembering the look on my grandfather's face as I held a needle to his throat. He wasn't expecting the grandson he sold to break into his home and wait in his closet with a syringe full of enough morphine to stop his heart.

His life hadn't changed.

He was still in politics—still evil.

No one had made him pay for the years he made my mother cry.

He simply moved on, thinking he had done enough to atone by buying my mother a meeting with Albrecht a year ago.

My mother is a forgiving woman.

But I didn't inherit that same quality.

My grandfather owed me, and I didn't leave until he gave me what I needed.

Leverage.

There's no way my grandfather could be sure Albrecht would keep his secret unless he had something of equal importance on Albrecht.

“Your birth father kept up with you,” I explain, not fully answering her question. “He knew you were in college and that you worked at the motel.”

For a moment, all she can do is just stare.

“I needed leverage on Albrecht,” I explain. “Something I could bargain with. Something—or someone—he’d do anything to keep quiet.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. You’re Congressman Albrecht’s daughter.”

“No.” She’s still shaking her head. “My mother would have used him to get money.”

My chest hurts. “I’m sure he paid her off.”

“No, she would have tried again.”

“Perhaps,” I agree, “but that’s not the worst of it.”

She blows out a shaky breath and chuckles darkly. “Of course not. My life couldn’t be that simple.”

“I didn’t...I didn’t know what all you had been through,” I explain, hoping it’ll mean something, “until it was too late.”

Her arms tremble as she stares at me. “Too late for what?”

“To hate you.”

A sob rips through her throat, and it absolutely destroys me but I have to continue. “I planned to befriend you,” I admit, dragging in a painful breath to get the last bit out. “Then I planned to sleep with you and blackmail Congressman Albrecht by threatening to leak the footage.”

“You were going to make a sex tape of us?” Her bottom lip quivers as disappointment clouds her brilliant blue eyes.

“Yes. Congressman Albrecht would do anything to keep a scandal quiet.”

It isn’t the easiest thing to admit.

She stands as the first tear streaks down her cheek. “You didn’t save me because you were a nice guy. You saved me to earn my trust.”

That's not entirely true. I helped her because Gerald had no business putting his hands on her. But it'll be easier for her to move on if she thinks it was all part of the plan.

"I tried to warn you that I wasn't a good man."

A mocking laugh escapes her still-quivering lips. "You did. You can rest easy knowing this is all my own doing. I am the stupid girl who thought you were different."

Her hands fold across her chest as invisible walls go up between us. It's more painful than a burn.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I never meant for this to happen."

"Yeah, you did. After all, you had a plan."

But falling for her wasn't part of it.

Instead of using her, I want to protect her.

And I am. She just can't understand it right now.

"I'll take you to the airport and buy you a plane ticket back home."

It's like the world just crumbles around her as she drops to the ground, burying her face in her knees. "You know what, Remington?"

My breath catches in my throat as her glassy eyes lift to mine.

"All this time you were punishing the wicked by sacrificing the innocent. Congratulations, you're no better than Albrecht."



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Remington

Forgiveness is fear.

It's a one-sided commitment with an uncertain future.

And it terrifies me.

Who is Remington Potter without hate and vengeance? Do I even know? Of course not. Because soon, there won't be a Remington Potter.

"It's time to go," I bark, marching across the sand to where Eden sits with red eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

I've given her several hours to curse me in silence.

"You can finish hating me 43,000 feet in the air."

Her head snaps up, and she levels me with a glare. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Unfortunately," I clip, "you don't get a fucking choice."

She swings her arm out to hit me, but I easily sidestep the blow. “Just leave me alone.”

“I would,” I tell her. “But I’m in no mood to file a missing person report when you’ve been kidnapped and tied to someone’s bedpost.”

“What do you care?”

I narrow my eyes in warning. “I don’t. I care about me and not spending twenty-five to life behind bars because someone was foolish enough to touch you.”

Her eyes widen in shock.

Yeah, you might hate me, love, but you’ll always be mine.

Without warning, I pull her to her feet and sling her over my shoulder like a ragdoll as she screams, banging her fists against my back. “Put me down!”

“What have I told you, Eden?” I question, making my way across the beach. “Violence makes my dick hard.”

“I hate you!” she screams into the open air.

“Good,” I bark. “I hope you hate everyone who’s like me. It’ll keep you safe.”

Her fists immediately stop pounding, and she goes limp.

“I don’t want to hate you,” she cries angrily. “Tell me why I don’t want to hate you.”

A sick sense of relief washes over me for a split second before reality kicks in.

No matter how Eden feels, I can never give her the happily ever after she deserves.

“You don’t hate me,” I explain casually, “because you have shitty taste in men.”

A heartbroken sob rocks her body against mine. “You know that’s not true.”

I do, but unfortunately, it doesn’t change anything.

We make it to the car, and I lower her to the ground on shaky legs. “I need you to look at me.”

Of course, she doesn't.

Grabbing her chin, I force her head up. "You promised me that if I told you about Albrecht, you wouldn't let anything you learned change you."

She's survived Albrecht's abandonment, Gerald's threats, and her mother's attempted murder. There's nothing she can't get over—especially me.

My girl doesn't need a hero—she is one.

"Keep your promise, Eden. Don't let me or Albrecht change the amazing woman you are. Fight for your future—fight for *you*."

She pulls in a shuddering breath that seems to stop my heart, but it doesn't.

Her words do.

"I wanted to fight for *you*."



It all ends here.

Everything I'd been planning for the last year ends here.

I thought I was ready, but that's not the case.

"One room or two?" the middle-aged clerk asks.

I look back at the parking lot and see Eden's head bowed, her face resting in her hands as she sits motionless in the passenger seat.

I sigh. "Two."

The last thing Eden needs is to sleep in the same room with the man who betrayed her. I don't deserve to see her or find peace in her company. I deserve to be alone in a closet, facing my poor decisions.

"Here you go." The guy hands me two keys.

"Do they have chairs?"

“Chairs?”

“Yeah, plastic chairs, like the ones you have outside.” It’s like he doesn’t even work here.

He nods. “Yeah, each room has one.”

Speaking from experience, that isn’t true. Not all rooms have one, but whatever. I don’t have the energy to argue.

I’ll just steal his if it’s not at my fucking doorstep. “Thanks,” I say as I leave, wishing Eden was talking to me so I could brag about actually thanking another piss-poor employee. But instead, I get into the car silently and pull around to our rooms.

“Here’s your key.”

Her eyes flash as she takes in our respective room numbers. “I want 101, not 102.”

Like I give a shit. “Okay. Anything else? Maybe a limo in the morning to take you to the airport?”

“Fuck you.”

That’s my girl. Fight back.

“Order us some fucking food since you seem to be talkative.” She grabs her suitcase and gets out of the car, causing me to smile like an idiot.

“Well, now you’re just being cruel,” I tease. “Two *fucks* in a row...Be still, my heart.”

I could fuck the taste out of her mouth right now.

She leans down and sends me a much-deserved glare. “Goodnight, Remington.”



After the food is delivered to Eden’s room, I step outside and take a chair, distracting myself by scrolling through my phone.

Several texts are there from my family and even Maverick. But they all go unanswered since none of them are who I want

to talk to. She sits next door with her curtains closed and a *Do Not Disturb* sign hanging on the door, hating my guts while I sit out here, waiting like a fool in love.

Something is wrong with me.

There has to be.

I have never sat outside in a chair and worried about what someone thought of me.

Just call me a pussy.

Or Duke.

They mean the same thing.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and for a brief second, I think it's Eden, but then Duke's number flashes across the screen.

I know why he's calling, and I'm pretty sure he plans to yell.

Fuck it. Why not? I could use a laugh.

"What?" I answer, already lighting a cigarette for this entertaining conversation.

"Is that any way to greet the man who brought you into this world?"

"Well, it depends," I chide, "if my date minds the interruption."

"Shit." He sighs. "I know you didn't get my brains, but you do know how babies are born, right?"

No wonder I like this fucker sometimes.

"I think so," I lie. "Is that when I raw-dog her on your kitchen island and forget to pull out?"

"Okay, okay, you win. Stop before we're both nauseous."

He's such a quitter. "What did you want, Dr. Depressing? Talk fast. I only have a few minutes until she gets me hard again."

“Well,” my father starts, his voice turning stern, “I would like to know where the *fuck* you are and why you haven’t been in class? Your roommate says he’s never even met you.”

I almost laugh out loud. “Look at you, Pops. You’re quite the investigator. I bet Mom had her way with you for that little bit of snooping.”

“She did.” He scoffs like I’m stupid. “But don’t try to change the subject. I want to know where you are.” He’s so cute, trying to play grown-up.

“You know where I am. Underneath”—I pretend a girl is with me—“what’s your name again, sweetheart?”

“Remington!” All the teasing is gone from his voice. “I want answers. Where are you, and what are you doing?”

“Didn’t Mom tell you?”

He goes quiet. “No. She won’t choose between us.”

That’s my queen of revenge.

Mom knows I’m going after Albrecht. Hell, she even offered to help, but we both know Dr. Depressing would spoil our plans like he did with her when *she* went after Albrecht.

He inhales, trying to hide his frustration. “I know what you’re doing with Albrecht.”

“Do you?” I chide with an amused grin. “And what *exactly* am I doing with Albrecht?”

“Let me help you,” he pleads, lowering his voice.

“I don’t need your help, Dr. Duke.”

To be honest, I never needed any of the Potters’ help.

But I took it anyway.

And that’s where I went wrong.

Allowing Halle to help me. Letting Vance give me a job. Spending the summer at the lake with my mother and father. Eden and her fucking snark.

All of it made me weak.

It stirred up emotions that I had suppressed for years.

It made me *want*.

It made me crave a future I could never have.

And I can't take it. I can't endure the pain anymore.

I want to be numb again...like when it was just me, alone in a shitty motel.

"I've been talking to Kelly, you know, Summertime Girlfriend, the reporter that your mother and I talked to before? She has information we can use to take down Albrecht. Whatever it is you're planning, you don't have to do it alone. Let us help you, son."

Son.

He uses the term so frequently now. Like it was something he was born to say. And yet, I can't reciprocate. I can't call him dad when he deserves to hear it.

But in order to honor the father who saved me, I would have to forgive the one who tried to kill me, and I can't.

Not yet.

The term *dad* still belongs to Tooney, who I hate—who ruined the heroism of the word.

I don't have a dad.

I have a father with many nicknames. A father who has been patient, who endures my ribbing and slips of me addressing Ramsey as Mom.

But he's never asked or seemed expectant of the title.

He simply waits, and it fucking kills me.

"Remington," Duke tries again, this time more confident. "We're going to get Albrecht. Your uncle Vance and I are working on it. Why do you think we came to Georgia with you?"

Because they're fucking nosy, and they knew I was up to something.

"Don't try lying to me, Dr. Depressing. I know your tells."

Anytime Duke is lying, he gets more aggressive and alpha-sounding, like he is the boss and not the bitchiest brother.

“Fine,” he admits like a pussy—marriage has ruined him. “Vance and I came to Georgia to open the new plastic surgery office and help Halle with the foundation. But we also hoped you’d learn to trust us and reach out. We can help, Remington. I know you’re used to doing things on your own, but you don’t need to anymore.”

He pauses, giving me an opportunity to open up.

And like the asshole I am, I don’t.

Duke has been through enough. The last thing he and my mother need is to know why I desperately crave revenge against Albrecht. It would kill them to learn what Tooney did to me. I can’t add another reason for them to feel guilty. They deserve a fresh start.

They deserve a happily ever after.

“Maybe next time, Pops.”

And then I hang up.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Eden

Why me?

I tried to be a good person, a better daughter, and the best partner.

And yet, I still ended up alone with a carton full of fries.

I thought maybe, just this once, I found someone who appreciated me.

Maybe that was just me and my wishful thinking, though.

Remington was upfront about who he was from the beginning.

He said he was the villain.

I should have believed him, but I hoped he was different.

And he wasn't.

He was just like Gerald and my mother—he needed something from me, and he had a plan to get it.

Remington's betrayal hurts worse than finding out Albrecht is my birth father.

Unlike Remington, I had already written off my birth father years ago.

Albrecht had the chance to be in my life, and he wasn't. Instead, he let me bounce around from foster home to foster home until I aged out of the system.

I learned quickly that I would never have a *Pretty Woman* moment in my lifetime. Real-life princes don't rescue girls like me in a gray Lotus Esprit.

But...maybe girls like me could be rescued in a black Chevy Impala by a dark and twisted prince who threatened villains with his own wicked smile.

Honestly, when I saw Remington, I thought I had found my prince on the clearance rack.

I don't need a Lotus to drive me away with a clean-cut billionaire.

I need a chain-smoking asshole who threatens to push me out of his Impala.

I'm simple like that.

But my dark prince betrayed me, and for some reason, I still can't bring myself to hate him.

The man planned to use me—planned being the operative word here. He didn't film a sex tape or even try to fuck me. *I* banged *him*.

He tried to push me away, but I was stubborn.

I knew what I felt, and my gut is never wrong.

Remington is *not* a villain.

Villains don't save you. They don't take care of you or give you space after they break your heart and still order you food.

They certainly don't buy you yellow suitcases.

Remington has always had my back, but the question is, has it all been part of his plan to befriend me?

I don't know.

I can't wrap my head around all the feelings circulating through my head.

I only feel heartbroken.

And confused.

Remington is a walking contradiction. What he says is totally different from what he does. I know the asshole cares about me. I know it!

And for that reason alone, he should be stabbed with the plastic knife in my take-out bag. You do not ensure your leverage is fed before she leaves for the airport in the morning, flying first class back to a shitty motel.

Rage burns beneath my skin as I stare at the door. I bet he's sitting in his fucking chair, smoking his thoughts away. I'm sure he isn't antsy or heartbroken. He's probably quite calm, thanks to fucking nicotine.

Fuck it.

Someone has to stab him.

I snatch the bag of takeout from the table and fling open the door, finding the demon exactly where I expected.

His throne.

"Hold this bag!" I bark. "I need to stab you."

His eyebrow arches as he blows smoke out of his nose. "As fun as that game sounds, I think it would be considered toxic behavior if we played it."

I swear, I'm going to *kill* him—fuck stabbing him.

"Did you eat tonight?" I snap. "I didn't hear the delivery driver deliver food to your door."

The fucker actually grins. "Why? Are you offering to let me finish my lunch?"

He's not talking about real food. He's talking about finishing his pussy platter from earlier.

"Sure," I clip. "Right after I stab you."

I throw myself down into the other plastic chair at my door and ignore his laughter.

"You're in a feisty mood tonight," he observes. "It's getting me hard."

Of course, it is.

Because he freaking likes me.

I open the bag and pass him a container of fries. "Eat. I'll feel guilty if I stab a hungry man."

He plucks out a fry, holding it up like it's some kind of fond memory. "Are you planning to give me a running start before you try stabbing me, or do you prefer me naked, taking it like a man?"

The fact that I find him incredibly charming right now is concerning. This man has kept secrets from me. I shouldn't trust him.

"I want you to tell me something," I blurt out angrily.

He takes a bite of his fry, chewing slowly. "All right."

"If I wasn't Albrecht's daughter and you didn't want revenge against him, would we have been friends?"

He picks up another fry and puts it to his lips. "No."

My heart sinks, and tears sting my eyes.

"I don't have friends." He continues explaining as he blows out a breath and looks to the sky. "But even if I did," he admits softly, "you wouldn't have been one of them."

Something in my chest feels like it shatters, broken shards of glass filtering down through my veins. Every inch of me hurts.

"You would have been so much *more* than a friend."

His jaw clenches steadily, enhancing the sharp edges of his face as those haunting brown eyes lock on to mine. "You

would have been my Eve.”

My lips quiver at his admission, but it’s not until he finishes his declaration that I sob.

“And I would have been your Adam.”



I couldn’t sleep.

It wasn’t until my crime show ended that I decided to check on Remington. Something told me he didn’t go inside after I left in tears. I couldn’t face him, realizing that even though he did love me, it changed nothing. He was still getting revenge against Albrecht—against my birth father.

Everything is so fucked up that nothing makes sense, except the fact that Remington fell in love with the leverage he needed to blackmail the man who ruined his life.

I can understand his pain.

I even understand his betrayal.

I just don’t remember either of them stinging this bad.

Opening the door, I’m not surprised to find Remington in front of my room, asleep in his plastic chair, like a soldier standing—or sitting—guard. It’s hard to look at him, to see him so kind—so broken.

Leaning against the doorframe, I watch his chest rise and fall rapidly, like he’s fighting even in his sleep. Taking in his twitching hands, I notice the phone in his lap lighting up with text messages.

I waver for half a second before deciding that, technically, I’m still his research assistant and reach for his phone, already reading the previews of the texts on the screen.

Ignoring all the messages from his parents and his uncle, I choose to focus on a more interesting one from someone named *dead man*. The criminal researcher in me is already suspicious that *dead man* is none other than my newly

revealed sperm donor. I can't be sure, without doing more research, though—obviously.

Turning the phone, I hold it in front of Remington's face to unlock it. Instantly, I'm brought to his home screen, where I find his message app and open it, clicking on *dead man's* message.

Only a couple of texts are in the chat. One from a couple of weeks ago when Remington told *dead man*—aka Albrecht—that he would tell his daughter—aka me—hi, and the other is from an hour ago.

The words on the screen might as well be a marriage proposal. There, in a blue chat bubble, are two sentences that mean more than I love you.

Stay out of her life, and I'll back off. You don't deserve her.

Now, it's been a rough day, but if I'm not mistaken, this text sounds a lot like Remington is tapping out of his revenge quest against Albrecht for me—to keep another wicked person out of my life. Unless he's lying, and this is all part of the plan.

No. No way.

There are evil people in this world, yes, but Remington Potter is not one of them.

Remington is not wicked.

He won't be.

Because I would kill him.

There's no way he's going to do sweet things for me and promise to be my Adam in another life and then walk away after all this.

I will be that crazy bitch that goes to jail for murdering her sarcastic—

Remington's phone buzzes in my hand, cutting off my inner rant, as Albrecht's response appears in the chat.

You have a deal. Let this be a lesson for the future. Blackmail only works when you have the right

leverage. Next time, try fucking your feelings since you seem to have so many for my daughter.

Okay, so maybe I'm toxic.

Maybe I have Daddy issues.

But one thing is for sure, I love Remington "Asshole" Potter. He might have kept secrets from me, but he cared enough to tell me the truth and give up his revenge. If that isn't motivation enough to make a sex tape and blackmail the shit out of Albrecht, I don't know what is.

After all, I've never been a roses kind of girl.

Fuck Albrecht. He'll never hurt anyone again.

Remington and I don't need another life to have a future as Adam and Eve. We have this one, and I'm done wasting it.

"Remington." I shake him gently. "Wake up."

His eyes open slowly, and he blinks a few times under the light. "What's wrong?"

I take his hand and pull him to his feet. "What's wrong is that you're a fucking quitter, and I don't have the patience for it."

Even sleepy, he cocks a brow. "*You don't have the patience for it?*"

"No," I snap. "I don't." I hand him his phone and ignore his scowl. I warned him I would answer his phone again every chance I got. "Where's your room key?"

His eyes widen, and for a second, he looks scared as he removes the key from his pocket, holding it between us. "Is this the part where you stab me?"

This man.

I snatch the key from his fingers and nod. "Come to find out, I really love being toxic with you." And naked, but I'm trying to keep our romance classy-ish.

A grin pulls at his lips as he shoves me inside aggressively, kicking the door closed behind him. "What about earlier?"

“Oh, you’re going to make up for earlier. I’m thinking of washing your mouth out with my pussy juices. Maybe that will teach you not to lie to me again.”

He nods seriously. “The punishment is harsher than I expected, but I’m willing to endure whatever it takes to atone for my behavior.”

Gah, I’m going to fuck him hard tonight.

“Good,” I praise. “Then it’s settled. You are my hero-ish villain to stab whenever I want.”

“As long as you promise to make it hurt.”

I flash him a smile. “I’m glad you feel that way.” Stepping forward, I pluck the phone from his hand and slip it into my back pocket. “Strip, 101. I want to see all of you.”

His dark brow rises. “Don’t get too brave, love. I feel guilty, but not *that* guilty.”

Meaning, he’s being very generous by allowing me to pretend to run him right now.

And that’s totally fine.

I want him to lose control.

I want to see the real him—the one who keeps nothing from me.

“Your shirt, Remington. Now.”

For a moment, all we do is stand there, facing off with one another. His eyes speak of pain and apologies, but the bulge in his jeans speaks to claim and absolution.

“Should I make you?” I ask when he continues to challenge me.

“Yeah,” he clips, his lips twitching while he fights off a smile, “I think I’d like to see you try.”

“Done.” I tip my chin, accepting his challenge, before turning and walking to the window, throwing the curtains open for the world to witness him losing.

“Promise you won’t be a sore loser?” Turning and leaning against the window, I flash Remington a smug smile that he reciprocates.

“You forget, love, I don’t lose.”

He does.

The text messages on his phone prove that he forfeited his game with Albrecht.

“But you forget, Adam. You’ve never played my game.”

I don’t go down easily.

Those brown eyes of his seem to sparkle in the dim lighting as he prowls forward, coming to a stop directly in front of me. “All right, Eve,” he drawls wickedly, “let’s play.”

Without another thought, I rip off my shirt and toss it at his feet. “If you don’t remove your shirt, love,” I threaten, “the next thing the guests will see is my ass pressed up against the window.”

Still, he doesn’t move.

The only way I know I’m getting to him is by the way his fists ball at his sides.

“Have it your way.” I shrug, pulling his phone from my pocket and setting it on the windowsill before sliding my sleep shorts to the floor.

Remington growls and starts to step forward.

“Ah, ah,” I scold. “You know the rules.”

“You aren’t wearing underwear,” he spits, already being a poor sport.

“And you’re still dressed,” I challenge. “Bare yourself or...”

I finger the strap of my bra, taking a moment to let reality set in for my competitor that only one scrap of fabric stands in the way of exposing myself completely.

But my opponent is no rookie. He won’t give up that easily, which I love.

“I want to ask you something,” I say as I reach around and unclasp my bra, keeping the fabric pressed to my chest. “Are you a quitter?”

Remington’s arms jerk as he fights not to reach out and grab me.

“Are you not going to answer me?” I lift my chin and let one strap slide down my arm, my bare ass cooling against the window.

“I’m not a quitter.”

That muscle in his jaw might as well be a vibrator—every move brings me closer to orgasmic bliss. “So you say,” I challenge. “Yet, you planned to put me on a plane and send me back to Georgia even though you love me.”

Finally, he snaps and snatches his shirt over his head, stepping forward with a growl. “I was trying to do the right thing.”

I let the other strap fall, holding his eyes as they fill with rage and lust. “Villains don’t do the right thing,” I remind him. “They do the wrong thing.” I shrug. “But if you’ve had a change of heart, let me remind you that good guys never win.”

Taking a step forward, I meet him nose to nose. “A good guy will watch with the knowledge that he failed to claim what was rightfully his.” I drop my hands, and the last barrier falls to the floor, leaving me naked and exposed as I press up against Remington. “A good guy will watch as another man takes my body and pleasures me with his cock, marking me with his own claim as he fills me to the brim.”

Anger rips from Remington’s throat as his hands grip my hips, holding me still, as if that will stop me.

“This man—this ‘bad’ guy—wouldn’t hesitate to fuck your Eve against this glass and show the world what belongs to him. He wouldn’t concede to some old bastard because he loved her. He would know she was just as vengeful as he was.” I grab his cock through his jeans. “This ‘bad’ guy would know that Eve was given to Adam as a companion—as his

queen. She was created from his body.” I flash him a challenging look. “They are one and the same.”

Flipping the button on his jeans, I shove them past his hips as his arms tremble against me. I can feel him breaking. I can feel the air changing around us into something savage—something lasting.

“Fuck the good guy. I want the villain.”

The last of his patience falls away because, in a split second, my naked body is lifted and smashed against the glass. “Fuck, Eden! Fuck!”

“Yes,” I chant, exposing my neck as he mauls me with eager nips and wet kisses. “Fuck, Eden.”

Remington moans. I can’t tell if it’s because he can’t deal with me or if he’s about to impale me on his cock.

I’m okay with either.

“You deserve better,” he admits, hitching me up on his hips.

“I don’t want better. I want *you*.”

“Albrecht is your father,” he tries again, his head dipping low as he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks hard.

“If he means that much to you”—I moan—“I guess you can visit him in prison.”

Remington chokes and looks up, finding the biggest fucking grin on my face.

“But he will go to prison,” I assure him. “The question is, will it be you who puts him there or me?”

For a moment, all Remington does is stare at me, as if I’m some stranger.

“One way or another, Congressman Albrecht will get what he deserves.”

“This is—” Remington shakes his head. “No. I don’t want you involved.”

I clasp his face between my hands. “Too bad.” Pulling him closer, I press a harsh kiss to his lips. “Hand me your phone, 101, and let’s finish this.”

I count ten seconds while Remington searches my face as if the answer is buried somewhere between the two freckles on my cheeks.

“I’m going to ask you this one last time, Remington Jude Potter. Are you a *quitter*, or are you a *winner*?”

It was the wrong thing to say because Remington drops me.

Well, I take that back. He doesn’t drop me. He lowers me faster than a freaking weightlifter, and it *felt* like I was falling.

“Grab my phone,” Remington demands, holding my hips so I can reach his phone on the windowsill below me.

I narrow my eyes at him for the theatrics, but I do it, holding it between us while he straightens.

“Call him,” he orders, “and threaten him like the villain you are.”

He is so getting fucked on camera with those compliments.

I find his eager gaze in the moonlight and unlock his phone with it, pressing the button and calling the *dead man*.

“Thanking me already, I see.” Albrecht chuckles, answering after a few rings.

“Actually,” I coo, enjoying Albrecht’s silence as he hears my voice for the first time, “we did want to thank you. You brought us together, Albrecht. You gave us a common enemy.”

I flash Remington a smile that he returns.

“You gave us vengeance.”

Remington’s cock prods my entrance, thick and ready, as his eyes hood with pure need, waiting for my signal.

We don’t need another life to be together.

We have right now.

And we are finishing what we started.

“There’s a camera in my hand, Congressman,” I warn. “You have two days to turn yourself in to the authorities before I upload footage of your bastard daughter getting railed by the boy you stole. I’m sure several news outlets would love to cover our love story—to hear how you selflessly brought us together with pain.”

The line goes silent, and I chuckle, pressing down onto Remington’s hips, nudging him inside me.

“We’re coming for you, Congressman. We’re coming for revenge.”



CHAPTER THIRTY

Remington

So, this is what it feels like to consume?

To own?

To behold someone too good for this world?

Eden's legs tighten around my waist as I bury my cock deep inside her tight flesh, staking my claim and reveling in the feel of my cock being surrounded by her arousal.

Eden Da Luca is a villain.

She's not a pretty lie.

She's my ruthless truth.

She's my Eve—my bittersweet *end*.

“What?” Eden breathes. Her eyes dash to my phone set up on the table. “Did you change your mind?”

Did I change my mind to make a sex tape with her and blackmail her father with it?

Yeah, no.

I'm seconds from getting down on one knee if this is her idea of make-up sex.

Does she not realize how crazy I am right now with her naked body pressed against the window for all the world to see? Part of me is ready to spread her against the glass and fuck her until she wakes the neighbors with her screams. And then there's another part of me that wants to toss her naked ass into a suitcase and disappear with her, so no one will ever lay eyes on her again but me.

No one has ever made me feel so possessive.

So unworthy of such a woman.

Of such a gift.

But I guess that's the irony of it all. Gifts aren't rewards for good behavior. They are given freely—even to the undeserving. I have no say in the matter of whether I deserve such a gift—such a person. It's not up to me. It's up to Eden.

And she chose me.

"Remington," Eden whispers, her fingers combing through my hair. "Are you okay?"

I'm far from okay.

I fucking love this girl.

"Remington."

She's concerned. Hell, she should be. I can barely think about anything but devouring her from the inside out, before hiding her somewhere off the grid.

Inhaling a breath, I shove her body farther up my waist, causing the glass to rattle from the impact.

"Hold on," I demand, pulling out until the tip of my cock is the only part of me left inside her. Her arms loop around my neck, preparing for what she knows is going to leave her sore tomorrow.

“Who are you?” I grit out between clenched teeth, fighting the urge to push back inside her.

Her lips press against my neck sweetly. “I’m yours. Only yours.”

It’s all I need to hear before I slam into her with a force that is sure to draw noise complaints.

I fuck her through her encouraging whimpers and gasps of pleasure until we’re both shaking, and the window feels as though it’s moving behind us.

“You’re so strong,” I confess. “So brave. So incredibly beautiful.”

Eden groans, and the sound hits my ear like a sweet lullaby as she kisses my face while I pound her against the window. Albrecht will never see this video—he will never even see her face if I can help it.

She is as good as dead to him. He will never have another opportunity to hurt her.

Eden Da Luca is *mine*.

Finding the phone, I let my gaze settle on the screen, watching as Eden’s head goes back, and her pussy milks me dry with each labored thrust.

This woman loves me.

She sleeps next to me in closets without judgment.

She blackmailed her own father to give me justice.

And how do I repay such love?

I break her heart.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Eden

I wake up with a backache.

More importantly, I wake up in Remington's arms—in the *bed*.

Not the closet.

For the first time, Remington stayed in bed all night.

Something shifted between us last night. It was more than just making a sex tape and getting revenge. It was more than just claiming each other. A bond was sealed against that window—a promise spoken without words.

Our actions spoke the truth: we found love with each other, and nothing—not even revenge—will tear us apart.

Rolling over, I turn and find Remington asleep, his cheeks flushed, like he's spent too much time out in the sun.

“Good morning,” I whisper softly, kissing his lips.

For a moment, I'm impressed with myself. It looks like I managed to fuck the dark lord of sarcasm into a coma. But then I notice it's not just his cheeks that are flushed. His whole body is feverish. "Remington!"

I yank the blankets back and shake his shoulder. "Remington, open your eyes!" My heart pounds in my chest, fear settling in my stomach then climbing its way up my throat. "Remington," I cry. "Open your eyes right now!"

His chest rises with labored breaths, but he remains sleeping while burning up with fever.

Does he have the flu? Did he get sick because he sat outside so long in his chair before I pulled him inside? I have no idea. Not that he can't catch a cold, but this feels different—like it's more than just a cold.

I try shaking him once more, and when he doesn't respond, I jump up and dart to the bathroom, wetting bath towels like I've seen on TV shows to cool him down.

"Remington." I drape the towels over his body. "Wake up. I need you to tell me you're okay." *Please tell me you're okay.*

"Eden," he finally murmurs from the dead. "It's too early for your drama." His fingers find mine. "Save it for after my morning cigarette."

I almost smother him with one of the towels. "You have a fever and weren't waking up! I'm not being dramatic. I'm scared you're sick."

Remington drags in a breath and groans. "I'm not sick. I'm tired from washing the window with your ass last night."

At least he's still charming when he's sick.

"Now, who's being dramatic?" I snap. "I'm serious. Should we call an ambulance?"

That question seems to wake him up. "No!" His eyes flash open. "No doctors."

Technically, paramedics aren't doctors, but I'm sure his hateful statement includes all medical personnel. Thank you, Congressman Fuckhead, for destroying his faith in medicine.

“Okay. What about a fever reducer?” I negotiate. “I could buy some at the drugstore down the street.”

Unlocking our hands, he rolls away from me. “The drugstore doesn’t carry meds that treat pussy withdrawals.”

Oh, my gosh, he’s so getting stabbed when he feels better.

“So, unless you want to enable my pussy addiction, I suggest you hush and let me sleep it off.”

You know what? I’m going to leave his sarcastic ass alone, but only because I want to scream at him. And that would not be a very loving thing to do. “Okay,” I surrender. “I’ll let you sleep.”

He mumbles something that sounds like... I don’t even know what it sounds like. But I’m taking it as an *I love you, and yes, please take my car to the drugstore to pick up a fever reducer for my stubborn ass.*

But before I do as he says, I give him one last look, watching as he trembles under the cool towels, looking very, very sick. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am being dramatic. He could literally have the flu and will feel better in a few days. But anxiety swirls in my gut, and my gut is never wrong. Something is wrong with my Adam. And that something is being hidden behind sarcasm.

Untying the St. Michael pendant around my neck, I place it around Remington’s and tie it back. He may need to sleep off this illness, but a quick prayer and St. Michael resting on his chest, can’t hurt either.



I’m back with the fever-reducing medication in fifteen minutes, finding Remington in the same position I left him.

“Honey, I’m home,” I tease, giving him a gentle shake. “You won’t believe what I found at the drugstore.” I pop the cap on the bottle and take out two pills. “Pussy withdrawal medication!” I chuckle at my own joke. “The pharmacist said

they renamed it ‘fever reducer’ after someone claimed the name wasn’t child friendly.”

Slowly, Remington rolls over, his eyes dark and heavy, but he manages to flash me a smirk. “Did he say to take it with pussy or on an empty stomach?”

I twist the cap off the bottled water in my hand. “He recommended shoving it up your ass, but I thought it might be too soon for a backdoor virgin.” I hold out the water. “Good thing he had alternate routes for pussies.”

Remington barks out a pitiful laugh. “You, my love, are a twisted wet dream.”

I’m positive that means he loves me.

“Here,” I push the water closer as I open my hand, revealing the pills in my palm, “take these.”

He stares at my hand and then meets my eyes. “No. I don’t want them.”

Recapping the water, I lay it on the bed and grab his chin. “I know you haven’t had positive experiences with people giving you medicine, but I’m not Tooney. I love you. I would never let anyone hurt you—not even my father. I am your Eve. Please trust me. You can even look at the bottle. I’ll google the name so you can verify what it is. Please,” I beg. “Please, let me help you.”

I don’t expect miracles. Years of trauma can’t be undone with great sex or even love, but trust is different. Trust can be built—it doesn’t have to be healed until you break it. I haven’t broken Remington’s trust, not even once, since I’ve known him. If anything, I’ve more than proved I’m all-in on Team Adam and Eve.

“Don’t look at me skeptically,” I snap when he just lies there, his eyes glued to my face. “You know I’ll warn you when I want to kill you.”

He grins, the lines on his face softening as he weighs my words.

“Yeah, you know I’m right.” I narrow my eyes. “I will always give you a running head start.”

A low chuckle warms my heart. “You are too good to me. I don’t know how I got so lucky to find a woman like you.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “I don’t know how you did either.” I push the pills to his mouth. “Now open. I’ll wait and murder you later in the week when your brain isn’t frying.”

About thirty minutes later, Remington seems to be a little better, but he’s still hot and only awake a few minutes at a time.

“Eden?” he whispers beside me.

“Yeah?”

“I really want to keep you.”

My chest tightens. I don’t like how he phrased that sentence. “What made you think you had a choice, 101?”

I can’t let myself think he’s being serious.

“You’re keeping me, even if it isn’t voluntary.”

Again, I am that crazy girl. Adam had one Eve, not eight. Remington’s sampling days are done. Eve has put a proverbial ring on his finger. Let him try and walk away. He won’t make it far, especially with those smoker’s lungs.

“Don’t make my dick hard when I can’t stay awake long enough to relieve it.” He chuckles, but it sounds off.

I smooth back his hair and wipe the cloth against his face. “You’re feeling worse, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” He pulls in a shaky breath. “I need to call someone.”

Fucking finally! “I’ll get your phone.”

I don’t give him time to change his mind before I’m across the room and back with his phone in hand, already flipping through his contacts. I have his father pulled up and ready to call when I show him. “Your dad, right?”

After all, he's a doctor. It makes sense that he could triage his son over the phone.

"Fuck no." He nearly chokes. "Do not call anyone with the last name Potter. Do you understand?"

He's winded with the amount of fear he injected into his words.

"Okay, no Potters. Got it." I flash him a disappointed frown. "Who should I call?"

It's like I asked him to clip my toenails after dinner with the look he gives me. "Don't be a pussy," I chide. "Make the call."

Closing his eyes, he groans. "Grant—his name is Grant."

I don't ask who Grant is or how he's going to be able to help. I simply press the button and put the call on speaker.

"Dr. Grant speaking," he answers on the second ring as Remington flashes me a look I can't quite figure out.

"Grant," Remington starts. "I know I broke our contract, but I'm—"

The doctor seems to know way more about this situation than I do since he cuts Remington off mid-sentence. "When is the last time you've had treatment, Remington?"

Remington's gaze drops to bed. He won't look at me when he admits, "The last time I saw you."

"Holy fuck," he swears. "No meds either, I assume?"

Remington shakes his head. "I planned to pick them up, but I—"

I don't know what kind of doctor Grant is or what exactly he's been treating Remington for, but he breaks something on the other end of the line. "What did I tell you, Remington? What did Maverick tell you?"

My eyes narrow. Maverick? That guy from campus?

"I know." Remington sighs. "I had to be compliant, or you couldn't treat me."

“Yes,” Grant snaps. “Exactly. Now, call a fucking ambulance and have the hospital contact me when you get there.”

Remington finds my eyes. “Yeah,” he agrees. “Thanks.”

Grant hangs up without another word, leaving nothing but silence between Remington and me for several minutes.

“So,”—I sigh—“do you prefer a fingernail file or a rusty fork to be stabbed with? I have an opening just for you next week.”

The biggest pain in the ass smiles weakly. “You might have to get in line, love. I think this time, there might be a waitlist.”

He can’t even laugh at himself—that’s how tired he seems.

“That’s okay,” I tell him, taking his hand. “Just tell me who needs to go first.”

I swear his eyes turn glassy for a split second before he masks it by pulling in a deep breath. “Dr. Depressing,” he admits. “He can stab me first.”

Nodding, I pick up his phone and dial his father, putting it on speaker.

Duke answers on the first ring. “Remington?” he says cautiously, like it’s out of the norm for Remington to call him. “Are you all right?”

Remington’s eyes pinch shut as he pulls in a ragged breath. “Dad,” he says, his voice trembling, “I’m in kidney failure.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Eden

It's silent for so long that I think Duke must have hung up.

But then Remington just has to fill the space with his bullshit. "Don't be a pussy, Dr. Depressing. I'm sure Mom has called you *Daddy* a few times. This can't be a new term for you. Unless you want us to give you a moment so you can write it down in my baby book."

Duke *definitely* needs to stab him first.

"What the fuck do you mean you're in kidney failure, Remington? You better not be fucking with me. This is serious."

"Agreed," I add aloud, siding with his father.

Remington cuts me a side-eye, like it's my fault he has to talk to his father.

"Who was that?" Duke asks angrily. "Who is with you?"

Remington looks at me like I'm on my own here.

“Eden, sir,” I confess. “Eden Da Luca.”

The line goes silent again, and fucking Remington smiles. “You know that name, don’t you, Pops?”

I smack Remington’s shoulder. “Stop. You are worse sick than you are healthy.”

He flashes me those straight, white teeth, but he doesn’t answer me. Instead, he keeps fucking with Duke. “You’ve missed so many milestones over my fall break.” He ticks off his fingers while his hand rests on the mattress since he’s too weak to hold them up. “Losing my virginity to Albrecht’s long-lost daughter. Her convincing me to make a sex tape.” He pauses for a second like the asshole he is. “Oh, and blackmailing Albrecht to turn himself in with said sex tape.”

Oh my gosh. “Remington!” I choke. “Shut up. That is not how it went down.”

“Tell Mom,” he teases, “I have so much shit for her to add to the baby book—even a video, if she wants to save it for my graduation slideshow. You’ll make all the other parents jealous with that cinematic masterpiece.”

My cheeks feel hotter than Remington’s fevered body. “Dr. Potter,” I beg. “I’m so sorry. That is not at all what we were doing. We—”

“Experimented with a little ass play, too,” Remington interrupts. “Good memory, love. I forgot about that one.”

“Remington!” Duke yells, his scary voice causing me to jump. “You better tell me now what the fuck is going on! Why do you think you’re in kidney failure?”

I can see it on Remington’s face. Another round of bullshit is about to come out of his mouth. “He’s sick, Dr. Potter. He has a fever and hasn’t been out of bed all day.”

“How high is the fever?” Gone is Remington’s father. In his place is Dr. No-Bullshit Potter.

“I don’t know. We don’t have a thermometer here, but I gave him medication about half an hour ago to bring the fever down.”

“Where is *here*?”

I can hear papers rustling in the background, like he’s writing all this down. “Louisiana.”

Another round of silence ensues, and I literally could hide under the bed with the amount of tension on this call.

“Louisiana?” Duke repeats slowly, earning a smile from Remington that his dad can’t see.

“Yes,” Remington adds. “Louisiana, as in the state on the way to Nevada, where I planned to blackmail Albrecht with a sex tape.”

A growl of frustration erupts through the phone, which only seems to bring more life to Remington.

“Don’t act so scandalized, Dr. Puss. You knew I wasn’t on an exotic vacation with dumb classmates while motorboating some stranger’s tits in the ocean. Though,” he muses, “my experience in Louisiana isn’t far off.”

I put my hand over his mouth. He’s done. No one needs Dr. Potter stabbing him to death before I can. “We called Remington’s doctor,” I interrupt. “He suggested we call an ambulance and have the hospital call him for a report.”

Remington hisses, then grins. “Bad answer, love. Now you’ve gone and upset Dr. Diva. Prepare for yelling.”

And like they have these discussions rehearsed, Duke yells through the phone. “Remington!”

“He was a gynecologist.” Remington laughs. “I have a right to privacy.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. There’s no way Remington is making it out of this alive.

“Remington.” Duke literally growls. “If you don’t explain yourself this instant, I will put Ray on this phone and let you explain it to her between the sobs.”

All the humor drains from his face. “She doesn’t need to know about this,” he begs, his voice trembling. “Not with the baby on the way.”

I didn't realize his mom was pregnant. I wonder if her pregnancy somehow triggered his need for blackmail. Seeing parents who you never got to grow up with bring another child into the world and do all the things you never got to do with them can't be the easiest thing to deal with.

Duke sighs. "She's strong, Remington. She can handle a couple of stressful days."

A shudder passes through me as Remington finds my gaze in a silent apology. "Not days, Duke. Months."

"What?" I detect the fear in Duke's voice. "What are you saying?"

Remington pinches his eyes shut and sighs. "I'm saying that if I don't get a kidney transplant soon, I'll die."

This road trip was always more than blackmail for Remington. It was an escape from the vicious truth.

He's dying.



"Call an ambulance and tell me which hospital they're taking him to. Do not let him leave, Eden! I'm on my way."

We arrived at the hospital several hours ago, and I still can't get Duke's voice out of my head as a sob escaped him before he was able to pull himself together and tell me what to do. Remington refused to speak after that. I don't know if it was because he heard his father's heart literally break from hundreds of miles away or if it was because he finally admitted what was happening to him. Either way, he's chosen to retreat into himself.

"You know," I tell him at his bedside, "your silent treatment is making me horny."

For the first time since talking to his father, he smiles. "Maybe you should come closer so I can do something about it."

I flash him a fake smile that he notices, which ignites his temper. “My condition wasn’t your business!”

“I didn’t say it was, did I?” It was totally my fucking business, but I’m going to let him get all the bullshit out before I lash out.

“You’re looking at me like you want to stab me for keeping it a secret.” He dares me to deny it.

“I might have lifted a knife from the cafeteria. So what? Doesn’t mean you didn’t piss me off about something else.”

It was totally this kidney failure secret.

He chuckles. “You’re such a terrible liar.”

I can feel the tears welling in my eyes. I don’t even bother blinking them back anymore. This whole time, I’ve stayed strong for Remington. I’ve played the bad guy by demanding to know each medication they’re giving him before the medical staff injected it into Remington’s IV. I even held it together when Remington set off the monitors with his rapid heart rate when they hooked him up to the dialysis machine.

I tried to be brave, so he didn’t have to.

And I’m tired of faking that I’m okay. “And you’re a great liar! You should have told me that Tooney ruined your kidneys with all those drugs he pumped into you for years!”

He laughs, but it’s hateful. “What difference would that have made? Even if you knew the aftermath Tooney caused, *this* kidney would still be failing.”

“I could have helped you!” I cry. “We could have taken your medication on the trip with us.”

“It wouldn’t have helped.”

My lip quivers. “But a transplant would. Why won’t you agree to another one?”

That was the hardest conversation I’d endured in my entire life as I sat with Remington, holding his hand while the doctor asked him about the transplant list.

“No,” he had said, looking at the doctor. “I know the risks. I know what will happen to me without another transplant.”

“I read your file,” the doctor admitted softly. “I know your adoptive mother donated her kidney to you before.”

He wouldn't even look at me.

“I know she didn't do well after surgery.”

Remington snaps. “She had a stroke. Her not doing well should have been a headache afterward.”

“I understand you've had a horrific experience that no child should have ever had, but Remington, with the right treatment, you and your donor can have long and healthy lives.”

“You can't predict strokes, Doctor.”

The doctor sighed, likely ready to stab Remington, too. “Just think about it, okay?”

The bastard I love shook his head. “I won't risk anyone else getting hurt because of Tooney.”

I could have screamed at him then, but I didn't. I simply shook the doctor's hand and remained at Remington's side, stoic and brave.

But I'm done. I'm so fucking done being brave.

“Don't you dare cry now,” Remington snaps, turning his head away so he doesn't have to look at the tears. “Don't you dare try to change my mind by crying.”

I laugh, but nothing about this moment is funny. “Is that what affects you?” I suck in a small sob. “Tears? Will my tears help save your life? Because if so, I will cry every waking moment until there are none left to fall.”

I can be determined when I want to be. Let him remember all the times I pushed his buttons until he broke—until he gave in to what he really wanted.

“You're scared,” I accuse.

He chuckles but still doesn't face me.

"You're not scared someone will have complications if they give you a kidney. You're scared that you won't know how to live this new life you have with your parents and a woman who loves you. You've spent your whole life waiting to die that you never once thought about how you would live it."

That seems to get a reaction out of him. "You don't know shit!" His jaw ticks in fury.

"Maybe I don't know everything, but I do know what it was like to start over and figure out who I was all alone." I reach out for his hand, but he doesn't take mine. "The future is scary," I agree, "but that doesn't mean it isn't wonderful. Don't let Tooney take that from you, too."

"I'm tired," he says, looking away. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"You should probably get some rest," I concede, climbing in the bed next to him.

For a moment, all he does is stare at me, battling whatever demons are running through his head. "Go to sleep, Remington. I'll make sure you don't need the closet tonight."

Without another word, I close my eyes and just breathe.

I don't think I can look at Remington any more today without breaking into a million pieces. Especially after he whispers, "I hope you know I love you more than plastic chairs."



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Remington

“If you’re going to go with the silent treatment,” I say, “I should warn you, it makes Eden horny.”

My father’s eyes drift from the dialysis machine and then back to my face. He arrived with Vance and my mother about an hour ago, but instead of being the first to greet me, he was the last, choosing to let my mother come in first and scream until she started sobbing. Thankfully, Vance escorted her outside before she could hit me or, worse, get something in my eye.

“Oh my gosh.” Eden pinches my arm. “You are being such an asshole right now.”

At least I’m not a *pitiful asshole* who made her cry like earlier.

“Eden.” Duke says her name like he’s an awkward teenager and extends his hand. “Thank you for saving my son.”

Oh, for fuck's sake, Dr. Dramatic. All she did was shove pills down my throat and yell. "Don't worry." I roll my eyes. "She didn't breathe life into me—or however you tell the story. You're still the fan favorite."

Eden glares. "Maybe you should take another nap before I smother you."

"You smothering me with your pussy seems like a much better way to spend my time."

Red blooms across Eden's face, and I'm reminded of another time when I left her cheeks pink. But fucking Duke kills the image in my mind when he speaks.

"Eden, will you excuse us for a second?"

She looks at me warily, then at Duke. "I promised I wouldn't leave his side," she explains. "I need to check the medications before they administer them to him."

Duke smiles like he's proud of her or something. "I'd be honored if you allowed me to relieve you for a break. I promise, nothing will go in him that I don't approve first."

Ugh. I do not have the energy to deal with a kind Duke.

"Remington," Eden starts. "Is that okay with you? If your —" She almost says *Dad*, but she corrects herself. "If Dr. Depressing takes over? I'll be right outside."

Duke's brows pinch together. "*Dr. Depressing?* Really, Remington? I thought we had made progress. You called me *Dad* earlier."

I grin. "We all make mistakes sometimes, Dr. Dramatic, especially in a fever-induced delirium. If it makes you feel any better, I'm sure it won't happen again."

Duke chuckles, but it's watered down. He knows I'm full of shit. We *have* made progress, but I show emotions as well as invisible ink.

"Ah, ah. Pops. Don't get emotional, or Eden will have to record it. I'm always looking for new ways to cheer up your brother after his therapy sessions."

Duke snorts and shakes his head. “I’m sure Vance is grateful for the comedic relief.”

Damn, you say Dad *one* time, and suddenly, you’re supposed to change your father’s contact name to match, or you feel bad.

“Fine,” I relent, sighing dramatically at Eden. “*Dad*”—I punctuate the word dramatically so he’ll stop being such a girl about it—“can take over while you’re gone. But I’m telling you now, he won’t give me a hand job as good as you do.”

Eden’s eyes widen as her gaze finds Duke’s. “I didn’t—”

He waves her off. “I know. Embarrassing people is Remington’s favorite game to play.”

He would be wrong there. Fucking Eden is my new favorite game, especially when she threatens me like a psycho.

“Stay close to Vance,” I bark as Eden heads toward the door. “Don’t leave his side. He’s a sucky fighter, but he’s lame enough that no one will talk to him.” I don’t need Gerald finding her again when I’m not there to intervene. “He is the one by the door that looks like a giant dickhead.” I point outside to where he stands, talking to the doctor.

“Got it. Giant dickhead.” She nods as she walks backward, flashing me a grin.

“Tell him to take you to get something to eat, too. I bet your martyr ass hasn’t eaten all day.”

I mean, I wouldn’t have let her leave anyway, but I could have yelled at someone to bring her something.

“Yes, sir.” She salutes me sarcastically before waving goodbye and introduces herself to Vance, who looks like he’d rather attend a work conference without alcohol than talk to a new person.

I flip off Vance through the window. I hope Eden gives him hell. At least as much as Halle gives me.

“He’ll take care of her,” Duke promises, dropping down into the chair with a groan. He’s already acting like a grandpa.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say. “Don’t even try to drag it out by being a dramatic diva. You knew I had fucking problems.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Congressman Tooney?” Well, fuck. He actually did get to the point. Too bad I won’t return the favor.

I settle my eyes on the stained tile above. “I can’t think with these alarms beeping.”

“Too bad. I’m not turning them off.”

Now, this is the Duke I enjoy.

“Fine.” I shrug. “Pass me a cigarette, then.”

It’s been a while since I’ve had one, and I have a feeling I’m going to need several to get through this conversation.

“You know you can’t smoke in a hospital.”

I cock a brow. “I’m dying. I think someone can make an exception this once.”

It wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“You should have told me what Tooney did to you!” he roars.

If we’re going to see who gets thrown out of this hospital first, I need him to know I came to win. “It was none of your fucking business!”

In a flash, Duke is standing in my face. “Everything about you is my business! I’m your father! It was my job to protect you.” His voice lowers as his hands tremble. “It’s still my job to protect you.”

I take in his stressed appearance, noticing his heavy breathing and bulging veins. He’s a hot fucking mess, but I can’t bring myself to reach out and hug him. Not now. Not when he’ll be able to miss it when I’m gone. It’s better he not ever know what it felt like to hug me. He can experience that soon enough with the new baby.

“Aw, you know better than to talk sweet to me, Dr. D.”

“Answer me, Remington, or are you the pussy?”

I almost laugh. “I handled Congressman Tooney. I had no need to tell anyone after that.”

“You *handled* him?” Duke throws his hands up and yanks at his hair. “You didn’t handle him, Remington. Congressman Tooney died before you could get revenge.”

“Exactly,” I agree. “What did you want me to do? Go piss on his grave? I already did that. By the way, it didn’t make me feel better. It didn’t change anything. Nothing I did changed anything.”

“Therapy could have,” he offers gently. “You see the difference it’s made with Vance.”

That sounds great and all, but he’s forgetting two things. “My kidney would still be failing, even if I managed to find a job that paid a sixteen-year-old enough to live and see a therapist several times a week.”

What Tooney did when I was younger...the damage has already been done.

I will never be able to have two healthy kidneys and not be overwhelmed with fear, just by popping a pain reliever. Therapy might have helped, but by the time I found the Potters, I already knew what my future held.

I was going to die.

The least I could do is smoke as much as I wanted and take Albrecht out with me.

“Vance and I knew something was up when you decided to come to Georgia,” Duke admits tiredly. “But what I want to know is, when did you know that you needed a transplant?”

It’s the worst question he could have asked me.

It’s the one that pisses me off the most.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” I beg. “Pretty lies are easier memories than the vicious truth.”

All I’ve ever wanted to do was spare him and my mother from more pain. Our family has been through enough.

Duke sits and puts his hand on my leg, squeezing gently. “No more secrets, Remington. When did you know?”

“Promise you won’t tell Mom?” I’ve never asked him for anything, but I’m asking him for this.

“You keep this secret between us. I don’t want to cause her any more pain.”

Duke takes several moments to consider my request and the loyalty to his wife. “Okay,” he agrees. “I promise this stays between us.”

I nod. It’s better than telling them both.

“I found out I needed another transplant a month after Albrecht revealed that you and Ramsey were my parents.”

Duke makes a pained noise that I choose not to acknowledge. “You had a renal specialist in Texas?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because I was embarrassed. I was angry that the future I dreamt of was merely a tease. Albrecht stole my childhood, and Tooney destroyed my future, and I can’t do a damn thing about it but die.”

I swallow thickly and smile. “Except fuck up Albrecht’s life.”

“You’re not going to die,” Duke snaps, unhinged. “I won’t allow it. We will find you a new kidney, if I have to test the entire state of Texas for the match. I will not have my son taken away from me again!”

I don’t have the heart to argue with him.

But the truth is, only one of us can control the situation, and it’s not Dr. Duke Potter.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Remington

Two weeks later

Eden just had to be a fucking match as a kidney donor.

Worse, my mother matched, too.

Ask me if that changed my mind about receiving another transplant.

“Fuck, how bad is your hearing? I said no. Should I write it down this time?”

“For someone so clever, you haven’t thought this rebellion through.” Vance tsks, casually leaning back in the hospital chair, kicking his feet up on the bed like he has no manners. “I don’t need you to agree to the transplant, Remington. I just need your heart to stop.”

He looks at his watch like he’s waiting for my heart to actually quit beating.

“Because once they revive you—and they will revive you, Remington—they’ll leave you sedated and on life support.” He flashes me a wink. “And then they’ll ask my distraught brother what he wants to do.”

It’s then his face changes to something more determined. “And what *we’ll* do, Remington, is allow the transplant, sans your permission.” He shrugs, leaning back in his chair.

“So, refuse, but either way, you’re getting a new kidney, even if I have to make the incision myself.”

I swear my heart actually does stop for a second before I recover and flash Vance a smirk. “You keep forgetting that I’m an adult. All I have to do is buzz the nurse and ask for someone to fill out an advance directive.”

I didn’t just play video games when I worked for Potter’s Plastics.

“One call, and I’ll ensure Eden’s kidney never gets close to my body.”

Suddenly, Vance is out of the chair, his fingers gripping my chin as he turns it to the glass window, where Duke and Ramsey are speaking with the doctor. “Look at her.” He growls. “Look at the tears falling down your mother’s face. Besides Eden, she’s the only match, and she can’t help you without harming your sibling. She’s in a no-win situation. To save the child within her or sacrifice that child to save the one who refuses to save himself.”

I attempt to turn away, but Vance’s grip is too tight. “No, you look at her. Look at what you’re doing to a mother who spent her life only thinking of you and your father. She has the power to save you, and you won’t give her peace by accepting Eden’s kidney. What do you think that will do to her when you die? What do you think it will do to your father? Eden?”

Tears stream down Ramsey’s face as my father pulls her in closer, rocking her gently as the doctor continues talking to them. All my life, I’ve dreamed of comfort like my parents have. And I’ve found it. With them. With the asshole gripping my chin and force-feeding me the truth.

He lets me go and holds my angry gaze. Clearly, he's not done lecturing me. "You can save them, Rem. You can save all of us by saving yourself. Don't let Albrecht win. Don't let him destroy our family more than he already has. Take the kidney, son. Do whatever it is you need to do to find peace with it, but fight for the life you deserve."

I swallow harshly and avert my gaze. Seeing Vance with glassy eyes is more than I can bear. "I'll think about it."

Any other answer, and I think he would have shaken me.

"But I'm not promising anything."

Vance settles back in his chair and pulls his phone from his pocket. "I suggest you think hard because your father and I have more pull at this hospital than a teenage boy on prom night. It'll be months before you get that advance directive."

I belt out a laugh.

I can't even be mad at him. If I were in his situation, I'd do the same thing. We're Potters. We always get our way.

"You're such a dick."

Vance doesn't bother looking up from his phone. "This isn't a bonding moment. Don't try to get on my good side by pointing out the qualities we share."

The doctor appears in the doorway.

"Dr. Potter, can we see you out here for a moment?"

I don't bother arguing that I'm an adult because, frankly, I'd rather *Dr. Potter* get the fuck out of my face.

"Please," I beg. "Maybe go to the office, too, and see your own fucking patients. I'm sure someone has money to waste on your services."

It's not the sweetest thing I've ever said, but I've been in this fucking hospital for two weeks with everyone up my ass, asking how I feel every minute of the fucking day. I'll tell you how I feel. I feel like stabbing somebody in the eye—especially Vance.

As soon as Vance leaves, Eden comes in to take his place. Even though I strictly forbade her from being tested, she did it anyway because *my bad kidney, smoker's lungs, and open-back gown weren't going to be able chase her anytime soon.*

She's a bold little psycho. I'll give her that.

"I thought you could use a little privacy." She flashes me a grin and pulls the curtains closed, blocking our view of the doctor talking with my family.

"Now, this is the kind of transplant convincing I'm talking about, Eden," I chirp, pushing up on my elbows. "You should have led with this weeks ago."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah." I scoot over and make room for her on the bed. "I thought you knew a blow job is always the way to a man's heart."

"I'll keep that in mind for the next time I need to convince you."

The determination on her face scares me. "Are you going to sit?"

She shakes her head. "I think I'll stand for now."

"For fuck's sake. Don't you think I've suffered enough?" I whine.

"You have suffered." She agrees. "But not enough."

"Come again?" I arch a brow. "Are you saying I should suffer more?"

She nods. "For many more years."

Ah, now I see her game.

"As fun as that sounds, how long I suffer is not up to me. It's up to my failing kidney."

She pushes in closer, grabbing my face between her hands. "Do you love me, Remington Potter?"

"You know the answer to that." I'm not in the mood to give her sweet nothings.

“I do, but I want to hear you say it anyway.”

I blow out a breath and throw my hands up. “Fuck, fine. I love you, but I would love you more if you blew me while we had this conversation.”

She nods like that’s all that she needed to know. “I love you, too, and when you’re asleep and not acting like someone shit in your car, I love you more.”

“Great,” I say, like the asshole I am. “I’m glad we got that out of the way before I cried. That whole five seconds of not knowing how you felt were brutal.”

Unlike my mother, she doesn’t cry when I act like an asshole. Instead, she responds with a taunting smile that makes me nervous. I sometimes forget that my girl is just as twisted as I am.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, Eden swipes the screen until she gets to what she wants to show me, which, hopefully, isn’t another picture of some poor soul slowly dying from kidney disease. The Potters have been quite creative with their transplant-convincing attempts lately.

But then I hear a moan.

That’s no kidney video.

“You’re so beautiful,” I say on the video. “So brave.”

“If you’re trying to get me hard, love, congratulations. Now it’ll be awkward for Nurse Susan to come in and give me a sponge bath.”

“Susan,” she warns, “is the least of your worries.”

Clearly, my worries will be much worse than that if Eden keeps playing this video. Imagine explaining to Susan that the reason the sheets are sticky is that my twisted-ass girlfriend taunted me with our sex tape until I came all over myself.

“Tell me, Remington.”

Ah, hell. I know that seductive voice.

“Do you know why Eve was created from a rib on Adam’s side?”

Of course, I do.

But she knows that. She just wants to make a point I won't appreciate.

"It's because Eve wasn't created to walk in front of Adam, or behind him. She was created to walk *beside* him. She was created to be his companion—his eternal partner."

Her words settle around me like a fog as I draw the parallels in my head.

"What does that story have to do with our sex tape? I highly doubt Adam pulled out his phone, like we did, and banged Eve against the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge."

"The point is," she muses, dragging her finger along the base of my throat. "There's a reason fate brought us together, Remington."

"No." I already know what she's getting at, and it isn't happening.

She presses her finger against my lips, shushing me. "You don't get to say no. God didn't ask Adam if he wanted a companion. He simply did what He knew was best for him and made it happen. He gave him love, Remington. He gave all of us love that will last generations."

Leaning down, she presses her lips to mine. "If I'm going to make bad decisions, it's prophesied that you're to suffer the consequences with me—just like Adam did for Eve."

Why did my dick get hard just by her using the words suffer and consequences? She may as well have passed me a cigarette with the amount of excitement she just shot through my veins.

"But, I decided that I will give you a choice, Remington, but only this once."

She hits play on the video again.

"This footage of us is uploaded to the internet. If you answer my next question incorrectly, the entire world will watch you take me against the glass and declare your undying love as I fall apart in your arms."

A growl climbs up my throat, and I'm immediately sitting up, pulling wires off, and making the machines go crazy. "I'll fucking kill any man that looks at that footage," I threaten, ignoring my breathing and all the other shit the doctors told me to watch.

"Then you better answer my question correctly."

It's at this moment I realize I was never the brains of this relationship. Eden Da Luca has always known how to play me.

"Are you threatening me, Eden?"

She gets low in my face and shoves me back down onto the bed. "I'm not threatening you. I'm blackmailing you."

She presses a kiss to my aching lips before breathing out the worst words I've ever heard. "If you love me and truly want a future with me, you will take my gift. You will take my kidney, and you will let me be your hero."

"No."

Her mouth turns down, and she shrugs like that's fucking fine. "Then you'll die with the knowledge that strangers will come looking for me. They'll think they've fallen in love with the girl on the sex tape. They'll look up where I live and find me, and I'll be alone, because you didn't choose to accept the gift fated to you. There was a reason I survived that hot car—a reason that you survived Tooney. A reason that your matching kidney is from Albrecht's daughter. We were meant to survive, Remington. We were meant to save each other. But more importantly, we were meant to *be* together."



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Remington

Two weeks later, and I'm still an asshole.

Eden's kidney didn't fix that.

"Where is she?" I yell, fighting through the brain fog from the pain medication they gave me. "I want to see her!" I slap Duke's hands away—at least, I think I do. My whole body feels heavy, but I make contact with someone, hopefully Duke. The bastard hasn't left my side since I agreed to accept Eden's kidney.

I don't know if he was simply scared I would change my mind and run or if he's still just a pussy and wanted to annoy me until I begged the doctor to perform the surgery early, just so I could get some fucking rest.

Either way, I was ready for this operation. I was ready to get back home and remind these fuckers that I'm not some golden retriever who needs constant attention.

Duke laughs, and I'm finally able to open my eyes long enough to catch his smug smile. "I can't wait to brag to your mother," he teases. "You inherited more than just my good looks—you got my diva gene, too."

My eyes are already trying to drift closed again, but I manage to roll them just for Duke. "At least I didn't inherit your daddy issues. You've been clingier than a bad fuck since I called you *Dad*."

Most fathers would yell, but not mine. He knows his way around a dark heart like a pro. "I'm happy to see you getting back to your old self. I was worried when you kept asking me for hugs."

He's full of shit.

I hugged him once, and that's only because Mom shot me a look of death when *he* hugged *me*, and I didn't immediately return it. I did it for her—not because I actually wanted to hug my father for the first time. I don't know why everyone thinks I've somehow turned into an emotional vagina over the past two weeks. Just because I hugged them does not mean they don't still get on my nerves.

"Stop trying to get them to sedate me again, Dr. Depressing," I scold, my words slurring just a bit. "Go get my fucking girl, or I'll—"

Vance shoves me down onto the bed. "Lie the fuck down before I punch you and upset your father. I can only deal with so many girls at one time."

I can't help it. I fucking grin. "Vance-hole," I threaten, "if you don't bring Eden to me right now, my *girl*-ass will fuck up your life more than Halle. You will suffer—"

"Trust me," Astor interrupts us by pushing a stretcher inside the room, "this entire hospital is suffering since you've been here."

"Are you seriously being a pussy again, 101?" Eden's eyes are closed, and several monitors are hooked up to her small body. It sends my heart racing, setting off my own monitors. I never wanted her to do this. I never wanted her to be in an

ounce of pain because of me. Not ever again. But she didn't give a shit and, like always, got what she wanted from me.

She would never tell another man she loved him.

Nor would she ever bear his last name.

She is *mine*.

Forever.

“I thought we agreed you'd only cry in private now?”

Vance lowers the side rails to mine and Eden's beds and pushes us together, so I can take her hand.

For a moment, I simply squeeze, making sure that she's here—that she survived. I don't remember much from before they took us into surgery. I just remember threatening her while the surgeons explained what was going to happen while we were asleep.

“Just know that if you decide to do something stupid like die on that table, you will take many people with you—including your surgeon,” I threaten, stopping the surgeon cold.

“I will haunt you from hell, Eve. I will make sure that our prophecy comes true. You will suffer for your bad decisions.”

Vance clamped a hand over my mouth. “First thing we're doing when we get home is getting your sick ass some therapy. Who threatens the person who is saving their life?”

I do.

And Eden better write her surgeon a thank-you note for dooming her to an eternity of torture.

“Don't expect me to be nicer to you just because you gave me a kidney,” I warn as relief sets in just by touching her.

“As long as you don't expect me not to stab you just because you almost died.”

I'm so fucked with this woman.

So, so fucked.

And it's never felt better.



Eden and I are sharing a room.

Right now, we're sharing a bed. The hospital staff doesn't like it, neither does Duke. He thinks we need space so that she doesn't pinch my lines or that I don't finger her pussy while he sleeps in the recliner.

Okay, he didn't mention the fingering bit.

Vance did.

But then my girl cried and told them she got scared at night without me, and they caved. A woman's tears are a powerful weapon—but not nearly as powerful as her loyalty.

Eden doesn't need me at night.

I need her.

There's no closet in our room, and unless they dope me up, I won't sleep alone in a bed. But none of the Potters know that. Because my girl is loyal as fuck and took one for Team Adam.

“Can we turn on the TV or something?” I blurt out the question to the ridiculous number of people in my room, all sitting in new plastic chairs with yellow bows on them. They thought they were fucking cute bringing these chairs instead of the cigarettes I asked for when they left earlier. “Because if I can't smoke this nicotine patch on my arm or fondle Eden under her gown, without someone clutching their pearls, I'm going to need a distraction.”

I promised my mother that I'd stop smoking in a moment of weakness. Clearly, she's learned some of Eden's manipulation tactics. She fucking ambushed me with tears one night as she hugged me and made me swear to take care of myself now.

I told her no.

She shrugged and told me she understood but hoped I would reconsider since I had to be discharged to her because I would need help for the first few weeks.

I didn't understand at the time until she added, "*your father is looking forward to making up for all those hugs he missed with you.*"

I had no choice but to quit smoking.

I couldn't risk being his teddy bear. One hug is enough for him until Father's Day. Vance can handle the rest of the year.

Astor sighs dramatically when no one volunteers to pick up the remote that I threw at Vance earlier. If I heard one more time that he wasn't my fucking nurse and to use my call light, I was going to kill him. Obviously, I didn't. I threw that fucking call light instead, which is how you turn on the TV—hence the reason no one is eager to give it back to me.

"I'll only throw it at Vance," I promise, when Astor looks at me with a Dad frown. "Unless you want me to throw it at Duke too?"

"I'll just hold on to it for you for a little while longer."

Whatever, I don't give a shit anyway. I don't need a nurse. I like to fuck with Vance and have him get me cups of ice every five minutes, just so he can say no, which then causes Halle to yell at him.

Astor turns on the TV, but he doesn't scroll through the channels for Eden and me to pick something. Instead, he leaves it on the fucking news.

"Are you serious?" I bark. "I understand you are older than Moses, but we aren't. Knit and watch the news at your own house."

"You've been moodier than a teenage girl," Astor chides. "Maybe the news will settle you down."

"And you've been around as much as Halle's period. Maybe the 'news' will get you to fire your brother for knocking up your assistant on the job."

A collective gasp goes around the room as Halle turns bright red. "How did you know?"

Because I know those two idiots. "There's ginger ale in Vance's flask," I admit like it's obvious.

Vance's eyes widen as he puts it together. "You're such a fucker," he accuses. "You just had a kidney transplant. Were you seriously trying to drink liquor from my flask?"

Disappointed stares go around the room. It's the most entertainment I've had all day. "Actually," I admit, "I was just making sure your bitch-ass wasn't drinking after I heard Halle puking in the bathroom this morning."

I point at her shocked face. "Eden and I weren't asleep, but even if we had been, your man-heaves would have woken us."

"Oh my gosh," Halle squeaks through laughter. "You are such an asshole. Thanks for spoiling our surprise."

"You're welcome," I tease. "You know I always have your back, even if you're unwed and carrying a demon's baby."

Collective groans and congratulations proceed to go around the room, effectively taking the attention off me for once. "How sore are you?" I whisper to Eden.

"Stop." She laughs. "We're not crossing that line yet."

It wasn't a no.

"Yet," I agree. "I'll check back with you tomorrow."

I can't wait to get out of here and drown myself in this woman. Everyone should hug her now because once we've recovered, they won't see her for months. Eden owes me a lifetime, but I'll start with a semester buried inside her pussy.

"Congressman Albrecht was arrested today."

My head jerks to the TV, and the room falls silent as the name we all hate grabs our attention.

"He is accused of allegedly running an illegal adoption ring for the past twenty years. Three women were seen dropping off a package at the FBI office, which contained documents that led to the congressman's arrest."

My eyes stay locked on the screen, along with everyone else's.

"Sources say, one of those women is the birth mother of one of the children Congressman Albrecht allegedly trafficked"

to another politician. No one knows how she came across the information, but one source says she allegedly befriended Congressman Albrecht's ex-wife, who gladly gave the woman proof once she heard her story."

It's like we're all operating in slow motion as our heads turn to Ramsey, who is sitting in her plastic chair, sketching something on her pad.

"Ray?" Duke growls, but then stops as the newscast continues.

"One thing is for sure. Never doubt the power of a mother's love. This mother helped the FBI recover twenty-five trafficked children from the documents she delivered with two other women who signed the package, Jude's Angels." A picture of security footage fills the screen of three women in hats entering an FBI field office. "This is Channel 5 News, reporting to you live from Girl Power Central, Las Vegas, Nevada."

"Halle!" I snap. "You told me you couldn't find my sunglasses!"

She flashes me a sneaky smile. "They looked better on me. I'll buy you a new pair later, if Vance doesn't kill me."

I watch as Vance rises from his chair, his back straight like someone pushed that stick up his ass even further. "I'm going to do more than kill you," he threatens as his jaw ticks with rage.

"Wave goodbye to Halle," I whisper to Eden. "The beast is gonna lock her pregnant ass up for several years."

"He'll do no such thing," Halle argues, but she's already stepping back toward Keagan, who's locked in a stare-down with Astor. Keagan's a brave soul. I'll give her that. But she has no chance against living through one of Astor's brutal lectures on the way home about safety blah, blah, blah.

But at least she and Halle have some self-preservation and apologize for going behind their partners' backs to take down Albrecht, unlike my mother.

This nut rises from her plastic chair like the queen she is and faces my father. “I didn’t need to marry Albrecht to help my son,” she says. “I only needed his ex-wife.”

Her back straightens, and her chin lifts. “No one fucks with my son.”

She flashes me this hard look that tightens my chest and sets off the alarms monitoring my heart. Turns out, the peace my adoptive mother spoke of comes in many forms.

It came with a family’s support.

A father’s hug.

A mother’s revenge.

And... loyal woman’s love.



EPILOGUE

Eden

One year later

Remington has never been good at taking orders. So, I don't even know why I was surprised to see his stubborn ass sitting in the parking lot at the parole hearing—blatantly disregarding my request for him to stay home and let me go alone.

“How fast did you have to speed to beat me home?” I ask, eyeing him outside the house we rented in rural Atlanta, so his diva ass didn't have to live in the dorms or a motel room, where anyone could talk to him or look at me when we went back to school.

I know, right? His chivalry knows no bounds.

His brow rises. “Are you accusing me of something?”

Yes, that's exactly what I'm doing. “Did. You. Speed?” I repeat slowly, making sure he knows I am not letting this go any time soon. “Just admit you were there,” I challenge, “and I won't stab you with the nail file in my purse.”

He chuckles, his eyes darkening in response to my threat. “Don’t get brave, love. I’m not in a generous mood.”

Bullshit.

“Ooh,” I coo. “Does that mean you’re in a punishing mood, then?”

His mouth twitches, and he spreads his legs for me to step closer. “Do you need punishing?”

“Not unless you consider me stealing fries off your plate last night after you fell asleep a punishable offense.”

He narrows his eyes. “I dozed off for a second.”

“More like an hour.”

He shrugs. “Your pussy sucked up all my energy.”

Oh my gosh. This man. “Hmm...that sounds concerning. Maybe you should take it easy—spend some time on your back tonight.”

“Agreed.” He closes his legs around me. “I hear a blow job is more effective than a good night’s rest.”

I smile, leaning in and pressing a kiss to his lips. Those haunted brown eyes seem lighter these days, playful even, but they haven’t changed. Neither has he. We might sleep in a bed now, but Remington is still just as sarcastic as he’s always been.

Nothing has changed that.

Not even his obsession with me.

And I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Remington Potter is still my villain-ish hero, who is more beautiful on the inside than out. He still threatens me before breakfast and protects me after dark.

I could not be more in love with this incredible man.

“So,” I tell him, getting back to my original question that he deliberately avoided. “Do you want to know the outcome of the parole hearing, or do you already know since you were there?”

He flashes me an amused smirk. “I’m good at a lot of things, love, but reading minds isn’t one of them.”

Gah, he’s so aggravating. I don’t know why he can’t just admit he followed me to the hearing and watched over me like the dark hero he is.

But then I remember, Remington will never admit to being my hero, because I love the villain in him more.

“I testified against my mother,” I tell him, as if he doesn’t already know this. “She was denied parole.”

“I’m glad not everyone there was as dumb as they looked,” he muses, completely forgetting to keep up his lie.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I worried for a minute you were going to smart off to one of the guards and get thrown out.”

He flashes me a guilty grin. “You stand out wherever you go, 101. Especially in a federal building full of officers.”

He shrugs, no longer giving a shit to keep up the lie. “I wanted her to know you weren’t alone, that I would always be there to stab her—or anyone else—who thought about threatening you again.”

“And it’s comments like this that get you fucked into a coma.”

He grins. “I can’t think of a better way I’d want to go.”

I think I made myself clear before that he’s never dying. He needs to get over that shit. He’s stuck here with me and his family.

“And Gerald?” he asks. “Did you talk to the district attorney? Did they reach a plea deal?”

I nod. “Yeah. They did. We won’t see him for many years because of the drugs they found in his house and in my mother’s cell.”

I was so inspired by Ramsey and her justice against Albrecht, that I decided my days of hiding from my mother and Gerald were over. If Ramsey was brave enough to go up

against a high-ranking politician, I could certainly be brave enough to go after pieces of shit like my mother and Gerald.

So, I asked the Potter women if they would go with me to the police station.

They did, and now we have another picture to add to the refrigerator. But this time, it isn't security footage of three women serving justice. It's a selfie of four women becoming a family.

"Good," Remington says, pushing his sucker between his lips.

He has to have something to occupy his hands since he quit smoking. Apparently, a sucker isn't as good as pussy or a cigarette, but at least it's healthier and more discreet when he's out in his chair, decompressing after a full day of classes.

He's made the Dean's List several times, but we're all banned from celebrating it. The only thing he'll agree to is going to his parents' lake house for a weekend. It's not the Mississippi River, but it makes him happy since, apparently, it doesn't smell like bad tuna.

"Sit with me," he says, patting his lap.

I drop my bag on the ground and start to climb onto his lap like I have a million times.

"Wait!" He holds up one finger and then digs his wallet out of his pocket and hands it to me.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Open it."

I narrow my eyes at the mischief in his gaze.

"It's not expired mints and tampons," he adds. "But I hope it's enough."

"Enough of what?"

He rolls his eyes like I'm already annoying the fuck out of him, and I've only been home five minutes. "For fuck's sake. Just open the wallet."

I don't know what he's up to, but he seems very excited about it.

Carefully, I unfold his weathered wallet and pass over several dollar bills before I get to the surprise.

"You told me you didn't know where these pictures were!" I pull out the two Polaroid pictures we took on our road trip.

"I lied." He shrugs. "I do that sometimes."

"I searched everywhere for these!" He's such a bastard. "I thought we had left them in the motel in our haste to get you to the hospital."

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "They were always in my wallet."

Because his ass stole them from me like the romantic he is.

"You could have at least told me."

"I could have," he confesses, his shoulders rising and falling lazily, "but then, where would the fun be in that? I recall comforting you for several nights after you gave up looking."

Again, he's such a bastard.

But he's mine.

And I love him more than the yellow plastic chair that sits next to his black one.

"I can't believe you," I scold, but really, I *can* believe he would do such a thing. Remington always has a motive. "You know, you don't always have to take what you want. You can just ask."

I don't even know why I'm angry right now. It's not any worse than not having the pictures, but still. I hate that he's fucking smiling right now.

"Don't get emotional," he chides. "I'll make it up to you as soon as you finish looking through my wallet."

He's definitely getting stabbed tonight.

“This is so ridiculous.” I scoff, but I’m too curious not to keep looking. “All I see is cash and your license.”

He takes the wallet from my hand, pulls out the license, and hands it to me. “Read the name.”

Something flutters in my stomach, and I pause. *His name...*

“Read my name, Eden. Don’t make me ask you again.”

Fine, fine. Good gracious, this man.

“Remington Jude Potter.”

I read his name word for word, still not seeing the purpose of all this. “Are you happy?”

His smile widens like he loves the sound of his name coming out of my mouth.

“Do you love me?” he asks simply.

“Of course, I do.”

“Then tell me.”

I have no idea what is going on, but I’ve learned in these situations to just go with it.

“Remington Jude Potter,” I start, finding his gaze. “I love you.”

He leans in, brushing his lips against mine. “Do you remember what I told you about the white stone?” he asks. “What it means?”

“Yes,” I answer. “A white stone is a new beginning—a new name.”

He nods and lifts his head, finding my eyes before slipping his fingers inside his wallet, revealing a...white stone.

But not just any white stone. This one is set in a silver band, looking a whole lot like an engagement ring. “Hi.” He pulls in a nervous breath. “My name is Adam, and you’re officially *mine*.”

It wasn’t a question—not even a proposal.

Remington simply fulfilled our prophecy.



Eager for more of Remington? [Download this bonus epilogue](#) and enjoy!

Want more characters like Remington? Check out Theo in [Pitcher](#) and [Commander](#) from my *Commander in Briefs Series* or Maverick from [IOU](#). They are full of antihero goodness.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader,

I started this series as a passion project. It came along at a time when I was struggling to really find where I fit in the romance industry. Was I romcom or contemporary? Honestly, I didn't know. All I knew was that I wanted to write something meaningful, whether that was for one person or several. I just wanted you to take something away from this story. I wanted us to heal and grow while renewing our faith and hope. Life is made up of seasons. Some are wonderful. Some are challenging. And some are heartbreaking. But most importantly, those seasons end, and a new one emerges. This series took those seasons and reminded me that even in the coldest seasons lies hope, love, and a brighter future.

I needed this series.

I needed this reminder.

I needed this purpose.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Thank you for supporting this series and allowing me the opportunity to find my place as a writer and as a person. I can't tell you what it means to me.

Kristy

This book wouldn't have happened if not for these wonderful women who supported me the whole way through this book. They stayed up with me, cried with me, and gave up weekends

and time with their families to make sure this book came to fruition. I am eternally grateful for their love and never-ending kindness.

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