

QUORUM DUET BOOK 1



The Reeling

L. MILES

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Version 1

*For everyone who likes to eat cereal as a snack. You have
good taste.*

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Author Note

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AUTHOR NOTE

A QUICK WARNING

This book contains slightly darker relationship tropes that may be uncomfortable to certain readers. There are scenes consisting of over-the-top controlling behaviour that is unacceptable in real life.

The harem is made up of possessive men who will manipulate and twist our heroine until they can tie her to them forever. If that sounds deliciously dark to you, then this book is for you.

Otherwise, reader discretion is advised.

If you would like a list of tropes that will be covered in this duet, [here's the link from my newsletter](#)

This book also contains **major spoilers** for my complete *Exception Duet*, which is a friends-to-lovers contemporary duet featuring Ali Hayes, a singer and actress. Her harem consists of a lawyer, tech CEO, doctor, and billionaire.

[Here's the first book if you're interested](#)

There are overlapping characters between the two duets because they're set in the same universe. If you're planning on reading both, I recommend you start with *Exception* first. However, you can read the *Quorum Duet* alone to get a complete story.

PREFACE

This book depicts a modern world you and I are familiar with for the most part, with a tiny hint of fantasy (in a broad sense, immortality). Maybe someday science can get us there, but for now, let us imagine.

They live forever, are more advanced than us, and are largely peaceful. But still, we can't ignore this possible threat in the future.

- classified government documents

SAIGE

I dug my hands deeper into my pockets and blew out a breath. A wisp of my hair fell onto my face and I anxiously pushed it away.

I stared at the text message on my phone. It was sent to me two hours ago while I was having lunch, and right now, the burrito I'd enjoyed felt like it would gladly crawl out of my stomach.

MARIA

You're requested on-site. Don't knock.

2134 Grenhalms Drive

I double-checked the address, but it was a match.

This makes no sense.

I was standing in front of a mansion that sat on the edge of the woods. It looked rundown, with dark brown paint peeling off the panelling. The entire house had a distinctly Victorian style with small square windows. I could imagine wooden floors creaking as I walked through the rooms. With the leafless trees surrounding the mansion, it looked like a classic Halloween haunted house.

Driving over here made me swear my GPS was messed up because I thought there was no way anybody lived or worked out here.

This certainly was at odds with the sparkly, glamorous, high-end estate I was expecting. I thought Granier Translating

only took on large corporate clients. Was I wrong? I'd scoured the company website before the interview, but evidently, I must have missed something.

My first day at work was set for next Wednesday, and I made sure my flight back to New York City would land on Monday. I made the mistake of telling Maria, my new manager, that I was spending family time in Oregon.

Supposedly, a reclusive client needed a French translator as soon as possible, and since I was already here, I would hold up the fort until the company could send in an experienced employee.

"He's a particular man," Maria said on the phone.

I had her on Bluetooth. Her voice was muffled as if the reception was bad, and maybe it was. I felt like I was in the middle of nowhere. "Don't question him. Do whatever needs to be done and get out once Devin gets there."

"Get out?" Strange phrasing.

Maria's voice became nervous, her voice hitching a bit. "He seems like a relaxed man, but he could easily kill you. Or ruin you. Whichever he deems is worse. So do your job and leave as soon as you can!" Her breathing was noticeably quicker and my stomach dropped in apprehension.

"Maria?" I asked weakly. "Devin can handle him, right? Maybe I should leave him to Devin."

"We needed to send someone there a fucking hour ago. You're going," she snapped.

I swallowed as I turned the last corner. The address should be straight ahead, maybe a couple more minutes. "Okay."

"You'll be fine," Maria said unconvincingly.

Well, I was the newbie. Technically, not even that, since my first day was next week.

But if I pulled this off... it would be a good start to my job, right?

“Good luck, Saige.” Maria swallowed audibly. “Hope to see you soon.” Clearly, she was ready to hang up and leave me to my doom.

Oh, wait. “What’s his name?” I’d probably expedite my death if I showed up without freaking knowing who he was.

“Ryder Belshaw.”

The moment I heard his name, I knew I was screwed.

I was one of the few humans to know about the existence of immortals because my parents worked for the Quorum, the collective name for the three leaders who rule over immortals. And still, I knew very little. They were these mystical beings in my mind. Except for the infamous Maddox Nicoli, the face of the secretive international security company Pendulum, I didn’t know what the other two looked like.

As a young, unknowing child, I’d asked about immortals.

My dad had said, “All immortals allegedly live forever. It’s been centuries. Heal very fast. Never get sick. They’ve developed all types of enhancements to their senses. All in all, they don’t live that different from us.”

My mom had chimed in, “The three of the Quorum are the most lethal and unstable. Though they do protect the immortals under their protection.” She then gave me a warning look. “Hiding their existence from humans is to avoid the possibility of ramifications from our government and being overrun by humans wanting to become them.”

“Mom, I don’t want to become one.” Yeah, no chance of that. I was going to pretend like I knew nothing and try to stay far, far away from immortals.

I wanted to live an unassuming life. Work hard, save money, and if I get the chance, buy a house someday. My new job was a good start, paying double the average for new translators on the market.

Getting mixed up with anyone like Ryder Belshaw would end badly for me. I could be killed at any point for knowing too much or branded as a conspiracy theorist for accidentally revealing their secrets.

No, I needed to live simply.

But regardless, here I was. Standing out here like an idiot. A lamb brought herself to slaughter willingly.

I remembered talking to my roommates about being a translator when we were deciding on our career paths.

“Just a cubicle job, my ass,” I muttered, dragging my feet up the staircase to the front door. “Look at me now. Devin better show up soon.” I was waiting to be saved by a guy I didn’t even know.

I had my laptop bag slung over my left shoulder. Since it carried my computer, my papers, and all my stationery, it felt like I was lugging around a sack of bricks.

Stepping forward to the door, I gave it three knocks. There was no doorbell button. I winced as my knuckles made contact with the rough surface. Once upon a time, this mansion may have been pristine, but the owners obviously started neglecting the maintenance.

After standing there for a minute, I dropped my bag at my feet, unwilling to carry the weight any longer. There were no sounds of approaching footsteps or any other sign anyone lived here at all. In fact, now that I was thinking about it, there was no car in sight.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I placed my hands on my waist and paced, my heavy footsteps making the wooden panels creak. Right when I was about to call Maria, the door suddenly swung open.

Jumping back, I grabbed at the railing in a futile attempt to catch myself from losing balance and falling back down the stairs.

The woman flashed forward so fast, I blinked once and she was right there in front of me. She grasped my arm and tugged me closer to the front door and away from my precarious situation.

Even as I caught my breath, my head spinning, I was staring at her. *Was she an immortal, too?*

Could they do that? Move fast?

She was a brunette with grey eyes. She wore form-fitting office attire with a dark grey bodice and black skirt. Her black heels were killer and I'd bet they had red bottoms.

Standing next to her, I deeply regretted not prioritizing dropping by the mall to pick up business casual attire. But when Maria called me, she stressed the importance of time.

I closed my eyes to regain my composure. *Let's not screw more things up.*

When my legs were steady and I couldn't hear my heartbeat in my ears anymore, I gave myself a mental pat on the back and turned back to the woman.

She had said nothing this whole time and merely patiently waited for me to put myself back together.

"Thank you for your help with the, uh, stairs." I cleared my throat. "My name is Saige Kinley." I desperately hoped that Maria told them to expect me. "I'm here on behalf of Granier Translating for Mr. Belshaw."

She studied me for a second. "Hello, Saige. You're unexpected."

"I understand. Believe me," I said dryly, "this was unexpected for me too."

She cracked a smile at that. "Come in. I'm Nicole."

I grabbed my bag and followed her inside. As soon as the door closed, a burst of warmth smothered me.

At least the heating was more than adequate here.

The mansion had wood floors and dark gray painted walls. Despite the shoddy exterior, the interior looked well taken care of and relatively modern. Black light fixtures were attached to the walls and barely illuminated the hallway. I peeked into the open doorways as we passed, but there was nobody to be found.

"It's pretty empty out here. Most of us stay deeper inside the estate," Nicole said as if she read my mind. "It's not

necessary anymore, but it's an instinct. It's safer to let Ryder be the first line of defence."

"Oh, okay," I replied. Not knowing much about immortal history, my mind wasn't connecting the dots. But I shook it off and held my tongue to avoid asking clarifying questions.

After this assignment, I'm going back to my normal life of humans and stability.

As she walked ahead of me, I admired how tall she was. In the summer, I interned at an artist management company, and she appeared to be at the ideal height for modelling.

"I'm jealous of your height," I said with a sigh. "What's it like up there?" Being around five-foot-two, my height was my one physical insecurity. I just wanted to reach for things on the top shelf without losing my balance or wearing heels.

She looked back and gave me a surprised look before laughing. "You're not that short."

I snorted. "Right."

We entered a small room with towering mahogany bookshelves along the walls, two armchairs, and lamps set up on tiny coffee tables. On the left, there was a door with fancy wood carvings on it.

Nicole waved at a chair. "I'll tell Ryder you're here. If you want to take off your bag, you can put it there."

I nodded but made no moves towards the chair. "Thanks, Nicole." I couldn't help hoping that this was a quick meeting, so I kept my stuff with me.

She started towards the door before stopping. She whirled around and fixed a serious gaze on me. "You're new. Have you worked with Ryder before?"

I shook my head.

"Ryder's a bit... different, which is why Devin works with him exclusively. But there's no need to be nervous."

Before I could say anything, she briskly walked over and knocked on the door. After a couple of seconds, she opened

the door and firmly closed it behind her.

Different? What did that mean? Was she merely vaguely referring to his immortality?

An ominous feeling filled me up, and I tugged on the neckline of my sweater, suddenly feeling constricted.

This trepidation was all just in my mind, and there wasn't anything to worry about.

Right?

RYDER

“**T**here’s a girl named Saige Kinley waiting for you, My Liege,” Nicole, one of my staff, announced.

“A girl?” I looked away from the fireplace. The dancing, flickering flames were unpredictable. The wisps unfurled in the air, vanishing as quickly as they appeared.

It was fascinating.

“Well, a woman. She’s incredibly young.” She winced. “Apologies, I know you’re not interested. But she said she’s sent here from Granier Translating.”

Her light brown eyes met mine for a second before dropping to the ground. She was one of the few members of my household who held eye contact with me, albeit for only a moment.

That was precisely why I kept her by my side. I didn’t need someone who simpered and fell apart in my presence.

I raised an eyebrow, spinning my pen around my fingers. The tip was sharp enough to cut through skin. I watched it carefully, tempted to let it slip just this once. “Is Devin with her?”

“No.”

I grabbed my phone and typed out a text message to him.

ME

Where are you?

Devin Wong was my go-to translator when I requested one. Amusingly, he wasn't scared of me in the slightest and appeared to have no sense of self-preservation. My English was actually pretty good from my decades of practice, but he was good company.

I didn't interact with humans much. Their short lifespans made me resist forming connections with them. Since I craved balance, their tempers and wild emotions felt like whiplash.

But even though immortals had a lot of quiet power, we were still in the minority, numbers-wise. So we couldn't avoid humans entirely.

And scaring them fed into the dark side of me, and whenever the chance arose, I relished the feeling.

Would I get the opportunity today?

A smirk danced on my lips. Finally, there would be a spark in my dull days. "Bring her here."

I stood and walked over to the windows. It overlooked the vast forest of trees that extended for miles and miles. Deeper tones of green mixed with lighter ones, and there were the lone bunches of oranges too.

I didn't choose the area for its scenery, but it soothed me just the same. A century back, I left New York City to come here and start anew. Maddox, the stubborn asshole, goaded my departure. Alex went quietly to Washington, DC to rub shoulders with the human elite.

Thinking about the two of them made me bare my teeth. Alex especially. The memories assaulted my senses, and I closed my eyes, willing my heartbeat to slow down.

I didn't look back much, and I enjoyed being here. The soothing nature made me forget the harsh decisions of the past. It was also close enough to Canada where a lot of my immortals lived. If need be, they could easily come for help. The immortals chose to follow me because they felt comforted by my reputation.

Not that there were many threats around here. It was always Maddox who created chaos. The rest of us lived

peaceful but isolated lives.

But if the time called for it... I dug the tip of the pen into my finger, relishing the beads of red that sprung up from the sharpness. I'd be ready to show them why immortals are so fucking scared of me to this day.

“Thank you, Nicole.”

I stilled. That voice. It rang in my ears, making my senses more alert. I slowly turned, not knowing what to expect.

She was short, the top of her head barely reaching my chest. She wore a beige sweater and dark blue jeans, with black suede boots. Her long, wavy hair was pulled up into a ponytail, so tight that it must strain her scalp.

If only she'd loosen it, that didn't look comfortable.

I frowned.

She wasn't paying attention to me, still focused on whatever Nicole was saying.

Finally, the door closed behind her.

She was obviously struggling with her bag, and I immediately lurched up to relieve her of the weight. As I practically yanked it from her, she reached out as if to stop me. Our fingers touched and without thinking about it, I grabbed her hand.

Her eyes darted to our joint hands.

I looked down too, admiring how her pale fingers looked wrapped around mine. I was darker, my palm calloused, and she was smooth. Maybe smooth all over, given by the skin that wasn't hidden away by her clothes.

I ran a finger over her hand absentmindedly, and my gaze moved up to follow the lines of her face. Her sharp nose. The cut crease of her eyelids. And the gentle slope of her cheekbones.

Maybe I should draw her. A pencil sketch would work well to highlight those shadows.

She sucked in a breath. “Mr. Belshaw! You're bleeding.”

“Yes,” I murmured. My hand came up and brushed against her lower lip. Then I rubbed her cheek, staining her clear skin with a soft crimson red stain.

“Could you give me my bag? I have antiseptic wipes.” She held out her hand. “Wait, did you get any on me, by any chance? Your hand is near my face.”

I stared at the mark I gave her. It was innocent enough, like blush. *My mark*. She was blushing for me. “No.” I passed her bag back to her, letting my hand fall away.

She rummaged through her bag and took out what she needed. She reached for my bleeding hand but hesitated. “May I?”

I smiled, amused at her politeness. “Do your worst.”

“This might be overkill, but it’s good to be hygienic.” She swiped at the blood with her wipe only once before she stilled. A rush of an exhale burst through her parted lips.

Seconds ticked by.

I raised an eyebrow as she continued to cradle my hand in her palm. Her stare remained fixated on my unbroken skin. “You finished?”

She snapped out of it immediately, her wide eyes coming to meet mine in shock. She dropped my hand as if I burned her, and she stumbled back. “Yeah, uh”—she scrambled to put her bandages back into her bag—“this was silly, I forgot.” She continued to mumble something under her breath.

I could further enhance my hearing to eavesdrop, but I didn’t care to do that. What I did care about was how striking her brown hair looked reflected in the sun. The light revealed shades of tan, orangish-brown, and flashes of gold.

It was a cloudy day, so the sudden stream of sunlight streaking through the room was especially unexpected.

But a lot of things were unexpected today.

Even though we stood far apart, I could feel the spots where her touch caressed my fingers and held my wrist.

I stared at my hand and flexed my grip. The softness of her skin left my hand tingling. I rubbed my hand over my jaw, staring at this mysterious woman.

She straightened and thrust her hand out. “I’m sorry, I should’ve introduced myself. My name is Saige Kinley. My colleague Devin should be here momentarily.”

I rose my eyebrows. No formal greeting? Even the most senior immortals bowed or nodded in respect, and everybody else called us “My Liege” as well. We taught these basic customs to humans who knew about us, although admittedly, we weren’t so strict about it.

Unless she was clueless... the idea was delicious. I could introduce her to everything. It would be like taking pottery clay and moulding it into something recognizable. My creation. My eyes raked over her again, and I wondered if I made her nervous.

Did my gaze affect her? Did her body respond where my stare lingered?

My cock hardened.

I zeroed down at the bulging tent in my pants. *How... strange.* It was so long since another living being aroused me. Another new experience was brought about by one Saige Kinley.

She shuffled her feet.

I noticed she was holding her bag again. It was light to me, but she was like a fairy compared to my wide and tall frame. “Saige, please sit down.”

She needed to take care of herself. What the fuck was she thinking, carrying around a bag so heavy? I scowled.

Her eyes flashed to my face, and she froze. “I’m sorry, Mr. Belshaw. Is there a problem?”

My jaw locked, but I shook my head and gestured for her to sit. I didn’t enjoy talking to guests behind a desk, so I had two long couches set up opposite each other.

Saige dropped her bag, and it bounced on the couch with a thudding sound. Then she sank into the seat. “Thank you.”

I sat down across from her and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees. “Do you want to be here, Saige?”

She blinked. “That isn’t relevant.”

“But I want to know.” I sat back, stretching my arms over the back of the couch. “Tell me.” I pushed a bit of influence into my voice.

Saige barely batted an eye. “Nope. Let’s stay on topic. Oh, wait a moment.” She dug through her bag again and took her phone out, her fingers swiping over the screen. “Never mind. My boss didn’t update me about your request today, so I’m in the dark here.”

I scratched my chin. “You seem unprepared.” And off-kilter. I loved seeing people flailing because it gave me a sense of perverse pleasure. But with Saige, her stubbornness made it charming. I overwhelmed so many humans, immortals, whatever, but I felt like she would find a way around her reactions.

She pulled out her laptop before she bit her lip, focusing intently on me. “I didn’t want to say anything at first,” she said, her face flushing a fascinating shade of red. “But could you please put on a shirt?”

I blinked, glancing down at my body. I was bare-chested with only a pair of slacks on. If I didn’t feel the need to protect my cock from the bare air, I’d probably drop the bottoms.

“Why?” I asked, mystified.

“*Why?*” Her mouth dropped open. “Because you’re naked! Isn’t it basic etiquette to dress up”—her eyes cut to my abs—“or dress in *anything* to meet a guest?”

“That’s not the standard.” Immortals didn’t give a fuck about things like social propriety. “Humans are too stuck up.”

She crossed her arms, and her face tightened. “Please be respectful, Mr. Belshaw.”

“Drop the ‘Mister’ and call me Ryder. It makes me feel old.” My lips twitched. I was centuries older than her.

“I’ll call you Mr. Belshaw since it’s more appropriate.”

It also draws you farther away from me. And that was a thought that could drive me to violence. “Call me Ryder.”

Of course, she promptly ignored me. “So, why did you need our translating services? Do you have files I need to look at?”

Granier Translating knew I had absolutely no interest in working with anyone but Devin. They violated their contract by sending me Saige. Part of the reason was that I didn’t want to risk too many people knowing about the internal affairs of my immortals.

I could make Saige disappear, and out of fear of confronting me, Granier wouldn’t speak a word of it.

“Who sent you here?” I asked. “I’m not a normal client.” My attention zeroed in on the faint sheen on her skin. “Are you alright?”

“I’m sweating. It’s so hot in here!” she exclaimed, fanning her face with one hand. “It’s boiling.”

I liked my office hot. Sometimes I wondered if I was trying to deny the cold-blooded side of me as if I could somehow melt my history away.

It was a ridiculous notion, of course.

But with so many years under my belt and so many more to come, my brain had nothing to do but serve me nonsensical ideas.

“Take off your sweater.” I licked my lips, imagining all her delicate, bare skin. I never wanted to touch someone more.

She fiddled with the bottom of her sweater as she considered it. “I *am* wearing a tank top underneath,” she muttered. “What am I thinking? I’m working. Jeez.”

My phone’s screen lit up. A message from Devin.

DEVIN

I'm on vacation, back tomorrow. Do you need a translator?

Curious and curiouiser...

I should probably ask Devin about Saige, but I could find out myself. Smirking, I stood up and strode over to her. "You won't tell me what I want to know. I have ways to make you tell the truth."

"I didn't lie to you." She bristled. "And what does that mean? Are you going to torture me or something?"

"I'm warning you," I murmured. "You've gotten yourself into quite a mess, darling." Reaching out, I stroked a finger down her flushed cheek. I trailed my touch to a lock of her hair and twisted it around my finger. "Oh, you're fascinating."

"I need to use the bathroom," she blurted out, twisting away from me and standing up abruptly. She shuffled away from me, a trembling hand to her chest.

I stopped and stuffed my hands into my pockets. Running, was she? "That door." I pointed at my office's connected bathroom.

Saige practically fled from me, the loud clicking of the lock reverberating throughout the room.

My fingers clenched as I glared at the door and the walls. Everything that separated her from me. I didn't fucking like it. And she was unwilling to impart any information about herself. I could certainly use my signature methods, torture her slowly until her screams echoed and her blood soaked into my antique carpet.

But I found I wanted her to scream for me as I work my cock in and out of her. Feed myself to her until she was so addicted she would never leave. Humans had delicate sensibilities, I shouldn't rush her.

Her bag lay innocently on the couch.

I didn't even consider it. Unzipping it, I took out her laptop. Time to put those hacking skills into use.

Easily bypassing the password, I quickly skimmed through the document that was open in her word processor.

Oh, my little fairy has some explaining to do.

SAIGE

I took my sweater off because the scratchy material combined with the blistering heat of Ryder Belshaw's office or *freaking sauna* made me feel like I was being baked alive.

His bathroom was small and clean, with a toilet and shower. The white floor tiles heated the soles of my feet, and fluffy towels hung from the beige wall.

My hands patted my empty pockets, and I cursed the fact that I left my phone in my bag. I couldn't call for help or anything.

And the last thing the immortal outside wanted to do was work, apparently.

I ran ice-cold water up my arms to cool myself down. The soap had a pleasant eucalyptus scent. Drying myself with a towel, I tried to psyche myself up to deal with Ryder.

Gritting my teeth, I squeezed my eyes shut. Couldn't he just be a normal client? He was being cryptic and frustratingly uncooperative.

And so *touchy*.

It was such a blatant violation of my personal space, making me feel so uncomfortable. I could see his desire for me in his hazel, unnerving eyes, and I froze up when we were close to each other. His hungry stare wasn't creepy, but it was unsettling.

That sort of predatory expression didn't fit on a person's face.

Ryder was, without a doubt, a handsome man. He had an olive skin tone and a light dusting of chest hair. His muscles weren't that defined, but he was certainly toned. Short, wavy brown hair matched his dark eyes, and although I was out of his presence, I could still vividly see his face in my head.

The door clicked open behind me.

I jumped back, my arms coming up to shield myself as if I was naked. I stared, openmouthed, as Ryder came in, his heavy boots thudding. It took me a moment to find my voice. "*Why the hell are you in here?*"

"Looking for you," he said simply.

"You could've waited!" I spluttered. "I was just about to go out. This is—"

"Do you know what I am?" Ryder interrupted me.

I opened my mouth to say something, but no sound came out.

"I read through the notes on your laptop. I'm guessing you wrote them?"

"Again," I snapped. "Not. Your. Business." I'd typed out everything I knew about immortals and a rough outline of my call with Maria. "Did you break into my laptop?"

But he wasn't listening. Instead, his attention was hyper-focused on my chest. My white tank top was rather sheer, and my black lacy bra could be seen through the fabric.

My fingers itched to grab my sweater and wrestle it over my head, but my limbs felt heavy. It would also obscure my vision from this... predator. And that instinctually felt like a stupid move, even if it would only be a few seconds.

Ryder's pupils were blown up, swallowing the light colour of his eyes. His hand reached out to trace the curve of my breast, and he did it slow and methodically, his touch worshipping.

I felt like I was in a daze. This was Ryder Belshaw, an immortal of the Quorum.

Am I going to let him touch me like this?

I leaned heavily against the countertop, trying to press as far back away from him as possible without obviously moving away.

But Ryder noticed everything. His eyes shot down to the way my hands gripped the side of the sink. He stalked forward until he was completely plastered against me. “Do you know what I just learned? You knew what you were getting into with me.” He didn’t wait, tilting my chin up and pressing his forehead to mine.

“What are you talking about?” I whispered.

He closed his eyes and shuddered, his hot, heavy breath blowing across my face. Then his hand shot to my throat, and he choked me with his unyielding grip. “Who sent you here?” Ryder hissed into my ear. “You know that I’m an immortal. And Devin isn’t fucking coming.”

I gasped for breath, and panic set in. My vision narrowed with specs of light and my senses dulled. I clawed at his hand, my legs desperately flailing and failing to kick him.

Ryder cocked his head. “Are you going to tell me the truth?” His words faintly registered in my mind, and I tried to nod even as my eyes bulged. My mouth could barely part, and a gurgled sound escaped my lips.

Everything was going dark.

Finally, he released me and I slumped over the counter, my back to him, hacking out my lungs. I coughed and coughed until my head stopped spinning. My neck burned from his grip, and I could see the marks of his fingers in the mirror.

His hands were so big that he almost wrapped his entire hand around my neck. It was going to bruise. The pounding of my pulse combined with my humiliation made tears burn in my eyes.

I blinked it away, my trembling hand brushing a sweaty lock of hair away from my forehead.

All this for a job?

His hand touched my back. “Fuck. I keep forgetting you humans are so damn fragile.”

“Don’t touch me.” I flinched away from him. “I want to leave.” He didn’t step to the side, but there was just enough space for me to slip by him.

He followed me back into his office, and I was hyperaware of his large presence looming behind me. I swooped down to grab my bag.

Fuck this job.

And screw Ryder Belshaw.

I used to imagine what I would do if I was ever assaulted, and all those heroic ideas of standing up for myself felt utterly ridiculous. What if he put his hands on me again? How could I get away?

My breathing grew erratic as I unwillingly ran through the possibilities. I hurried to the door that led to the hallway, my pulse thundering in my ears.

I basically couldn’t even turn my head without feeling a burning, stinging pain. How the hell was I going to drive? And this mansion was in the middle of nowhere, do rideshares or taxis even come out here?

“Wait.” Ryder smoothly sidestepped in front of me before my hand touched the door handle. “Let me clear up the ache on your neck. If you leave it, those bruises won’t heal for a while.”

“You’re going to help me?” I scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“Hurting you felt... indescribable.” He worked his jaw. “I’ve killed, maimed, burned, but seeing you crumble underneath my hand tore at me.” He flexed his fingers and twisted his wrists. “I don’t know what this is, Saige.”

I could hear the contrite in his voice, and I was grasping at the opportunity to get better so I could get the hell out. “So you have medicine here? A cream of some sort?”

He gazed at me steadily. “Throughout the years of immortality, we’ve figured out how to do enhancements. You can think of it as a magical elixir that speeds up an aspect of the human body. The one I’ll give you is temporary, and you’ll heal instantaneously.”

With the way he described it, it really did sound like a magic potion. But was it too good to be true?

“What choice do you have? You know, you’re not going anywhere in your state. And forget calling a car. No one’s around. And my staff won’t drive you.”

Because he won’t let them.

I gritted my teeth. “Fine.” As he went to his desk to get what he needed, I sat down again.

“I treated you like a spy or a criminal sent to me for judgement,” Ryder informed me as he came back over. “Because you don’t seem to be who you say you are.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” I said stiffly.

“But I do.” He knelt down in front of me, and it was a testament to our height difference that he was now at my eye level. “Around you, there’s this foreign emotion in me”—he smiled humorously—“driving me to do just that. Arguments devolve into fights very often with immortals. I’m not the smooth talker in the Quorum, that’s for sure. We’re not humans. Those centuries didn’t make us more civilized, it did the exact opposite.”

I stared at my hands.

“Also,” he said, “any human who works closely with us should know these facts. It’s always been that way. I work with only a few humans, including Devin, and believe me, they all knew the score before meeting me.”

And I obviously didn’t.

I could see his point of view. I wasn't used to beating up everyone I suspected, but that was how immortals did it, I guess? Not an excuse, and he shouldn't have done it to me, but a hint of understanding was creeping in.

However, my throat hurt, and I couldn't let my resentment go.

Ryder had two tiny bottles in his hand, but one of them was empty. He unscrewed the other one and held a cotton pad over the top. "Ready?"

"One more thing," I said.

He dipped his head at me.

"Apologize." I looked at him straight on. "And fucking mean it." It wouldn't fix anything, but I wanted to hear the words. Also, I didn't have the patience for lame apologies.

His lips pursed. "First, tell me who you are." When I didn't jump to obey him, he sighed.

"I told you already, and I didn't lie. I'm a new hire at Granier Translating," I said.

"And what is this about Devin?" he asked.

"Maria, my manager, told me he's coming and for me to stall until he gets here. I know you're an immortal, but not much about what that means."

Ryder stared into my eyes for a beat before nodding. "Alright, let's fix your stiff neck." Before I could say anything, he pressed the soaked cotton pad to my neck.

I tensed, expecting a burn like it was an alcohol-based antiseptic. But instead, it immediately induced a tingly, toe-curling, pleasurable feeling. It felt cold as well, like the soothing chill of a menthol rub.

I held myself still as he ran the pad from one side of my neck to the other.

"I really got you bad, didn't I?" he muttered with frustration. I could only see the top of his head moving as he ducked to my right.

But even when he swore under his breath as he tilted my neck to a side, I could feel the ache leaving me. I attempted a tiny twitch of my neck and felt absolutely no pain.

Ryder sat back on his heels.

After shaking my head several more times, I turned to him, gaping. “You should sell that,” I gasped. “Or give it to me and I will.”

“You would probably faint if you see it set broken bones or cracked skulls.” Ryder screwed the bottle cap back on. “And heal gunshot wounds.”

Does it push the bullet out like you see in those science fiction movies? The prospect was thrilling. I was a casual science follower, interested in the topic, but not enough to study it academically. It struck me suddenly how amazing this all was. Science fiction was right before my eyes.

“Do all immortals have those enhancements on hand?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Yes, all of us have temporary ones ready,” he replied. “However, most immortals get the simple ones, like healing and strength, permanently. You can’t undo permanent enhancements, but you can choose whatever you want.”

I wondered what permanent enhancements he had.

Now that my neck was functioning normally again, I grabbed my bag and stood up. “I would thank you, but since you choked me, I think you don’t deserve it.” It wasn’t an amazing jab, and he’d almost definitely heard better. However, I flounced away from him because it felt good.

“You know, they sent you here without ever telling Devin.”

I stopped in my tracks before spinning around. “*What?*”

“Here.” He tossed his phone to me, and I caught it just as it slapped me on my chest. “It makes no sense that Granier would send you here. That’s why you’re so suspicious.”

I scrolled through the text messages. “How do I know you’re not lying to me?”

“You don’t.” He tipped his head. “But wouldn’t Devin be here by now? And you know I’m an immortal, an important one at that. Why would they send a completely clueless newbie like you?”

My mind was racing. “Wait. Do you believe what I said about who I am?”

“I used an honesty enhancement,” he said casually, tapping the other empty bottle with a single fingernail. “So yes, I believe you.”

“You have trust issues,” I said, peering at the bottle closely. It was made of dark green glass and had no labels.

He tossed the two empty bottles into the trash, and I braced as they shattered. “Trust is earned.”

I could call Maria. But knowing her attitude, she would probably chew me up rather than give me an explanation. Granier Translating was an elite translating firm with the biggest, most important clients, and they hadn’t hired outsiders for *years*.

This year was an exception.

I’d worked my ass off in university to graduate on top of my class to get this job. I didn’t want to be fired before I even got in the door.

“You would only work with Devin,” I said, checking his expression.

He nodded. “For the past decade or so.”

Okay... “Why did your assistant let me in then?” I asked, bewildered. “It’s obvious that I’m not the right person from Granier.”

“Because no one disrupts us for no reason,” he replied. “It’s been that way for decades now. My immortals know I’m more than capable of protecting us all if need be.”

My eyes swept over his body, lingering on his muscles and well-toned arms. He looked like he was in his early thirties, at most. But I knew he was centuries old.

What should I do? I could leave, but I hadn't done my job yet. Would Ryder say anything to Granier and make me lose my job?

Or maybe he was lying to me. He had years to perfect his poker face, his false sincerity. But I liked to run on my instincts, and I felt like he was telling the truth.

As I contemplated my options, I felt a touch on my back from behind me.

"So what are you thinking?" He ran his hands over my bare shoulders.

When did he get behind me?

I bristled at his touch. My sweater was still on his bathroom counter.

His smooth hands ran over my skin, brushing away the loose hair in his way. He played with the spaghetti straps of my tank top, twisting it and pulling lightly like he wanted to snap the dainty string.

"I don't care why you're here," Ryder murmured into my ear. "I'll set that aside for later."

"Well, *I* want to know," I said croakily. "Maria threw me to the wolves." Or she thought Devin was actually coming.

Crap, I couldn't think right now.

"I think it's rather peculiar that you knew I'm an immortal, and you came anyway, knowing what I can do to you," he purred. "It's like you're begging me to wreck you."

My mind became awash with seductive thoughts with his words. I was trembling now. His chest pressed against me and we were walking towards the couch again.

Ryder sat down and he yanked me into his lap.

I tried to get up, but my legs weren't touching the ground and his arm was like a belt around my hips.

"Stop struggling." The tone of his voice was light and amused. "I'm not letting you go. Sit tight before my cock joins the party."

I immediately stiffened, my thighs snapping together.

“There you go,” he whispered, smoothing a hand over my stomach. “Now let’s talk.”

“Are you going to let me leave?” I hated how timid I sounded. But I was in the arms of someone much more powerful who could do whatever he wanted with me.

“Eventually,” he said. “For now, let’s get to know each other, shall we? Let me peek into that brain of yours.” He eyed me hungrily, sliding a finger to rest against my temple. “I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

“There isn’t much to know.”

His breath brushed over my neck. “I feel like I could break you in half.”

I jerked away from him, my face flushing with indignation and confusingly, attraction. *What the hell?* “Ryder!”

“There’s my first name,” he smiled friskily. “Say it one more time.”

“We can talk, but I need you to give me some space. You’re suffocating me.”

Ryder considered my face for a moment. “You won’t run? I don’t want to accidentally hurt you if I need to chase you.”

My pulse jumped in my neck. “I know I can’t go far. I won’t waste my energy like that.”

In a blink of an eye, my butt was planted on the seat, and he was across the room next to his desk. “Alright, let’s talk. I could tell you about us.”

“I don’t want to know,” I blurted out.

“Why?”

“Because knowledge is power. I know how secretive immortals are, and what you do to humans if we reveal anything. I don’t know what you have cooking in your labs, or how you’ll kill me. I want nothing to do with any of it.”

He leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms. “It seems like you have a lot of preconceived notions about us.”

“I don’t want to stand out, not to you immortals. I have to protect myself. You’re practically superhumans.” I heaved out a sigh. “For lack of a better word.”

“Your government calls us anomalies.” He sneered at the label.

He probably had connections within government agencies to get this kind of information, since nobody publicly acknowledged immortals.

“I’m assuming I shouldn’t refer to you as anomalies,” I said wryly, noticing how his lips twisted. “Is it derogatory?”

He nodded. “Personally, I don’t mind it. But I’m offended on behalf of my immortals. They stay isolated from our broader community, so they end up indulging and connecting with human culture a lot more. Being different can be a tough pill to swallow. But I don’t withhold news from them.”

Ryder was an intense man. No, not *man*, but an immortal.

And he appeared to be willing to reveal certain secrets to me.

I recalled Maria’s warnings about Ryder. “What’s with your reputation?” I studied him. “There must be a story behind it.”

His lips quirked up. “You just said you don’t want to know anything. Are you changing your mind?”

I flushed. My sense of self-preservation didn’t overrule my natural curiosity.

The phone on Ryder’s desk rang.

He swung around and glared at it before snatching up the receiver. “What?” His voice was snappy and impatient. As he listened, the energy around him seemed to thicken as his mood plummeted and his shoulders hunched over.

Seeing that he was preoccupied, I inched over to my belongings and started shoving the items that spilled out back

into my bag.

“No rush, you’re free to leave.”

I looked up to see him striding towards me. “I can go?”

“You could always leave,” he murmured, pushing my hands away and zipping up my bag himself. He swung it over his shoulder and grabbed my hand. “You chose to stay.”

“Did you forget threatening me?” I asked, trying in vain to get my hand back. But his grip only tightened, and he dragged me to the door.

“The point is, you stayed. I didn’t physically restrain you, did I?” He smiled down at me like the lunatic he was. “I would’ve liked it if you pushed back more. Made me hunt you down.”

I shuddered, and his grin grew more feral. “You’re crazy.”

Ryder’s gaze was smothering now, and we reached my car. He spun me around and pressed me against the driver’s seat door.

I gazed up at his fiery stare, unable to look away. He commanded my attention like no one else ever had, and that was a frightening thing.

One hand rested on the side of my neck and the other came to cradle my cheek. The heat from his palms was stark against the cold air.

Ryder took a step closer, and he leaned his body against mine.

My mouth grew dry as he studied me with an indecipherable expression on his face.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he said softly.

My fingers dug into my thigh as his lips barely brushed against mine.

“So,” he murmured, “are you going to stop me?”

I held my breath as my words stayed caught in my throat.

He hurt me today. Then healed me. And made my body feel things I'd never felt before. He was an enigma that drew me to him, and we had an undeniable spark.

Ryder's eyes brightened with triumph. His thumb rubbed my jawline and tilted my head to the side. After brushing his nose against mine once, he dipped his head and pressed his lips against my neck.

I froze as he nuzzled my neck. Tingling goosebumps followed his movements, and my body clenched. My stomach hollowed out and that fluttering feeling wasn't going away.

His mouth ghosted over my skin, travelling over my collarbone and settling in the hollow of my throat. There, he placed a hint of pressure and whispered, "Saige Kinley, what a pleasure."

My eyes were wide when he pulled back. My legs felt wobbly, and I braced against the car, relieved for the support.

He tore the door open without unlocking it and set my bag down on the passenger seat. After shutting it, he ducked his head and quickly nipped the bottom of my lip. "Drive safe."

I watched him stride away, my mouth stinging from his teeth. I ran my tongue over my lip in hopes of easing the fiery bite, but the feeling lingered.

Even as I drove away, I couldn't concentrate on much else. With just one meeting, Ryder Belshaw found a way to cement himself into my mind.

SAIGE

I was in New York early to speak with Devin because I met with his designated client.

Devin Wong had a large office on the top floor of the building. It overlooked the cityscape, and I felt like a mogul when I stood at the windows. He didn't have a printed job position on his nameplate, and I couldn't find him on the company website.

So I went into the meeting with him blind.

Thankfully, Devin appeared chill and was now staring at me with wide eyes after I detailed meeting Ryder.

"Huh," he said, leaning back in his desk chair. He stroked his beard and stared at his bookshelf in deep thought. "Interesting."

"What's interesting?" I asked.

"Excuse me, Saige. I need to think for a moment," he said in a cordial tone.

I nodded, sitting back.

Devin was a middle-aged man, and the only signs of his age were the streaks of gray in his jelled-up, short hair. He seemed to be fit and athletic, wearing full jogging attire today.

If his office was any sign of his personality, I felt like we would get along very well. Devin had a mini-golf putting green set up against the back wall and a magnetic dartboard. A

small fridge and a collection of glasses sat behind his desk, right next to his wall of bookshelves.

“Maria’s fired,” Devin finally said. “Just so you know.”

I perked up. “Why?”

“The way she handled you was unacceptable. Ryder put in a complaint, as did I.” He grinned at me. “Both of us have a lot of sway here.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. “Even though I don’t know what really happened, I appreciate you standing up for me.”

“Ryder was adamant, and she acted out of line. We have protocols here in place on how to handle our VIP clients. She should’ve waited for me instead of sending you.” He shook his head. “I don’t go out of town usually, and coincidentally, I was on a flight. Maria floundered.”

Getting someone fired before my first official day at work was rather unexpected.

“You’re under my management now,” Devin announced.

My deep sense of relief made me relax my posture. “Oh, thank God.” Ryder seemed like a nice enough person, unlike Maria.

“Since Ryder wants you to work with him too, there wasn’t another option,” he added. “Nobody else knows about immortals here.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said teasingly. “I feel so wanted.”

His office chair creaked loudly as he adjusted his seat. “He is... unusually interested.”

“Are you reporting my every move back to him?”

Devin eyed me. “Something like that.” When I raised my eyebrows at his answer, he chuckled. “I don’t want to lie to you.”

“Can’t he leave me alone?” I reclined in the chair, my hands rubbing my eyes. “How the hell do I fly under the radar now? I just want to do my job.”

“Maybe he won’t ask for you again,” Devin said unconvincingly. “Sorry, kid.”

I sighed. “Sucks to be the chosen one.”

After he briefed me on my simple assignment, he took me on a tour around the office. Everybody was hard at work but still flashed pleasant smiles when I passed by.

We walked to the large kitchen, which was open to the rest of the office. All the cubicles were set up right there, without a separate door, wall or anything.

Devin handed me a mug of water.

“Water cooler talk?” I grinned. “Now it really feels like I’m working in an office.”

Devin sighed. “You’ll get sick of it soon enough. I always jump at the opportunity to work on-site. Lucky I have seniority here, and since you work with me, you’ll get all the perks, too.”

“You know what? You’re alright.” I winked at him.

We continued to banter, but just then a blonde-haired man strode purposely through the office. He stopped in front of an empty desk and took his phone out. One of the company’s assistants, Garret, ran to his side, apologizing profusely.

This mystery man was vaguely familiar, and I wracked my brain trying to figure it out. When he turned to speak with Garret, I got a clearer view of his face.

Suddenly, it clicked.

“He hired me,” I whispered.

In fact, this man gave me an extremely hard time by forcing me to converse with him about politics in French. I’d expected to be grilled, but he talked to me for an hour when the other three interviewers let me leave after twenty minutes combined.

After experiencing how quickly the others ended my interviews, I thought I’d blown it. Sitting through the last one with that man made me sweat, and my voice trembled at the

beginning before I regained my composure. But by the end, our conversation flowed comfortably.

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” he said, closing his folder and standing up.

I stood up and followed him to the door. “It was an enjoyable conversation, Mister—” I paused. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“I didn’t offer it.” He turned around, pinning me with his heated, blue-eyed stare. “Call me Alex. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other very soon.”

And here I was.

Maybe it was his demeanour or the way certain people reacted as he walked me to the exit, but I felt like a lot was going on with that man.

“Want a cookie?” Devin dug through the prepackaged cookies sitting on the counter. “The butter ones will clog your arteries, but it’s good enough that I don’t care.”

I made a mental note to steal a handful to hide in my cubicle, but I had better things to do right now.

“Who is that man?” I asked Devin in a hushed whisper.

He gave the man a quick look before doubling back, slack-jawed. “Fucking hell, that’s Alexander Moreau. Ryder’s going to be pissed.”

Another member of the Quorum?

My pencil slipped from my fingers and fell onto the shiny linoleum floor with a clatter.

I could barely hear it.

Was Granier a company for immortals? Maybe I should quit my job.

“Devin,” I hissed. “Why is he here?”

“I don’t know.” His eyes were wide. “We have immortal clients, sure. But they don’t come to our headquarters. We work for them.”

“Is he like Ryder?” Even though it was a terrifying experience, I lived through it.

Devin shook his head. “I only know a little, but he’s a very influential guy in our world. He somehow stayed under the radar for someone so important. Moreau stays in the shadows and pulls a ton of strings in politics and the corporate world.” He ran his fingers through his hair and his eyebrows furrowed. “Why is someone like him doing here, of all places? Maybe he’s involved with management or ownership. I don’t pay much attention to that. ”

I clenched my fist on top of my thigh. “Yeah, maybe.” It would sort of explain why he was part of the hiring process.

Devin washed the last of his cookie down with a gulp of water. “Time to get back to work, Saige. I left the files on your desk. Do as much as you can for the rest of the day, and I’ll check it tomorrow morning.”

I thanked him and watched him head back to his office.

So this was it. My first day at work.

Instead of going to my cubicle right away, I decided to go to the washroom first. After I finished my business and washed my hands, I studied my identification card in the mirror. I looked dead tired in my employee photo, but seeing my name there with *Granier Translating* above it still filled me with glee.

Sighing happily, I knocked the door open with my shoulder. As I turned to go down the hallway, a voice came from right behind me.

“Hello.”

“Crap!” I jumped, a hand to my chest, before spinning around. “Oh, um, it’s you.”

It was, as I just learned, Alexander Moreau. He was an immortal, Quorum member, and my interviewer. *I have to pretend like I don’t know that he’s an immortal.* But I had the strange feeling I couldn’t hide much from him.

Today he was dressed similarly to the last time I saw him. Classically put together in a fitted navy suit with a matching tie and shiny gold clip. Stubble covered his square jaw, giving his elegant features a rugged edge.

“How have you been?” His arresting gaze was intense with a steadiness that made me uneasy.

“Good,” I replied, doing my very best to not shift my feet. “I hope you’re well.”

“I’m better now.”

“I don’t know if you had a hand in it,” I said. “Or if you put in a good word. But I’m hired, so thank you if you did.”

I said “if” a million times, didn’t I? I wanted to smack my forehead.

He still hadn’t said anything, merely staring at my face, expressionless.

“Sir?” I asked hesitantly. “Is everything alright?”

“You look lovely today.”

I looked down at my outfit. It was a simple emerald green office dress with short sleeves. “Nothing special, but I appreciate the compliment.”

“Would you like a mint?” he asked abruptly.

I could feel my face heating. “Does my breath stink?” Was that why he was staring? Wondering if he should bring it up or not?

He held the candy out to me, and I took it. It was the kind you find next to the cash registers at restaurants.

“I meet a lot of new people, and I don’t like chewing gum. It’s a small thing to do to set a good impression.”

I mentally noted that for the future. I didn’t expect to meet clients anytime soon since I was a newcomer, but I’ll collect advice for now.

“They’re throwing a welcome party for you,” he said. “Will you be coming with someone?”

“No.”

“You answered that quickly. No hesitation.”

I shrugged. “Even back home, I attended events alone. Plus, now I’m new to the city. There haven’t been many opportunities to make new friends.”

“Are you someone who likes that? A social butterfly of sorts?” As he spoke, a lock of his blonde hair dipped onto his forehead.

Seeing this impeccably dressed man with his hair askew bothered me, and my fingers ached to brush it back for him. He was so put together that it ruined the illusion.

“Saige?”

“I don’t have a preference,” I said. “It can get lonely if I’m alone all the time, but I’m still getting my footing here. So I’m preoccupied.”

He took a step closer to me. “Are you lonely now?” His words were low and guttural, a hush of intimacy underlining his simple question.

Heat washed over me, from the center of my chest to the tips of my toes. I almost teetered on my slight heels, but I held myself steady with a hand on the wall.

Alex didn’t move.

I didn’t have any experience with men being this forward with me. Personally, I made the first move with all my prior boyfriends. I didn’t like to wait around, playing those *will-he won’t-he* games. The only other man who showed me his dominant side was Ryder Belshaw.

Their straightforwardness pushed me off-kilter and looking back to my meeting with Ryder, he took easy advantage of that fact.

Were all immortals like this?

Alex was a stranger to me, but he spoke like we had a prior understanding. It wasn’t like being picked up at a bar by a

skillful player. He seduced with his eye contact and the sinful tone of his voice.

“You’ve been asking all the questions, Alex,” I murmured, a little breathless. I mustered up my usual confidence with men and set my shoulders. “Tell me, are *you* lonely?”

His beat of silence felt heavy. “I have been looking for a woman,” he revealed lowly. “*My* woman. It’s time I settled down and got married.”

I’d expected him to rebuff my question. But with the way he was looking at me, I couldn’t help but feel a little lost under his piercing attention.

Desperate for something to do, I ripped open the candy wrapper. “Any luck? The dating scene can be tricky.”

“I actually wanted to ask you.”

My mind jumped to the possibility that he was asking for me to be his wife. Not a good sign. Fantasizing about my gorgeous superior at work was a big no-no.

I tilted my head in pretend thought, hoping I wasn’t so easy to read. “Sorry, I don’t know anyone interested in marrying so young,” I told him. “My friends are all my age.” I popped the mint into my mouth, sucking at the dry candy to bring out the flavour quicker.

Alex was before me before I could even blink. His chest bumped into my breasts, and my back thudded against the wall. He slid the tip of his nose against my mouth and inhaled deeply.

When his unsteady eyes met mine, he whispered, “Don’t do that, Saige.”

I was flustered by his tumultuous gaze and sudden closeness. “Don’t do what?”

He slid a finger over my mouth, pressing against the seam until my lips parted for him. “You doing anything with that mouth”—he gave me a heated look—“is positively sinful.”

I basked under his possessive attention until reality slipped in. “Alex, we work together. This isn’t right.”

He gave me a secretive smile but moved back.

I felt a touch of disappointment, even though I should be relieved. “Well, I’ll get back to work then. It was nice to see you.” I was hesitant to leave, but I had to.

“Wait.” The curt word made me turn back around.

Alex stepped forward to me. His hand wrapped around my neck and his grip ran upward until I tilted my chin up. He leaned down to meet my mouth. “Soon.” The word puckered his lips, grazing mine.

It was barely a touch, and yet I felt a tingle deep within my bones. I knew I would dream of his searing eyes.

He released me and walked away casually like he didn’t just manhandle me in the hallway.

I was left standing there, dazed.

When I got back to my desk, I fell into my seat. Shutting my eyes tightly, I counted backwards from ten.

A male voice said, “Slacking already?”

I immediately straightened up, my hands slapping onto my desk. “What? No. Sorry.”

Xavier, my coworker who sat next to me, grinned. “No need to freak out, it’s just me.” He told me that he joined the company four years ago and was the newest hire before I came along.

I blew out a stream of air. “There’s always the need. I still need to prove myself.”

“I heard you dealt with Ryder Belshaw,” Sally, my mentor who sat across from me, remarked. She studied me behind her thin-framed glasses. “That’s quite something already.”

“He’s a piece of work,” I replied bluntly, recalling how he held me in place and made me feel... things. “I don’t know how Devin does it.”

“With him monitoring you, you should be fine,” Sally said. “Or at least, I think so. You’re the first one who has worked with Ryder except for Devin.”

How reassuring.

Xavier clapped my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it.”

I stared down at my documents and swivelled my mouse around. “Yeah, that’s the plan.”

There was nothing I could do about it. And after that encounter with Alex, my head was spinning.

I shook off my confusing emotions.

“What’s this about a welcome party?” I asked, grasping at any semblance of normalcy. “I just heard about it.”

“What welcome party?” Xavier rubbed his forehead. “There’s no party.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t get one, I don’t think it’s a thing around here.”

“Yeah,” Sally agreed. “Sorry to disappoint you, Saige.”

“It’s fine.” I frowned. “I just heard someone mention it.”

So Alex lied about it? Why would he do that?

A notification appeared at the top right corner of my desktop from the company chat, and I latched onto my work again. By the time the day was over, I felt exhausted. Not as tired as I used to feel after studying for hours for my final exams, but it was close.

“Have a great weekend!” I waved at my coworkers before running to the elevators. After leaving the building, I tucked my identification card away into my purse.

Finally, two days of rest. While work wasn’t gruelling, I missed the days when I could sleep in until noon.

I got back to my studio apartment, shut the door, and tossed my keys back into my bag. When I turned to look at my new humble abode, I almost laughed.

Humble. That sounded about right.

There was no furniture except for a dusty, old armchair in the middle of the empty living room. I kept the drapes closed because my neighbour was close enough to knock on my

window. There was a leftover bedframe when I got there, so I invested in a comfortable mattress while using cheap sheets and a comforter.

If I showed this place to my parents, they would definitely offer to help me out, but I wanted to depend solely on myself for a change. They already gave me the psychological comfort of knowing I had their unwavering support, and that was enough.

I headed to the tiny kitchen to put the kettle on before I went to change out of my work clothes. As I took out my earrings, a knock came from the front door.

I jogged over to the door and got on my tiptoes to look through the peephole. It was completely black. I pulled away from the hole and blinked furiously before looking again.

Nope. Still black.

The knock came again.

Screw it. I swung open the door. My sense of self-preservation was at an all-time low.

The man standing there looked safe enough, reminding me of a character in Sherlock Holmes. He had on a long trench coat, a vest, and a tweed cap. I half expected him to speak in a posh English accent.

“My name is Pierce. I am here on behalf of Pendulum.”

The security company helmed by Maddox Nicoli?

First Ryder, Alexander, and now Maddox?

I didn't believe in coincidences.

“I'm not interested in whatever you have to say,” I said, easing the door shut. “You have a good day.”

He immediately wedged his foot in the door. “I need to deliver a message from Maddox Nicoli!” The man cried out desperately.

Maddox was so well known with the perfect mixture of mystery and bad boy hotness, I always found him intriguing.

But it was the kind of intriguing that was satisfied by admiring him from a distance.

“He means you no harm, he’s merely c-curious.” It would’ve been a lot more convincing if Pierce wasn’t sweating profusely, his hands shaking as he reached for his handkerchief. He leaned in closer. “Please come with me willingly so you don’t get hurt.” His eye twitched, and he jerked his chin towards the right.

I frowned in that direction before finally noticing movements in the shadows.

“They’re following Nicoli’s orders to take you. If you resist, well, your neighbour is awfully lonely.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re using the elderly woman next door to make me come with you?”

Inside I was freaking out, but I wouldn’t show it. I’d become quite the poker player during college and part of my expertise was hiding my expression.

Now if Maddox himself was here, I’d probably react as I did with Ryder. Despite how attractive he was, the man had an air about him that screamed danger. But Pierce seemed harmless, and he looked like he was about to pass out from delivering the message.

Since I’d recently moved here, I didn’t know much about the old woman who lived next to me. Given what I knew about Maddox, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he harmed innocent people to win someone’s compliance.

Should I call the police?

“I guess I’m walking into my death trap,” I mused, slowly inching away from the door. Pierce was still preventing me from closing the door fully.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

“Excuse me.” I scrambled for the device, eager to have an excuse to delay my decision.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Your parents are adorable

They also sent a photo of my parents sitting in the outdoor seating at a restaurant. I could recognize the place anywhere because it was my parents' go-to Friday evening date spot.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the photo. My hands were shaking and my heartbeat thumped loudly in my ears.

They looked so happy and unaware. Whoever was watching them could hurt them without a second thought.

“We don't want to do anything to you. Or your family.”

I looked up at Pierce's words and flashed the screen of my phone. “Then what the fuck is this?”

Pierce winced. “We only do what we're told.”

So everything he said meant nothing. The second Maddox told him to kill me, he would do just that.

Before he could say anything else, he pushed the door open with one hand. Over his shoulder, the stranger in the shadows inched forward. Now that he was in the light, I could see he was wearing a leather jacket and a black mask over his face. A glint came from his hand.

Crap. That was a blade of some sort.

I swallowed. “You're going to take me even if I don't want to go?”

He bobbed his head. “His orders.”

I clutched onto my phone, which was still illuminated with the photo of my parents. The brightness mocked me. “Let's go.”

SAIGE

Once I was seated in the van, Pierce gave me a blindfold. The entire journey was quiet, and I didn't feel like making small talk either.

Should I have put up more of a fight?

I just didn't think it would've made a difference. But I may have misjudged the situation.

Crap. I wished someone would speak. With no distractions, I doubted my decision-making skills.

The man in the front seat started muttering something rapidly, and I strained my ears to listen in. It was a foreign language, maybe Spanish? I picked up certain words like *chica* and *patrón*, but my French proficiency wasn't helping me a lot.

I had my phone in my pocket, but I didn't want to draw any attention to it. Still, my fingers ached to hold it and call for help.

The drive was quick, and soon, with my vision still obstructed, Pierce led me out of the car and whisked me through hallways. Several doors closed with an echoing finality behind me. Chattering voices replaced the ominous ringing when we came to a stop.

Giggling, glasses clinking, and low masculine tones permeated the air. Maybe it was a massive dinner party. It sure sounded like there were a ton of people here.

Or immortals.

I shivered.

“Take your blindfold off,” Pierce said.

My hands were unsteady as I complied. I exhaled in a failed attempt to soothe the nerves brewing in my stomach before finally opening my eyes. Blinking furiously, I glanced around the dimly lit hall.

It was a mixture of decadence and mystery. Shiny gold light fixtures and plating lined the walls, and the floors were a smooth slate gray cobblestone. The lighting made my surroundings feel like a medieval dungeon, keeping everything relatively dark.

This was a throne hall. And I was standing alone in the middle of it all like I was a court advisor with something to tell the king.

However, nobody was paying any attention to me. They were too busy with their... activities.

On both sides of me were long extended black tables that sat at least a dozen formally dressed men and women. Most of them either had scantily clad women or bare-chested men draped over their laps. They kissed openly, their hands underneath each other's clothes.

“Oh, you're so powerful,” a man crooned sultrily to the man he was sitting on. He wrapped himself around him. “Let me please you.”

I averted my eyes, not really interested in seeing people being stroked and flirtatiously whispered to. I could hear moans coming from behind me, and my back became even more rigid. Whether or not this was a giant orgy, I wanted no part in it.

And in the front of the hall, elevated above the rest of the delegation, was *him*. The third and last member of the Quorum.

Maddox Nicoli was a large man, a fact that was obvious even in his oversized golden throne. His shiny rings tapped on the armrest while he sprawled in his seat. Although his

demeanour appeared casual, his dark eyes alertly scanned his subjects.

He was decked out in a black suit that stretched over his wide shoulders and muscular frame. Swirling black tattoos peeked out from the open collar of his white shirt. His shoulder-length hair and beard made him look more rugged and masculine.

My mouth grew dry as I stared at him. I crossed my arms as a chill seemed to caress my skin. He looked just like his photographs except in person, that magnetism he emanated was magnified a hundredfold.

He was watching me, and although there was much distance between us, I felt the weight of his attention hit me hard.

I took a step back.

“Don’t move!” a man hissed from the side. “Do you want to get killed?”

Maybe I did because I immediately scurried in his direction. At that moment, I would do anything but stand in the middle of the hall like I was waiting for him to slaughter me right there.

The man shot me a fearful glance before running off.

I shrugged, taking his spot.

Where the hell was Pierce? I knew he was unreliable, but he was also the only one I’d interacted with this whole time.

Right when I was peering around, Pierce strode in from the side door at the front of the hall. He stopped to stand behind Maddox’s throne. His back was rigid, his gaze forwards, looking like a trained soldier.

He looked nothing like the nervous, shaking man I’d seen outside of my apartment.

Did I get duped?

The main door burst open, and a tall man stumbled inside. He was bulky and looked like a bodybuilder, with straggly

brown hair.

The man stopped where I was before and bowed his head. “My Liege.” I could see the obvious shaking of his legs. He gripped onto his yellow folder, holding it so tightly the paper crumpled in his hands.

Maddox looked at him distastefully, a sneer settling on his perfect face.

The man flinched.

The hall immediately went silent. It happened so quickly that I almost gasped. I dug my fingers into my thigh as a foreboding sense of trepidation filled me. Everyone was watching the scene unfold with hungry, vengeful smirks and narrowed eyes. The energy in the room grew tense.

I was swimming in a room full of predators.

“Do you want to explain yourself?” Maddox’s voice was quietly lethal, like a sharp knife slicing through the air.

The man’s knees locked together, and he crumpled into a heap on the floor. He looked up with a pitifully hopeful expression on his face. “You’ll let me explain?”

Maddox smirked. “No.” He lazily flicked his fingers, and two men appeared from the shadows and made quick work to bind his hands. They duct-taped his mouth before hauling him away. He continued to struggle and shout against the tape, the muffled shrieking coming from deep within his throat. The three of them disappeared around the corner.

Silence permeated the air that was previously thick with laughter and lust.

“Fuck,” a man whispered from my left.

The door opened again, and another man was thrown inside. Scratch that, he was young enough that I may even call him a boy.

He fell onto his hands and knees right in front of me. The boy shivered on the floor, his eyes bloodshot and mouth agape. His filthy white sneakers scrambled on the ground, but he couldn’t stand up.

Standing up from his throne, Maddox drew himself up to his full height. As he came down the steps, his heavysset boots thudding, he suddenly stilled. Almost like it was an impulse or a hypnotic force, his face turned to me.

As he came closer, our eyes met. There was a shift in his gaze, barely a widening of his eyes, before they once again slid into slits. His body grew tense, and a vein crawled up the side of his neck.

The force of his eye contact hit me like a tornado, entrapping me in his lure.

Attraction.

He had everyone's attention, but he didn't quicken his pace. Maddox calmly sauntered over to the boy and stood over him. He rolled up his sleeves methodically. "Now you, Zen, I'm going to make a message out of you."

"My Liege, I—"

"Shut the fuck up." His controlled tone wasn't loud but still biting.

I didn't know what Zen did to deserve Maddox's wrath, but right now I fought the urge to shy away from the scene in front of me. He wasn't that close, yet I still felt his presence like he was touching me.

Zen's sweat slid down his face as his eyes darted around the room. His look of pitiful despair made my throat ache, and without looking, I knew nobody would help him.

Was this cruelty a typical situation for immortals? I knew humans weren't the model of morality, and we were much better at hiding it.

I glanced up to see that Maddox was looking at me again with an unreadable look on his face.

While keeping his eyes on me, he snatched Zen up and neatly sliced a knife over the boy's neck.

"*No!*" I gasped in horror as Maddox tossed him aside like a bag of sand.

He merely grinned, and the body subsequently burst into flames. There was no way it was normal fire since, within seconds, the corpse was completely charred and blackened.

What the fuck?

I must've made a sound because the man to my right shushed me and yanked on my sleeve.

Maddox smirked at my reaction to his cruelty before his icy mask enveloped his face. "Traitors," he growled, "will not be tolerated. As you know good and well."

Everyone remained quiet. Nobody had my reaction. They merely watched seriously, and even the escorts looked grim.

"Let this be a demonstration for those who dare betray us." Maddox's glare morphed into an arrogantly seductive mask. He suddenly laughed, making a shiver run up my spine. "Sorry to disrupt the evening," Maddox purred at his stunned, fearful guests. "Please continue."

Although he sounded cordial, there was an undercurrent of his displeasure. But his immortals didn't hesitate at all, and within moments, they were laughing and conversing as if nothing happened.

I was too busy looking at the body on the ground to notice Maddox approaching me.

"Oh!" I stumbled backwards, knocking into someone, but his hand locked onto my wrist.

There was swearing behind me, and I found myself leaning into Maddox out of instinct.

"Keep moving," he barked over my shoulder. His hand curled tighter around me, and he yanked me into his embrace.

My heartbeat was thundering a mile a minute, a stark contrast to his. I could feel the steady beat under my cheek as I resisted the temptation to rub my face against his soft shirt.

"You done?"

I stiffened and lurched away from him. When I whirled around, the corpse was already gone. "Why did you kill him?"

He's so young."

"Zen was one hundred and twenty years old," Maddox said lazily. "Knowing that, does he reach your minimum age to be a murder victim?"

I was still having trouble processing this whole immortal business. "He looked like he's in his twenties." Appearances meant nothing in his world.

"His mother was clever," he said. "By freezing him at this age, he could get away with a lot more. Many people have sensibilities like yours and see an innocent boy who deserves second chances."

"So he didn't consent to be changed?"

Maddox tilted his head, considering my question. "I suppose you're correct. But those initial circumstances mean little after so many years and all his crimes."

"But knowing the context helps you understand him. Whatever... betrayal he did, this is a lot." My mind flashed back to the tiny bottles I'd seen at Ryder's office and their quick healing powers. Was this the lengths they had to go to prevent healing?

Thinking about the corpse made me cringe inwardly. *I highly doubt anything could cure death. But I could be wrong.*

"Consequences are consequences. No exceptions," he growled. "This is Quorum business."

That was code for "this is not your business and shut up." Got it. But I was already in so deep, and every new piece of information I learned made me increasingly interested.

I sighed.

"Anyway, immortality stops you at the age you are," Maddox revealed. "If I gave you the serum, you'll be as you are now." He ran his eyes over my body. "Delicious. Succulent. *Dangerous.*" He hissed out that last word.

My heart skipped a beat at his tone, but I tried to ignore it. "Maddox..."

His nostrils flared, and in a flash, he pressed his nose to the top of my head. The next second he was standing in front of me again like he didn't sniff me.

"What a creature," he breathed. The intensity in his stare was maddening.

I blinked. "Did you just call me a creature?"

After encountering Ryder and Alex, I felt like these immortals differed greatly from any man I'd met. Was this what happened to people who lived a long time?

"Would you ever want to be an immortal?" he asked abruptly.

I wrinkled my nose. "Living forever? I don't think so. No offence."

"You don't need to think it over at all? Just no?"

"I barely know anything about what being an immortal means. But I don't like the idea of not having an expiry date. Living with no end seems dull and repetitive."

"I don't know about that," Maddox interjected. He crossed his arms, and it made his muscles bunch up in a very attractive way. "I find myself stimulated by new things and new people, though admittedly it's rather rare."

I shrugged. It was hard to articulate my thought process. "I think I'd appreciate life more if I know it's not forever."

"What does that look like for you? How are you living life to the fullest right now?" His sardonic tone made my hackles rise.

"Stop acting like you know anything about me!" I snapped. Somehow, in his presence, I'd forgotten how Pierce basically forced me to be here.

"You don't know a thing about living, do you, baby girl?" Maddox's eyes gleamed, and he leaned forward. "And I might just have to show you."

There was a sudden commotion behind me, and he grabbed my hand, pulling me to the side.

I stumbled along, my breathing quickening at the possibility of being alone with him. He wasn't a client, and nobody knew I was here. If he wanted to murder me, there was nothing I could do.

But we stopped at an alcove in the back corner. There were marks on the floor showing that there was maybe furniture here before. A single torch-esque lamp really pushed the dungeon vibe of the hall.

I pressed my back against the wall, and he did the same opposite me.

He glared at the immortals who were still enjoying their debauchery, then he snapped his fingers.

It was like we were in our own bubble, cut off from the rest of the world. The only things I could hear were the sounds of my heartbeat thudding and my feet shifting on the bumpy, rocky ground.

I resisted the urge to shiver at the promise in his hungry stare. "Maddox, can you tell me why I'm here? Is it to show me how you're such a tyrant? We've never met before."

"You think I'm a tyrant?" He sounded amused as his thumb rubbed his bottom lip.

Hell, his seductive aura and his deliberate movements made everything he do unbearably sexy.

"Why am I here?" I repeated. I looked at his beard to avoid making eye contact with his intense stare. "And care to explain why you had Pierce pretend to be all fragile and abduct me?"

"There's quite a lot to unpack there," he replied. "And I'm fairly certain I did none of those things. I don't control how Pierce conducts his business, only that he gives me the results. And you came here of your own accord."

It was this bullshit again. Even Ryder subscribed to this twisted logic. And this was the same scene I saw in every mafia movie. "Threatening my parents doesn't mean voluntary."

“And as to *why* you’re here,” he murmured, “I received some interesting information and grew curious. And now, after seeing you in the flesh, I find my interest further piqued.”

Yeah, this was not making sense. I should’ve realized it in Oregon. “Why the hell is the Quorum paying attention to me?”

“A domino effect, since we’re nosy bastards.” Maddox paused. “But I wonder whose eye you caught first?”

I stayed silent. If he was digging for information, he wasn’t getting it from me.

“You met Alex already. How did he approach you? Did he make you bow and call him by his title?” A hint of disdain lined his question.

“His title?” I wasn’t surprised that he knew about my interaction with Alex. Surely he had enough connections and spies to learn anything he wanted.

“The noble Duke of Vale,” Maddox drawled. “He mysteriously disappeared after enough years have passed for people to notice he wasn’t ageing. After that, the title was passed on to his brother.”

“So he’s still known as a Duke?”

“A lot of our immortals are old-fashioned.”

Although Maddox didn’t seem particularly angry talking about Alex, I was led to believe that the three leaders were adversaries after centuries of tight-knit friendship.

What was the story there? Instead of potentially poking the bear, should I ask another immortal?

“Nothing happened with Alex. He was one of my job interviewers.”

He gave me an amused look. “Is that so?”

I frowned at his reaction. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I can understand the appeal, and you know what?” Maddox chuckled darkly. “I think I might keep you,” he murmured, determination solidifying in his stare.

Was I just some random object?

“I’m not yours to take.” I glared at him. “I’m not a pet!”

My refusal seemed to spark something in him. Maddox gritted his teeth, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. He smoothly pushed away from the wall, straightening himself like a leopard.

When he was right in front of me, his hand flashed up to pinch my chin. “When I want something, I take it.” Maddox towered over me. “I steal, I kill, and believe me, I *will* get what I want.” He leaned down so close that his lips brushed mine as he spoke.

My heart was beating erratically, and my every nerve ending was hyper-focused on this man in front of me. I remained frozen on the spot, unable to move away.

His tongue darted out, and he licked the seams of my lips. “Hmm.” He gazed down at me as his fingers slid under my thin t-shirt to tug on the straps of my bra.

My hands clung to his shirt helplessly as he dipped his head and continued to explore my mouth openly. It was so erotic and spine-tingling that it was driving me mad. We were kissing, and his addictive taste became all I could register. Every push and pull drew me in, and a cocktail of whirling emotions filled my soul.

“Saige Kinley,” he rumbled in a devastatingly masculine timbre. “Where have you been all my life?”

Just as I was about to get on my tiptoes to kiss him again, the door burst open and slammed against the wall. Shocked by the sudden sound, I turned to see the heavy wooden door splinter and crumble to the ground.

“I’ll have to send him an invoice. He’s paying to fix that,” Maddox remarked dryly.

When everyone in the room saw who was standing in the doorway, I watched their demeanours change to match the tense, abrasive atmosphere. It was smothering and so silent I could hear a pin drop.

Ryder studied the crowd in front of him, his face a mask of nonchalance. He scanned the room until our eyes met.

“Saige,” he breathed.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he was at my side.

He glared at Maddox. “*You don’t get to touch her.*” Ryder’s voice was a deep rumble. His hand shot out, and he yanked me behind him.

He didn’t let me go, and the sharp lick of pain made my head pound. Did he dislocate my arm socket? Probably not, but it sure hurt enough to feel that way.

“You’re hurting me.” I nudged his back and spoke softly to him.

Ryder’s eyes flashed as I rearranged the neckline of my shirt so my bra straps weren’t showing. His grip tightened for a moment before slightly loosening.

I backed away, keeping an eye on both immortals before I ran into someone.

This was becoming a terrible habit.

“Careful.”

Oh, it was Nicole.

“Now what is this?” Maddox drawled mockingly. “The great Ryder Belshaw shows his face in New York at last. What did I do to deserve this honour?” I could see his facial features tightening until they completely smoothed over. “Tell me. What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

“Come with me,” Nicole whispered, gesturing towards the door. “Leave them to it.”

I bit my lip, uncertain. “They look like they’re going to kill each other.”

“If they really wanted to, they would have years ago. You’ll just be collateral damage. Ryder doesn’t want you hurt, so please let me do my job.” Her tone was pleading now, and she was giving me pretty good puppy eyes.

“Fine.”

I looked back once to see the two of them still locked in a silent, animosity-filled stare. Before I turned away, Maddox turned to look at me, his dark eyes piercing.

I almost tripped on my feet at his savage grin as I hurried after Nicole and the door closed behind us.

SAIGE

“**R**yder hasn’t come to New York in decades,” Nicole revealed. “Proves how much he cares about you.”

I choked on my coffee. It was the cheap kind that came from a food truck parked on the curb. While Nicole also bought a pretzel, I’d declined since I lost my appetite a while ago.

After texting my parents and getting reassurance they were okay, I followed her to the bench that sat right outside the nearby park. Towering trees that cast shadows surrounded us, and the area was surprisingly empty.

Strangely, nobody prevented us from leaving Maddox’s lair. However, Nicole didn’t seem all that surprised about it.

“Ryder and I met once,” I reminded her. “You’re insane.”

She shrugged and bit into her pretzel. “Doesn’t matter. Once he decides on someone, he sticks to it.”

“He didn’t decide anything,” I muttered. “I haven’t seen him since Oregon.”

“You don’t understand. Back when Quorum was tight-knit and ruled together, New York was their headquarters. After it all went to shit when their relationships fragmented, this became Maddox’s territory. Ryder barely comes to New York.”

My mouth went dry. “What about Alex?”

Her lips twisted. “He doesn’t have it in him to hold steady values. He maintains the facade, but he’s too interested in maintaining the human and immortal relationship to be uninvolved. Maddox is the same.”

“So Ryder just does his own thing?” I didn’t know how I felt about that.

“Yeah. It’s a point of contention between the three of them, since being neutral and unaffected means the power of the Quorum is lessened.”

I wrung my hands, curiosity eating away at me. “Can you tell me more about immortals? And specifically, what happened between the Quorum?”

Knowing more wouldn’t hurt... right? Especially since these immortals were hanging around me these days, it would be smarter to learn more.

Uneasiness filled me. In the past week, my life took a turn from normalcy to immortals. From easygoing to complicated. And the change felt strange and disconcerting.

Nicole nodded. “Alright.”

I frowned. “Just like that? Isn’t secrecy a big thing for you guys?”

“Ryder cleared you. I can answer any questions you ask.”

“That sounds awfully irresponsible since I’m practically a stranger.”

She shook her head. “Nobody questions him unless he asks for advice. He’s our leader, and he knows the risks.”

“Dictatorship,” I muttered under my breath.

Nicole chuckled. “It works for us.” She finished her pretzel and crumpled up the paper bag in her hand. “Alright. Let’s start with our three leaders. I don’t know too much about their human days, but I can tell you about their falling out. I’m aware of the surface details.”

“Okay.” The looks on both Maddox and Ryder’s faces just now... I couldn’t fathom what happened there.

“It all boils down to human-immortal relations. A couple of decades back, the human government found out about us. They deemed us a threat, and still do. Alex wanted to take the diplomatic approach, Maddox was prone to violence and didn’t want to deal with peace talks. Ryder agreed with Maddox but ultimately didn’t choose a stance. A compromise couldn’t be reached.”

“Is that it?” The reactions I saw today and all I’d heard made it seem like a lot more.

Nicole sighed. “Not quite. I’d say Ryder and Alex had the biggest fallout. With how intertwined they all were, that affected Maddox too. I’ll let Ryder fill you in about his past since it’s his story to tell. But the problems all started with enhancements.” She paused. “You know about those, right?”

“Yes, Ryder told me. It’s like magic.” I still hadn’t forgotten about how quickly my neck healed. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She nodded. “And you won’t unless it’s from us.” Before I could say anything else, she stood up and took my empty coffee cup. “Hold that thought.”

As Nicole went to the nearby garbage can to throw away our trash, I drummed my fingers on my thigh, considering what to ask. Maybe I should’ve made a list. When she sat back down, my questions slipped out of me. “What about the enhancements? How does that work? Were you turned?”

She grinned. “I feel like I’m being interrogated.”

I winced. “Sorry.”

She waved a hand. “No, I like it. I rarely get to talk about us, it’s refreshing.”

“Don’t say that, I’ll definitely berate you with questions now!” I teased.

Nicole laughed. “I’ll look forward to it.” She kicked out her boots and leaned back on her hands. “Enhancements are Alex’s domain. He’s the only one who knows how to produce them. And since this whole immortality thing comes from a serum, that gives him a lot of power.”

“So you took a serum and became immortal? That seems quite easy.”

She nodded. “It’s like being sick and taking an antibiotic. You feel tired as your immune system works with the new drug. It’s nothing, really. But as you’d expect, the difficult thing is getting the serum.”

I pictured myself accidentally consuming a serum that made me immortal. *Oops! No more death for me.* “Yeah, no one’s leaving that lying around.”

“You’re more likely to find the other enhancements. Some have harsher side effects. You can choose to make enhancements permanent and it becomes a skill you have. But you only have a limited ability to handle side effects, so you have to choose wisely.” Nicole smiled cheekily. “Guess which ones I have?”

“Healing?” Ryder mentioned the common ones. “Strength?”

“Yes to those two. I also have one more. Super helpful for my job because my boss hates travelling the traditional way.”

Travelling? “You can go places? Like teleportation?”

She snapped her fingers. “Bingo!”

I gaped at her. “What the hell? How is that possible?”

“You’re amazed by that and not immortality?” Nicole asked disbelievingly. “Strange.”

“I’m already living,” I pointed out. “Prolonging it is cool, but it doesn’t feel like anything new. But being able to disappear and immediately appear in a new place is completely science fiction.”

“If you think that’s insane, Moreau is coming up with new enhancements as we speak.” Her eyes glittered excitedly as she spoke. “Teleportation is one of the earliest ones.”

“How does Alex do it?” I chewed on my bottom lip. “Scientists have been trying to figure out stuff like this for so long.”

“Well, Alex funded research back when he was a human and discovered immortality. It all started there. Obviously, he kept it a secret since then, and luckily, humans who mention immortality are considered crazy in your world.” A gust of wind blew by and several people walked by on the path in front of us. “Your government is a pain in the ass. They’ve been demanding the immortality serum.”

“*What?*” My surprise pitched my voice up. “Why?”

“You can imagine why. Power. Secrets. Coexisting peacefully must be a foreign concept. Lately, it’s gotten worse.” The space between Nicole’s eyebrows puckered. “The situation is escalating. I can’t say much about it, but the relationship has been strained to an irreparable point. Nothing can be solved without more peaceful discussions.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking this might not be the priority for the government. We have our own issues to deal with,” I pointed out. “We have a serial killer on the loose.”

The Senseless Ripper was murdering people in broad daylight on the streets of New York and, allegedly, Los Angeles. And while that wasn’t stopping anyone’s daily routine, law enforcement and politicians were facing backlash for not catching the killer yet.

She glanced at me. “Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

“Saige.”

I nearly jumped out of my seat. “Ryder! You scared me.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t look contrite, just haggard. His clothes were askew and frustration hung on the lines of his face. “Thanks, Nicole.”

She stood. “My Liege. I’ll leave you two to make some calls.” After a quick nod at me, she walked over to a shaded area of trees before disappearing entirely.

I twisted around to see if anybody noticed, but there was nobody around. Finally, I turned to my new companion, who was sitting next to me. He tugged on the collar of his shirt as if it was suffocating him.

“I don’t like being here,” Ryder revealed, exhaling harshly. “It brings back terrible memories.”

“I’m sorry about that.” And with him being so old, there must be a plethora of hard times he lived through.

He turned his eyes towards me. “It’s been a long time coming. Decades. I was planning on calling you after hearing about Alex. But then I found out about Maddox’s plan to meet you.”

So he just showed up, abandoning his habit of staying away.

“What does this have to do with you?” I asked bluntly. Being taken by Pierce and learning about immortals made my day way too eventful. I didn’t feel like being polite anymore. “Alex,”—I watched his jaw clench—“Maddox, and then you again. What the hell is going on?”

“Isn’t it clear?” He brushed his hand over the tip of my nose. “I’m pursuing you. Goodness, your nose is cold. Do you want something hot to drink?”

“I’m not cold. And I’m not interested.” The words came easily and automatically. But as if I triggered something, the wind picked up. The branches on the trees swayed. The swirling cold slipped under my thin clothes, making me shiver.

Ryder wordlessly took his jacket off and offered it to me.

“Thanks. I was kidnapped before I could get warmer clothes.” I took off my coat when I got home earlier.

Just as I reached out to take his jacket, he captured my hand in his and yanked me forwards, right into his arms. My chin landed on his shoulder and I got a strong whiff of his cologne. It was a woody, smoky scent that smelled irresistible. I pressed my nose to his skin, inhaling the heady scent.

Without thinking, I licked him.

Ryder, who was tucking his jacket around my shoulders, stilled. He gently tugged me away from him and peered into my eyes.

“Sorry, you smell good.” Forget these men, even I was acting odd.

“Don’t be sorry about that.” The small tilt of his lips showed his amusement, but his burning gaze reflected passion. “Damn, I want you,” he breathed. “But if I kiss you, I don’t think I could stop there.”

I shivered again, but this time I wasn’t cold.

He’s pursuing me.

Even if I ignored the fact that he was an immortal, we hardly knew each other. My friends back home would tell me to live a little and not overthink it. But all I knew was I wanted to explore Ryder right now and not commit to anything.

I hooked my fingers in the belt loops of his black jeans, my hand inadvertently brushing against his exposed skin. “Let’s just stay like this.” He was warm, and that was my excuse for why I wasn’t leaving his personal space. “Can you tell me anything about what I saw back there?”

Ryder didn’t say anything.

When I peeked up at him, my mouth parted at the dark look in his eyes.

He narrowed his eyes at me and dipped his mouth to my ear. “Are you wet? I can smell it.” His voice was low and husky. “Darling, just undo my jeans.”

I dropped my hand, which was sliding along his waistband that was hanging quite low. Blushing hard, I exclaimed, “Ryder!”

He could smell that?

“No?” He raised an eyebrow. “Then how about I touch you?”

I bit my lip as he slipped his hand into my dress pants, somehow undoing my clasp and zipper in the process. With his other hand, he pulled my legs apart deliberately, his large hand covering my inner thigh.

Just that movement made me grow wetter for him.

His icy fingers traced the outline of my pussy through the fabric, and my sensitive nerves caused a spike of pleasure to shoot through me.

Oh my goodness, was this really happening? With Ryder, and out in public?

I'd never done anything like this before, and the taboo sneakiness of being touched out in the open filled me with adrenaline. With a quiet gasp, I parted my legs further, hoping he'd put more pressure to ease this ache inside of me.

But Ryder continued to pet me lightly. I could feel his tantalizing touch teasing my pussy, and my head rolled back as soft moans escaped my lips.

The sky was so white, and I could barely see the plane flying by.

"Eyes on me," Ryder growled.

I jerked my gaze back to his, my pussy spasming at the possessive look in his eyes. Ryder already had a deep voice before, but when he was like this, all wildly seductive, his tone was a rich, melting caramel that hit me in all the right places.

Fucking. Hell.

I slid my arms around his neck as he flicked my clit and rubbed faster. "Oh my god." I dug my nails into the back of his neck, desperate for something to hold onto as the rising heat consumed me.

"Are you going to come without me touching your pretty little bare pussy, Saige?" he whispered. "Fuck, you're responsive. You'll feel so good around my cock, won't you, darling?"

His dirty words washed over me, and I sank my teeth into his earlobe to stop myself from moaning out loud. "Almost there." I grabbed onto his hair and yanked, panting now.

Ryder cursed. "Come for me, Saige."

"Mmm!" He clasped his free hand around my mouth to muffle my shout as bliss spread throughout my body. I

couldn't breathe and my pussy clenched around nothing, and the emptiness made me want him.

After I came down from my high, I realized he hadn't moved. He gave me a smouldering look and dipped his finger into my panties quickly before withdrawing his hand from my pants.

Ryder studied my wetness on his skin before sucking on his fingers, lapping up the remnants of my orgasm. The tiny flicks of his tongue and his intense eye contact made me want to do something about that bulge in his pants.

I ran my hand over the outline of his cock, and his stare positively burned. "I want to taste you, too."

His eyes darted to the right. "People are coming down the path."

Crap.

As I scrambled out of his lap, my phone fell to the gravel ground with a clatter. "Oh no!" Luckily, I had a good phone case. The lit-up screen told me it was almost eight-thirty. "It's late."

A couple walked by, chatting with each other and ignoring us completely. They were slow, perhaps on a post-dinner stroll, and we stayed silent as they passed.

After they were out of sight, I exhaled loudly. Now that I was standing up and away from Ryder, the lust that led to my reckless behaviour disappeared.

So much had happened this past week, and I felt so off-balance. Even with a boyfriend, I would've never done something like this.

I couldn't deny this connection I felt towards the Quorum. This magnetic draw I never experienced with anybody. And it didn't appear to be one-sided.

Ryder was the most personable out of the three, and despite how he treated me that day in Oregon, I felt comfortable with him. Alex was mysterious but had a strange allure about him.

And after today, I discovered Maddox was frighteningly lethal as much as he was attractive. He was, as advertised, a giant of a man, and also acted like a mob boss. He killed someone right in front of me as part of a public demonstration.

“You live nearby, so I’ll walk with you.” Ryder stuffed his hands in his pockets and cocked his head, awaiting my reply.

I cleared my throat, banishing my thoughts from my head. “Got the information from Devin?”

He laughed under his breath, and we started heading down the path towards the street. The sky was rapidly darkening and soon the city lights were all that illuminated the area. “It would take too long to wait for his reply. I have my ways.”

“Well, now aren’t you elusive?” I hopped over a crack on the sidewalk. “You and your secrets.”

“Fine.” He waited until we were at the end of the street before continuing. “I followed you home from work these past couple of days.”

“Wow. You didn’t even come and say hi?” I asked jokingly. It didn’t surprise me one bit that he was basically stalking me. “But really, that is quite creepy.”

“But it doesn’t freak you out.”

“No.” That was the truth, and I didn’t understand my own feelings. “Maybe I should go to the police.”

“That would be the sensible action,” he agreed. “But you won’t do that.”

I would’ve loved to refute him, but I sighed. I felt like one of those characters in a movie you yell at because they were acting irrationally. The title of the movie would be aptly named *My Stalker and Me*.

How should I reconcile my emotions and my rational mind? It seemed impossible.

We walked in silence for a few minutes until a thought came to me. “Wait a second. You said you came to New York because you heard about Maddox’s plans regarding me. *You*

knew I was going to get kidnapped and did nothing?" My incredulous voice was shrill in the quiet evening air.

Ryder peered down at me. "Maddox wouldn't have hurt you. I may hate it, but I know that for a fact."

"How?" I wrinkled my nose disbelievingly. "Can you explain that to me?"

"Speak of the devil," Ryder muttered, his pace slowing slightly.

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Can I see your palm?"

I frowned at the change of topic. "Uh, sure. But why?"

When I held out my hand, he grabbed it and interlaced his fingers with mine. Then he continued to walk, a smirk dancing on his lips.

"Why are we holding hands?" I hissed, trying to match his large footsteps.

He nodded towards the ornate building ahead of us on my right.

It took me a second, but when I spotted him, I gasped. Across the street, sheltered by the shadows of the building next to him, stood Maddox Nicoli.

And he didn't look thrilled.

He leaned against the wall, his scowling face hidden behind his long hair and beard. But even from a distance, I could see his corded neck and the tightness in his features. He aimed his icy glare at Ryder.

I twisted my wrists, trying to extract my hand. "I don't want to be a part of this." Their spat earlier today may be unresolved, and I wasn't sticking around to watch.

But, of course, Ryder wasn't letting go. "You're not going anywhere. You're mine," he said plainly.

I gaped at him. "No, I'm not. You... touching me doesn't mean anything like that."

Ryder's lips curled upwards even more. "He can hear you, you know. How about you let him know how I got to taste you? And darling, you looked so pretty when you came for me."

I wanted to die. "Oh, just shut up!" I didn't want anyone to hear about my sexual escapades, especially not the sociopathic immortal across the street. *The guy I kissed earlier today.*

Ryder ignored me, and his arrogance emanated from him in waves. "He has no rights to you."

"Neither do you!"

He stiffened and turned his attention to me.

I glanced back over at where I saw Maddox before, but he wasn't there anymore. "He's gone." I tapped on his arm. "Let go."

"I don't care." Ryder looked down at me, his stormy expression making my stomach flip. "I like holding your hand, so deal with it."

"Don't talk to me like that!" I shot back. "I don't know why both—"

He dropped my hand and instead took my face between his palms.

Then he kissed me.

Ryder's demanding lips consumed my mouth, and every suck and bite felt like a punishment. "You're fiery and so hot, I like it. How can I have you forever? I want to lock you up so no one else can have you."

My breathing hitched. "You're insane."

He flashed me a smile, all teeth, before tugging me along again.

I focused on the pavement, watching how my smaller boots looked next to his larger ones. I took two steps for every one of his, and his shoes were more worn than mine.

When we reached my apartment, I idled on the steps in front of the doors to the lobby. "Goodnight." I paused. "Are

you heading back to Oregon? Nicole told me that things aren't looking the best in the immortal world."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't be much use here."

Right, Ryder didn't take part in much anymore. It was all Alex and Maddox that made the big decisions.

"You're part of the Quorum," I said. "There's power in that. You have a say. Your immortals listen to you."

"I've always been the weakest leader." Ryder blew out a breath. "I'm no charismatic public speaker or outgoing personality. I'm an introvert, and keeping to myself feels comfortable."

Who knew? Whenever Ryder's name was brought up, there was always the picture of an overbearing, all-too-powerful immortal. I understood why dictators liked to spread propaganda now. Let people believe the worst so they remained biased. Because once you meet someone in real life without pretences, you often realize there are more similarities than differences.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and looked away from him, still reconciling this reality with the picture of him in my head. "That's pretty unbelievable."

"Is it?" He barked out a laugh. "I was living like a hermit within the immortal community until you came along."

"A degree of isolation isn't necessarily a bad thing."

Ryder gave me a sideways look. "You think so? Lately, I've been getting a lot of pressure to get involved again."

Police sirens rang loud as a car shot down the street on the road ahead of us. The ringing sounds of law enforcement reminded me of the crimes in the area, and I couldn't help but glance around us.

"You okay?" Ryder asked.

I wrung my hands, a prickling feeling on the back of my neck. "No, it's just everything about the Senseless Ripper. I haven't thought about it in a while, since I rarely stand out in the open like this."

“You’re going to be fine,” Ryder said flippantly, running a hand through his hair.

I gave him an incredulous look. “There’s a serial killer on the loose. Have you not heard? Do you get the news in Oregon?”

He rolled his eyes. “Again. Not a problem. Maddox wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

“Being on the defensive is hard. You can’t guarantee anything. Neither can Maddox.”

Ryder flicked my earlobe. “Not when he’s on the offensive.”

“What do you mean?”

A light appeared in his eyes and he gestured at the keys in my hand. “Invite me up and I’ll tell you.”

“Nope, I’m leaving *alone*.” I emphasized the word and gave him a pointed look. “Have a good night.”

“Wait.” Ryder caught my sleeve and pulled me back. “About the serial killer, I don’t want you to worry. Maddox is orchestrating it, and none of that will touch you.”

“He’s responsible for all this? Why?” So Maddox was also killing humans, too? Maybe he had an explanation for how he dealt with his immortals, but this time it was very different.

“Your government wouldn’t listen to any discussions, so there aren’t any options left.” Ryder’s face shut down, and he cracked his knuckles. “I may not like it, but we have to act in our interests.”

“Ryder.”

I jumped and whirled around.

Some time while I was focused on Ryder, Nicole arrived with a notebook in her hand. She looked at Ryder. “Business.”

His angular jaw tightened, but he nodded with a jerk of his head. When he turned back to me, his face softened. “Stay safe,” he murmured. “Go inside.”

Taking in the urgency on Nicole's face, I complied. As I waited for the elevator, I watched him slip away into the night, with Nicole following.

Tonight was maddening. Everything that happened since work felt utterly surreal. I learned more about immortals than I ever thought I would, and I met Maddox Nicoli for the first time.

Surprisingly, I kissed two guys in the process. My feet stumbled at the realization.

My apartment was dark when I opened the door, and I went through the motions of getting home mindlessly. My shower was brief and cold, and as I was drying my hair, my phone lit up with a notification from my email app.

RE: Wedding Schedule and Venue Location

The final countdown before our big day is on! I can't...

Helen, one of my college friends, was getting married soon, and I'd totally forgotten about it. I already planned my weekend trip to Washington a month ago.

I typed out a quick email to express my excitement for her.

Marriage seemed so far-fetched, something only adults did. And I felt like a teenager, still wading through everyday life, trying to find a purpose. But I didn't need to make the same choices to be supportive.

That night, I lay on my side, facing the window, waiting for time to lull me to sleep. Since it was the weekend, I got to sleep in.

But night slipped by me and by the time the sun came up, my eyes were still wide open.

ALEX

““**Y**our Grace,” Maddox drawled mockingly. “We meet yet again.”

“My Liege,” I threw back at him. “A pleasure, as always.”

He smirked at me but said nothing.

Technically, all three of us in the Quorum were called “My Liege” by our immortals. But out of deference to my birthright as the Duke of Vale, many still acknowledged my title.

Today I was at Pendulum’s head office in New York. I didn’t come here often, since Maddox’s global security organization was mostly separate from immortal business.

We weren’t exactly friendly, but right now the threat from the humans meant our objectives were the same.

In the real world, animosity had to be handled carefully and balanced with logical decisions. When immortals depended on the Quorum for leadership, we couldn’t completely isolate ourselves from each other the way Ryder foolishly believed.

The swirling clouds in the gray sky undeniably threatened rain. Down on the street, people rushed to and fro anxiously to get to where they needed to go.

I tugged on my tie and turned to face Maddox. “Any updates on Phil and Lucinda?” Both of them were humans who I hadn’t seen in a while. They held a lot of sway in the government as advisors to the president. Their close ties to

senior officials were hidden and would probably get public backlash since they were major figures in the corporate world.

Once I was in their presence, I'd be able to get more insider information.

“Both of them are travelling to London and Paris for shareholder meetings. But they'll be back by next week.”

Paris.

I hadn't been back since the last of my cousins died. My French was rustier than Ryder's since I was much more assimilated into society. In my mind, Paris was still the city I left behind, without the modern marvels we had now.

But my priorities were here, in the United States. And soon enough, if all goes well, I'd get what I wanted.

I looked at Maddox. “The government is still breathing down our necks. Your way isn't working.”

He rolled his eyes. “Give it time.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You've been slaughtering innocents on the streets for months now. How much more time do you need?”

He said nothing and merely scowled at the notepad on his desk.

I drummed my finger on my knee.

This was a dilemma we weren't able to crack yet. For a while, the human government was happy to see us immortals split apart. Having the Quorum as a united front made them uneasy. But their constant threats to reveal our existence were baseless, as it would hurt them more than us. We were absolutely not going to comply with their demands to reveal the secrets to our immortality.

Maddox proposed we make a statement by capturing and killing humans.

I didn't like the decision, and even now it bothered me. Violence felt like a hail mary, destroying any semblances of prudence and sensibility.

“They still think we want to eradicate all humans,” I said, slightly amused. They sure jumped to the most ridiculous conclusions. “Their imperialistic tendencies are showing.”

“We were humans once, so I can see the logic,” Maddox countered. “Obviously, humans aren’t aware of the change of perspective immortality gives you.”

Precisely.

What fun was there in destroying a whole species? The tricky aspect was trying to get along with them and coexist. It was like a real-time chess game, jumping through hoops and making connections to coordinate my efforts. Living forever would be boring if I didn’t embrace the art of diplomacy and try to play my hand in the human world.

Humans were fickle, and while mostly predictable, their occasional emotional impulses were pleasantly surprising.

“By the way, last week,” Maddox said, his steely voice cutting into me, “they tried to take Kelsey. She read their minds, and they wanted to experiment on her.”

“*What?*” Kelsey was one of the few immortals who turned when they were elderly. She looked like she was in her eighties. “You should’ve told me.”

She reminded me of my grandmother, and despite not knowing her well, hearing this news pissed me off. My fury heated my blood, and I ground my teeth.

“And what if I told you? Do you send a sternly worded letter? You talk to them and they give you empty promises?” Maddox’s muscles strained against his skin. “You always take action too late, and people walk all over you in the fucking process.”

Those words were a slap in the face. “Don’t say that shit,” I snapped.

Maddox knew me the best out of anyone, and so he wielded his shots expertly. We were as close as brothers once, and a part of me still considered him that. Centuries of friendship weren’t so easy to brush away.

“Alex!”

I looked up from my letter. I couldn't help my reluctant grin when I saw his appearance.

Maddox's trousers were dirty up to his knees, and both wet and dried mud caked his boots. Splotches of green grass stains covered his white button-up shirt. But his eyes were shiny and bright.

“Did you fall off your horse?” I inquired, pointedly waving at his attire.

He laughed. “Just enjoying the rain. You should join me next time.”

My lips flattened. “Our last escapade pushed my father too much. It'll be a long while until I'm allowed to do anything.”

Maddox sighed. “That's unfortunate.”

Indeed, it was.

My father thought Maddox was a useless distraction. My good friend wasn't the type to push me to disregard my duties as the future Duke of Vale, but my father's prejudice blinded him.

Maddox wasn't a nobleman, since his parent's wealth came from steam engine investments. Without a title, my family's social circle deemed him unworthy. Luckily, my mother cared little and let us be friends since we were young.

“Maybe you could find Ryder,” I suggested. He was the only boy our age nearby right now. He helped around Maddox's estate and came from the village nearby.

Maddox wrinkled his nose. “No, he's busy right now, so I'd get him in trouble. I'm just going to head home.” He gave me a short wave before creeping out into the hallway. After looking both ways to make sure the coast was clear, he darted off.

I rearranged my papers, staring down at all the documents I had to read through.

It was tedious work that I did somewhat enjoy. But occasionally I longed to go outside and enjoy nature the way my friends did.

I ducked my head and started skimming through the text.

No use thinking too much about it now.

I stared at Maddox, who was now working on his laptop. Those childhood moments were long gone. We'd grown up since then, and now everything was different.

Especially with Ryder.

The pang of guilt I immediately felt at the thought of his name made me uncomfortable. He was crossing my mind more often lately.

“You know about Ryder and Saige Kinley, yes?” I watched how Maddox’s shoulders grew rigid. “There’s mutual interest there.”

He pushed his computer away and leaned his elbows onto his desk. “I know.” His eyes flicked up to meet mine. “I don’t think he’s the only one.”

“What are you trying to insinuate?”

“You suddenly appeared at Granier last week, and the only change is her.” Maddox raised an eyebrow, a smirk hanging off his lips. “Does someone have a crush?”

There was much more to it than that, not that he would know. I’d worked with Saige’s parents, Tim and Lia, for over a decade now. First, they just worked at the labs with some other humans, but it became clear that they were the loyal type. And those were the people I used the most.

They accidentally mentioned her once, and that was enough for me to look further into her.

“What a beautiful language. My daughter is fluent in French, too,” Tim said offhandedly. “She might consider working in international relations one day.”

“Shut up!” Lia hissed, slapping his arm.

Tim immediately blanched, shooting me a fearful look. "Fuck."

I'd known for a long time that I needed someone diplomatic and strong by my side. And I didn't believe in coincidences, especially those wrapped in such a delectable package like Saige. The first time I saw her in person was when she was still in university. She was walking across campus, her textbooks in her arms, dressed in an oversized hoodie and skinny jeans.

There was a sense of purpose in the way she presented herself, and a hint of innocence in her wide eyes and easygoing smile. The world was her oyster, and she was more than ready to conquer it.

When a male student approached her, I'd gripped onto my steering wheel so tightly that indents were left in the leather.

It took all my energy and self-control, but I stopped myself from going after that young boy. It helped that he didn't touch her, but the urge to snap his neck was overwhelming and suffocating.

She consumed my thinking for days after, and that clawing, greedy desire for her felt disquieting and unfamiliar.

But there was no way I was staying away. It was my time now. And I had to find a way to possess her and draw her to my side.

Or to *our* side.

Saige was showing interest in all three of us. But the question was, would my two ex-friends be willing to share her?

I didn't care. Anything goes, as long as she was with me, too.

"Maybe Ryder and I will share her," I mused. "She wants us both."

Maddox shot to his feet, teeth bared. "*Like hell.* Ryder would sooner rip out your throat than share her with you."

He wasn't completely wrong, but I had to push. "You'd be surprised," I murmured. "He's enamoured by her. He might bend a little if she asked." Ryder was definitely acting soft around her.

"She's going to be with me," he snarled. "If she does anything with you two, it's a casual fling."

Casual relationships were the standard in immortal society, but the three of us always brushed off that lifestyle. Not for us.

"Maybe we'll ask her that, hmm?" I hid my smile at the answering rumble in his chest. He looked like he was about to attack me at any moment. "You think she'll choose between any of us? Don't let your feelings cloud your judgement."

"Saige wouldn't be okay with being shared. You know humans are prudes." Maddox got right up in my face. "And after you fucked up everything between us, the last thing we want is to be tied up in an arrangement *with you*."

The sneer in his voice was another hit that made its mark. "What happened before won't happen again."

"Don't act dense, Alexander," Maddox snapped. "It was a trust issue, and the situation was never resolved. You think it's so easy to forget it? Don't pretend like you weren't making deal after deal behind our backs."

I said nothing because he was correct. I rationalized it because working with humans would provide stability for our future. Those two never wanted to have peaceful discussions, deeming them worthless. And I pushed the issue by making those talks without asking them. It was a move out of necessity, but now I reaped what I sowed.

"You wanted to make decisions alone, and now you have it. So shut the fuck up." He stalked back over to his chair.

The air between us was tense, and I knew there wasn't much more we could say to each other.

"Do you need any enhancements?" I asked, all business now. "For your information today, everything is complementary."

And just like that, any hint of ease disappeared from the air.

I hated having to sell enhancements to Maddox and Ryder these days. Before, there wasn't this invisible line between us. All of it was *ours*, and we shared amazing research marvels between us.

He crossed his arms and lifted his chin. "I'll send you a list."

We looked at each other, still embroiled in this conflict that made every interaction a stand-off.

There were a lot of things I didn't do, and I lot of words I held back out of pride.

"I'm sorry," I finally said. "I didn't intend for things to end up this way." With that, I walked to the door. But before I turned the doorknob, he started speaking.

"This isn't the nineteenth century anymore, Alex. You aren't the noble who lords over us all. You learned that mistake too late, and there's no going back."

"I know." Being raised as a peer had continued to taint my judgement for a long while. But these past couple of decades, my perspective had slowly shifted.

Maddox stared at me, his stare unflinchingly sharp. "Make no mistake, Alex. I may look like it, but you are the villain of our story." Before I could say something, he waved a hand at me. "Now get the fuck out."

As I stepped out of the office, I slipped my hand into my pocket to grab my teleportation enhancement. Before I could take it, my attention caught on the man standing against the wall next to the door.

He dipped his head in a silent acknowledgement and swept by me and into the office I just left.

"Preston," I murmured.

Maddox considered Preston part of his inner circle, which was absolutely insane. With the tensions lately, a human being in the ear of a member of the Quorum made my senses go on

red alert. From what I could see, Maddox's top immortals respected him as well. I didn't know how much Preston knew, but it wasn't that hard to let secrets slip out. It was only a matter of time.

At least Ryder wasn't so idiotic. Sure, he had his advisors, but he still kept them at a considerable distance.

Even as those thoughts crossed my mind, I knew things weren't so simple anymore. One particular human made me want to disregard my rules. Even my instincts weren't pushing her away from me.

That was the unsettling part. I relied on my gut instinct to guide me, and trusting Saige was a clash with my rational decision-making.

But the risk could be worth it.

It has to be.

SAIGE

Compared to the night I was kidnapped from my apartment, the next week was uneventful. I prayed to the gods that it would stay that way.

So far, so good.

Today, I already made plans to run errands after work, but I wanted to go back home to drop off my bag and change into a more comfortable outfit first.

With music blasting in my ears and my folders of work stacked in my left arm, I strolled down the sidewalk back to my apartment.

This was the perfect weather, not too warm and not freezing either. It was slightly cloudy with no rain, and just enough wind to make my hair dance. The white sky made everything more bright, and the glow lifted my spirits.

Humming along with the song in my earbuds, I spotted my familiar building and stopped to rummage in my bag for my keys. When I finally made it to the front door of my apartment building, I stopped in my tracks.

Standing in my way was a group of blazer-clad men, all large and expressionless. They faced me, and their imposing statures were enough to make me gulp.

One of them drew his phone out and murmured something before hanging up. When he leaned over to talk to another guy, I could see the gun and knives attached to his waist belt.

I sucked in a breath, and my feet inched backwards.

But they weren't... doing anything other than blocking my way. I didn't care for confrontation, especially since these guys may be from a gang or some other secret operation. Forget the weapons, they had a threatening vibe that screamed danger to me.

Hopefully, whoever they were waiting for knew what they got themselves into.

I walked away steadily before jogging towards the side entrance. Right as I reached for the handle, arms grabbed me from behind. "What the fu—"

A large hand clasped over my mouth, muffling my shriek. I jerked my elbow back and tried to kick my legs, but my attacker had me so tight against his body I couldn't move at all.

With all my might, I pried my lips apart and sank my teeth into the hand. Instead of letting go of me completely, the touch slid to my neck.

"Saige."

The husky, dark tone was easily recognizable.

I tried to turn, but Maddox's palm squeezed the side of my neck and lightly brushed the spot above my pulse.

"Are you going to fight me?" he murmured into my ear. His arm snaked around me even tighter, letting me feel every inch of him.

I clutched onto my key so hard the metal dug angry red indents into my skin. "No."

Not that I could, anyway. I had no training and this immortal probably had a hundred pounds on me.

He loosened his arms enough for me to turn and face him. His men were standing at his back, staring at me.

"Leave," Maddox snapped.

The men slipped away silently like ghosts, and then it was just the two of us.

He trapped my hands between our bodies, and I could feel the lines of his abs underneath his shirt. I curled my fingers up into a fist to avoid touching him too much. “Can you give me some distance?”

The immortal smiled. “No.”

I gulped, watching how his throat worked as he looked down at me. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you,” he replied smoothly.

“Well, I’m busy. And I need to pick up my stuff, my work is all over the ground.” I said, ignoring how my stomach flip-flopped at his words. “And I have to go to the grocery store.”

He swooped down and plucked up my binders. “Let’s go.”

I stared at him. “Just like that? You’re not going to force me into a van and steal me into your lair again?”

“Pierce isn’t around, is he?” He smirked. “Kitten, we’re way past that now.”

Alright. He was delusional, just like Ryder.

I tugged open the door to my apartment building.

“Can I come in too?” Maddox asked.

“I’m not letting you in my apartment.”

“Don’t worry, that’s not what I want,” he replied.

I was more than a little perplexed, but I hesitantly held the door open for him.

As I walked to the elevators, I noticed all the taped-up notices around the lobby. I stepped forward to read one of them, and the brief paragraph shocked my system. “*What?*”

After ripping the notice off the wall, I spun around, trying to look for someone at the front desk. But this was a crappy apartment without an attendant, so there was nobody there.

Maddox took his sweet time prowling towards me, watching me freak out without a change in expression.

“Oh my god,” I spluttered. “Where am I going to live?”

The paper shuddered in my hand as my tension bled through to my grip. The typed-out words were spinning around in my head, and I was unwilling to accept them.

Attention to all residents:

We recently discovered major structural and electrical issues in the building that are below regulatory standards. Your safety and health are our priority, and therefore, we will immediately embark on a major renovation and rewiring project throughout the building.

Residents cannot be on the premises during construction and must seek residence elsewhere right away. The estimated timeframe is two to three months.

We are sorry for the inconvenience and will reimburse your relocation fees. If you have any additional questions, feel free to send us an email or give us a call.

“Dammit,” I muttered. “Why does this have to happen to me?” I felt like dropping my bag and all my binders now. Everything felt too heavy, and I wanted to sit down and forget it all. “This can’t be legal, right? Can I report this?”

I leaned heavily against the wall, staring listlessly at the splotchy white ceiling. The muted yellow lights made the whole lobby feel old and musky.

It was absolutely amazing how everything could go to crap in mere seconds. I rubbed my temples, already feeling a migraine coming in.

Turns out that being independent comes with a lot of curveballs.

Fingers curved around my neck, and it immediately startled me. My heart jumped out of my chest when I noticed how close Maddox was. This man had an arresting presence, strikingly draped in his lazy confidence. The way he was looking at me now made my mouth dry up.

“So,” he said, “you don’t have an apartment anymore. At least for the time being.”

The easygoing tone of his voice made my senses go on alert. “Uh-huh.”

He squeezed my neck once, not enough for it to hurt, but enough for me to tense up. “What are you going to do? Do you have another arrangement?”

Just thinking about everything I needed to do made my blood pressure shoot up. “I don’t know. And I have no time to figure it out.”

Someone would take me in, right?

He stepped away from me, his hand moving to his pant pocket. “True.”

The door opened and a middle-aged woman stepped in. I’d seen her around before and knew she worked here.

I didn’t think twice and rushed towards her, almost tripping on the old carpet. “Excuse me, can you explain this?” I shook the notice in her face, hysteria lining my voice. “Can I speak to someone here? The building manager?”

She looked like a deer in headlights. “Sorry, miss, you have to call the number. I don’t know anything. The owners made the decision.”

“Oh my god.” There was no point getting pissed off at a worker. I rubbed the heels of my palms over my eyes.

A crashing sound made me look over at the woman. She was sprawled haphazardly on the floor, looking like she’d taken a big fall.

I knelt beside her and helped her get to her feet. “Are you alright?”

But she wasn’t paying attention to me. She focused her fearful stare on the immortal behind me.

“This man showed up at the owner’s meeting this week. What he did”—she shook her head vigorously—“I can’t forget it.”

Maddox’s face darkened, and he straightened from his stance against the wall.

“Stay away,” the woman whispered, a shaking hand covering her mouth. “Don’t come any closer.”

Maddox tipped his head and didn’t move.

She edged around the counter, obviously heading towards the emergency staircase rather than the elevators. As she passed by me, she leaned into me. “That man is trouble. Don’t get involved with him.”

Maddox coughed sharply, and she jumped like she was shocked. Without another word, she sprinted for the emergency staircase and disappeared.

I stared at the swinging door. “What did you do? Were you really at the owner’s meeting?” When I turned to look at him, I saw he was typing something on his phone. An ominous feeling filled me. “Maddox? Don’t tell me—”

“Don’t tell you what? That I’m getting my men to handle that woman?” He shoved his phone away. “You know how we do things. She can’t remember what she’d seen.”

“You’re going to erase her memories?” I balked, the idea frightening to me. “You can... do that? Can you modify them?”

His lips thinned. “Modifying memories is a whole different thing. It’s difficult and fucking terrible, even by immortal standards.”

That wasn’t too bad, I suppose. I’d always known about the secrecy around immortals but never thought about what happened when humans found out. “Nothing else, right? You won’t hurt her? Ryder told me about the serial killing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Did he? He must’ve loved sharing that with you. It tickles your moral sensibilities. Turns you against me.”

“He didn’t mean it like that,” I argued, following my instinctual need to defend Ryder. “I mentioned the Senseless Ripper, that’s all.”

“If you say so.”

“Now tell me about what she said. Why were you with the owners?” I narrowed my eyes. “What are you up to?”

Maddox crossed his arms, and his bulging arms made the fabric of his jacket tight. “I did some research and found out you live in a death trap.”

“It’s really none of your business.”

“Well, kitten, I made it my business.” He came to stand in front of me, standing so close that I was basking in his body heat. “I looked into you, found your living conditions, then made some calls. It’s what a good citizen would do.” A smirk accompanied his last line, the small sardonic smile daring me to argue against him.

So *he* was responsible for this whole situation? “What in the hell?” I shouted. “Can’t you leave me alone?”

“You should thank me,” he retorted, that stupid smirk fixated on his face. He wrinkled his nose and looked around the lobby. “Did you know that the building owner didn’t want to renovate? This place is a shithole, and no one should live in a dangerously unsafe building.”

He wasn’t exactly wrong, but I still had my pride. At least my neighbours would benefit from having the building updated.

I sighed heavily. “Whatever.”

“Now, you can move in with me.”

My eyes shot up to meet his. “Nope. Not happening.”

“Do you think I did all this out of the goodness of my heart?” There was a hard edge to his voice. “I need you by my side, knowing that you’re safe.”

“You can’t always get your way, Maddox!” Other than my friend Ali, I didn’t know anyone in New York. She would let me stay with her.

I grabbed my phone out of my purse.

“*Try it.*”

The icy, haughty tone of his rumbling voice made me falter. His hand shot out and latched onto my wrist.

His touch was blazing hot, his heat bleeding into my skin. “Maddox.”

“What’s your plan, then? Are you going to call a friend? You know I’m going to find you wherever you go.”

It was in moments like these that I wished I had a confidant. My parents were always my listening ear. I knew the moment I called my parents, they would drop everything to come to me. Weeks had passed since I called them. I cringed inwardly just picturing them chastising me for it.

“Come and stay with me,” Maddox repeated. “It’s only until you find another place.”

Yeah, right. The good old foot-in-the-door technique I learned about in psychology class. But what sucks about being manipulated was knowing you might go along with it anyway.

Screw it.

“I’m calling my parents,” I announced, pulling my phone out of my bag. “And you know they work for you. You wouldn’t get involved with me without a comprehensive background check.”

He didn’t reply, but his confident stature didn’t waver. He leaned against the wall nonchalantly.

Not a good sign.

I held my phone to my ear and when the call went through, my smile lightened the heaviness in my chest. “Hi, mom. I wanted to check in.”

“Saige!” My mom’s voice was bright and high-pitched, and her excitement was more than palpable. “Darling, we have good news!”

“Huh?” I turned away from Maddox and took several steps away in a poor attempt at privacy. “What is it?”

“We’re taking a vacation to Greece! Finally, our time off got approved!”

My heart sank. I knew they wanted this for a long time.

My parents were compensated extremely well working for immortals, but like most humans in their employment, their contracts required absolute commitment. Extended vacation time was a rarity, and I grew up knowing that idea well.

“Too bad you just got your job or else we could’ve gone together,” she continued mournfully. “But I’m still excited.”

“You should be.” I kicked at a random rock that must have been tracked inside. “You and dad deserve a relaxing vacation.”

“I still wish you could be there.”

I laughed, hoping she couldn’t hear my unease. *What am I going to do now?* “Send me lots of pictures and have a good time!”

“Okay. I have to get back to work now. Love you!” She hadn’t sounded so happy in a long time. “Take care, Saige.”

“Yeah, I will. Love you too. Tell dad for me.”

When the call ended, I stared down at the black screen. Maybe I could call Ali, but involving an innocent person in this mess felt wrong. How about Ryder? But he was back in Oregon, and he had his whole feud with Maddox.

“Saige.”

I turned to Maddox, wondering if I looked as pathetic as I felt. I uncurled my fist to let the crumpled paper fall to the floor. There was a heavy lump in my throat as my emotions overwhelmed me. Suddenly, everything around me felt unfamiliar and bleak.

“Stop it,” he murmured, his hand sliding through my hair and resting gently on the back of my head. “Let me take care of this. Help me take care of you.” He drew me into his arms, allowing me to settle there.

It seems like I don’t have much of a choice.

But it didn’t feel like I was walking into a trap. That counted for something, right?

SAIGE

““**W**hat do my parents do for you?” I asked Maddox.

“Nothing,” he said. “They work exclusively with Alex. Ask him.”

We were in the backseat of his van, being driven to his apartment. This was a similar-looking van to the one from my kidnapping.

Maybe it was company issued.

The thought of that made me snort.

As the car halted at a red light, my suitcases shifted in the trunk. Maddox had carried both of them for me. Luckily, I didn't have many clothes or belongings to clear out of my apartment.

“How are you feeling?” Maddox was watching me with those dark eyes of his. His large hand curved stubbornly over my knee. It was closer to my thigh before, but I'd jerked my leg until he moved it.

This was as close to a compromise as I could get.

I thumped my head back against the headrest. “It's all good. Everything's going swimmingly. Never been better.”

“I don't know why I expected you to break down and cry,” Maddox mused. “At least you still have it in you to be sarcastic.”

“Wait until tonight,” I told him. “That’s when I’ll turn on the waterworks.”

His face softened, the lines of his forehead smoothing over. “I’ll be there for you.”

I tried not to get caught up in the seriousness of his voice, especially when he shifted a little closer to me. “How? You’re going to wipe my tears and rub my back?”

“I can do all that. Alternatively, I’m sure there’s a way I can... distract you.” His tongue darted out to lick his lips. “You’ll enjoy living with me, kitten.”

The car suddenly swerved wildly and, with a gasp, I was thrown across the seat. I found myself sprawled across Maddox’s lap, my head right in front of his crotch. Before I could push away, the car lurched again, pressing me even closer to him.

“Crap!” I breathed, my face burning with embarrassment. Foolishly, I forgot to wear my seatbelt.

“Don’t move, or you’ll hurt yourself.” He sounded amused, which made me feel worse.

How was I going to look at him after this?

“You’re jumping the gun,” he continued with a glint in his eye. “Plenty of time for this later.” His left hand rested on the back of my head and the other twirled a strand of my hair. “No need to rush.”

What the hell?

It took me a second to realize that I could feel his large bulge against my face. I tried to sit back upright, but he held me in place. “Maddox!”

He smirked at me before letting me up.

I jerked away from him, my hair falling around my face messily. Without preamble, I slapped his chest. “You’re horrible!”

Maddox slid across the seat, his arm coming around my shoulders. “Kitten, it’s going to happen.”

“You’re delusional.” I tried to shrug him off, still feeling miffed by this whole situation, but he held on.

“I want you, so I’ll take you.” Dark promises swam in his gaze. “Are you going to tell me you won’t end up underneath me?” His breath ghosted over my neck. “I’ll fill you up. Make you lose yourself in me. *I’ll dominate you.*”

My body didn’t quite feel like mine as his expert hands slid over my exposed skin. He pushed my coat off gently, caressing my bare arms and maneuvering me onto his lap.

I felt something wet brush over my cheek. His tongue curled over my earlobe and he nibbled on the skin there. His leg nudged mine open, and his touch ghosted from my stomach down to my inner thigh. Slowly, but surely, he was teasing me with every flick of his fingers.

I gasped at the sensations that were rising inside of me. My frustration made me dig my fingernails into his forearm as he continued to play with my sensitive skin. He was a devil that knew exactly what he was doing.

Right before I could snap at him to do... something, anything, he shifted me off his lap so quickly that I didn’t notice being moved. “What the f—”

“And that was just a teaser,” he murmured, leaning in and planting a kiss on my nose. “When you’re ready to take me on, let me know.” He knocked on the partition between us and the driver’s seat, and the car engine stopped. “We’re here.”

My world felt unsteady after all he did to me. I grabbed onto my bag and ignored him, wondering if there was a way to cool myself down without it being obvious. My skin tingled from where his lips were, and it filled me with another burst of heat.

“I can live with you being mad at me for not giving you an orgasm,” Maddox said. “With everything else, I would give anything to please you.”

I looked at him sideways. “Anything?” There was no way he would leave me alone. And I was drawn to him the same way I was with Ryder. These immortals were getting under my

skin, and damn it to hell, but a part of me wanted to keep them there too.

He grinned. “Seeing that look on your face, I take that back. Now, no more complaining.”

“And if I say no?” I shot back at him, more to antagonize him than anything.

Maddox’s eyes narrowed. Although his stare was still light with humour, I could sense a hint of the scary, furious man I saw that day we first met. “Move your cute ass and get out.”

He may be wrapped up in a delicious suit, looking all proper even with his wild hair and seductive air, but he was the last thing from a gentleman.

I glared at him as I hopped out of the van. He followed, and we walked into the building. Men in black suits surrounded us in the lobby, but Maddox waved them off.

I stayed silent until the elevators closed behind us. “Were those all your men? From Pendulum?”

“Yes, and you’ll be seeing them around. They won’t bother you.”

I chewed on the inside of my lip, wondering if I should ask him more about the Senseless Ripper. Damn Ryder, he left me with so many questions when he left so abruptly.

We entered his apartment.

Maddox’s place was very much like a bachelor pad, which was a style I liked. It was all sleek and modern, with gray walls and dark furniture. An electric fireplace sat beneath a large screen TV mounted high on the wall. The view overlooking the city made the apartment feel expansive and rich.

I followed him to sit on the long leather couch that was opposite the front door. “I want an explanation,” I started, “about why you’re murdering humans in broad daylight.” As I said it, I felt ridiculous. I was sitting with someone who was allowing a serial killer to run loose in several cities.

Maddox sat back against the cushions, his arms spread out on either side of the back of the sofa. “Do I need to explain myself to you?” His hand shifted to rest against my neck.

When I tried to move away, he squeezed my chin.

“Don’t move,” he whispered, his eyes chilly like glaciers. “And I’ll answer your questions.”

I swallowed. “Fine.”

His grip loosened, and he started stroking my cheek lightly. It was heating my blood and making me tremble.

“I don’t know how much Ryder told you,” Maddox said. “But basically, your government has been pressuring us to give up our secrets by murdering immortals they can get their hands on.”

He spoke so nonchalantly, yet the temperature in the room may have dropped several degrees.

“So what you’re doing is retaliation?”

He nodded. “Most of us are peaceful and live like you humans. Immortals, you’ll find, aren’t much different. We just happen to live longer.”

“And have a bunch of enhancements,” I added.

Maddox shook his head. “There are many immortals who choose not to use them. For them, the appeal was living forever, not becoming a superhuman.”

“It sucks that it takes killing innocents to make a statement.” I stared down at my hands. “But I get it.”

“Violence is so effective, it makes it difficult to speak another language,” he said. “And that’s the hard truth.”

“Ryder seems to approve of this.” I thought back to his reaction when he told me the other night. “That’s surprising to me, especially given how detached he is from everything with the Quorum.”

Maddox sneered. “Yeah, he changed his tune when one of his immortals was attacked. He wouldn’t give a shit otherwise, which shows his shitty character.”

I frowned. That didn't sound like Ryder, but at the same time, did I really know him?

"Is that why you guys aren't close anymore?" Since he seemed to be in an open mood, I wanted to dig deeper.

He peered over at me, expressionless. I could feel the slight tug of my hair like he was twisting it around his fingers.

"Tell me," I murmured.

"Something like that," he finally said. "Ryder and I never had many problems. It was he and Alex that ultimately broke up the Quorum. The three of us work together, and any issues between us create tension." He must have seen the curiosity on my face because he chuckled darkly. "If you have any more questions, you're going to have to ask one of them. It's way too fucking personal."

The elevators opened and a tall man walked in with my suitcases. "Sir." He had his hair slicked back and wore a completely black outfit as well, just like the other men I saw.

Before the man turned to leave, he looked at me for a moment. He was devastatingly good-looking in a bad boy kind of way. A hint of scruff on his jawline, moody features, and an air of mystery.

"*Leave.*" Maddox's voice was hard and unrelenting.

The man walked assuredly into the waiting elevator, and the doors started closing just as he turned. He was looking at me, right to the moment the elevator doors closed.

Creepy.

"So." Maddox gestured at my stuff. "Let's get you set up." He grabbed my bags and in a brief moment, I saw a blurry shadow of him flashing away and coming back empty-handed.

Crap, he's fast. His movements reminded me of all the vampire shows I'd watched as a teen.

He held his hand out to me. "Come, I'll show you your room."

I hesitantly slipped my hand into his. “Kind of dramatic with that show, huh? We could carry my stuff like normal people.”

He flashed me his white teeth. “I want to impress you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Maddox chucked me underneath the chin, laughing under his breath. “I’ll just have to try harder then.”

He led me down the hallway, which had bare walls. After we reached a set of double doors, he nudged open the left door and pulled me in with him.

It was a massive room, with painted black walls except for the one the king-sized bed was pushed up against. That wall appeared to be made of slate-coloured stone. A single chair sat beside the windows with a small coffee table.

“Are all your rooms this big?” I asked amazedly. “Because this is another level of luxury. We’re in Manhattan!” Rent would cost a fortune in a place like this.

“This one is the biggest.” He followed me as I ventured into the connecting bathroom.

It was decorated in the same style as the bedroom, with the same colour schemes. The deep claw-foot bathtub caught my eye. “You don’t seem like much of a bath guy.”

“Well,” he said, “it depends. If I’m with someone, I don’t mind it.”

Our eyes met in the mirror, and I was struck by how opposite we looked. He was so tall and bulky, looking like a wild Viking with his facial hair, yet all dressed up. And me... I was tiny and swamped in my office wear.

Knowing that a guy who looked like him was interested in me felt baffling, especially knowing who he was.

Maddox slid his arm around my shoulders and tugged me so I was leaning against him. “Like what you see?”

I peered up at him, and from this angle, I admired his angular jaw and the slight smirk hanging off his lips. “You

look better up close.” He also smelled incredible in that musky, clean, masculine way.

His arms tightened. “Yeah? Come closer.”

Right then, a sharp ringing sound came from outside the bedroom.

Maddox scowled in that direction. “I think I might need to change the rules.”

“What rules?” I asked.

We walked back into the bedroom and both sat on the edge of his bed since there was only one armchair. The bedspread felt silky smooth, and I resisted the urge to rub against it as a cat would.

I’d never owned anything silk in my entire life.

“Usually, I give my closest men free rein to come and go,” he revealed. “But with you here, that isn’t practical.”

I imagined walking to the kitchen and randomly encountering an unknown immortal. “Yeah, not the best idea.”

“How are you liking the room?” Maddox had a suspicious gleam in his eye. “Up to your standards?”

I laughed. “You’ve seen my apartment. Anything is better than that.” I’d bet the beds in this apartment were memory foam or something special like that.

He straightened up and swiped a hand over his suit jacket. “I’m glad you’re here now. I have some business to attend to, so I’m heading out.”

“Okay.” I watched him stride into what must be the closet. He rummaged around in there before coming out as he fastened a watch on his wrist. “Wait a second. Are your clothes and accessories in here?”

Maddox dipped his head. “Yup.”

I jumped to my feet. “*Hell, no.* Is this your room?”

In a flash, he stood before me, and his fingers tipped my head up. “I was wondering when you’d catch up, kitten.”

“I am not sleeping in the same bed as you,” I snapped. “This place is huge, give me one of the other rooms.”

Maddox studied my expression. “You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

He leaned in and bit my bottom lip before releasing me. “I hear you.”

I gaped at him, my lip still throbbing. “You do?”

“Your belongings are in the room next door.”

I spun around, finally realizing that none of my suitcases had made it to this bedroom. Maddox was toying with me this whole time.

“You’re horrible.” My words had no conviction since I was caught up in his hooded eyelids and the lazy tilt of his mouth.

“You said that already.”

He left soon after, and I watched the elevator doors close behind him.

Now I had this place all to myself.

I wandered around aimlessly, but eventually went back to my room. I didn’t notice it before, but the apartment seemed to have a low hum to it like there was an undercurrent of energy. Since there were so many luxury appliances and everything was controllable by a remote, I chalked it down to just a side effect of all the technology.

My actual room was a lot more practical than Maddox’s since it had a desk in it. The style and design were similar, and it was a tad bit smaller. It still felt like a royal chamber, since Maddox’s room was big enough to be an apartment.

I kept my stuff in the suitcases because I didn’t want to feel so settled.

This was temporary.

“Crap, I forgot about work,” I muttered to myself. I was organizing my cleansers in the bathroom.

I jogged to my bag and pulled out my laptop. After quickly setting up email alerts for new rental listings, I dug into my binders. There wasn't much to do, but it was tedious work.

Time passed quickly, and before I knew it, it was already past ten. As I was putting away my papers, I distinctly heard footsteps.

Maddox must be back.

Instead of going to find him, I followed my usual routine. I didn't want to talk to him anyway.

After taking a shower and brushing out my hair, I climbed into bed. Curled up under the covers, I reflected on all that had happened lately. I'd experienced more this past week than in my whole life so far.

The pillow was soft underneath my cheek, and I twisted the blankets between my legs. My mind was restless, even though I knew I should try to sleep.

The door creaked open.

I rolled over, blinking at the light that was now illuminating the bedroom. My breath caught at the sight.

“Are you going to turn me away?” Maddox's large frame filled up the doorway. His wide, muscular chest was bare and his briefs hung low on his waist. His black, intricate tattoos were so freaking hot, and they decorated his upper chest. “Your choice.”

I sat up slowly, drawing the covers over my shoulders. “For what?”

He merely waited for my answer.

I didn't expect this tonight. I wasn't so inexperienced to not recognize that he wanted me. But his forwardness was new and confusing, yet intriguing enough for me to want to give in.

“You know, you almost became my hall pass.” I'd brought it up jokingly with my ex-boyfriend. We broke up before he could tell me his choice.

“What's that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You don’t keep up with pop culture, huh?”

“Tell me,” he commanded.

Months ago, I was reading magazines with this delectable man on the cover. My girlfriends and I had a habit of trading photos of hot guys, and Maddox was brought up more than a few times. And now he was right here in front of me, in the flesh.

Giving me the option of sleeping with him.

So much can change without you expecting it.

“It’s silly,” I said. “It’s someone you can cheat with that your partner is okay with.” I paused. “I guess technically it isn’t cheating since there’s consent.”

His mood immediately darkened, and he stalked into the room. The energy was suffocating when he landed on top of me, still over the covers. His hand curled behind my head.

“No hall passes,” he growled, nipping my bottom lip. “I’ll kill anyone who dares to touch you.”

“Anyone?” My mind flashed to Ryder. And strangely, Alex, even though I barely knew him.

“What are you thinking about, Saige?” Maddox murmured. “You look guilty.”

Do I?

I pursed my lips. “Nothing that concerns you.” It would be downright stupid to bring up any of the other guys in this situation.

He snorted. “Right.”

While he seemed to be preoccupied with his thoughts after my comment, my attention strayed to his face. My stomach felt hollowed out, and I couldn’t stop staring at his mouth. There was something sinful about the way Maddox acted, and those slight movements could haunt my daydreams.

He nestled over me gently like he was careful not to squish me.

My hand hesitantly came up to rest lightly on his waist. His soft and smooth skin felt warm underneath my touch.

A dangerous look flashed over Maddox's face and he dipped his head down so our mouths brushed against each other.

Neither of us said anything. We were just breathing in each other's scents and touching just enough to drive me mad. I could feel his bulge pressing against my leg, and I flushed, imagining how this night was going to go.

"Saige, your blush is so pretty..." Maddox whispered huskily. "I want you so badly." I turned my head to see that he was clenching his hands, bunching up the pillow under his grip.

All of a sudden, Maddox abruptly jerked off of me and got to his feet. "Fuck," he growled.

I stared at him, wide-eyed, and slid off the bed too. "What is it?"

Before leaving the room, he looked back at me. "Don't move, kitten." Then he disappeared before my eyes.

Was there something wrong with the apartment? I knew he had much better senses than I did.

I hastened to my desk and rummaged through my bag. I didn't own anything that could be a weapon, and this room was pretty empty. Finally, I found the letter opener my dad gifted to me after I got this job. Even though I had no use for it, I kept it with me.

I gripped onto the handle tightly, the barely sharp end pointing towards the door. It didn't escape me that any intruders would most likely be immortals and I'd be dead meat. But at least I would put up a struggle.

Before I could creep out of the room, Maddox materialized in the doorway.

"I couldn't find one," he grumbled as he stepped into the room again. When he saw my fighting stance, he stilled. "Saige. What are you doing?"

Now that this hulking man was back, I felt silly. I lowered my makeshift weapon and turned to drop it back into my bag. “I thought there was an intruder or, you know, something dangerous.”

“You think I’d leave you here unprotected?” His voice was incredulous and there was an undercurrent of hurt there.

I whirled around and hurried towards him. “No!” I wrung my hands. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Were you going to fight off someone with that letter opener?” he asked, his eyes alit with amusement. “How creative.”

“Shut up.”

He slid his arms around me and nudged my forehead with his nose. “I like how fierce you are. But violence is my strength, I even have permanent enhancements to help me win fights. Let me protect you, okay? I have many enemies, but I’ll do anything to keep you from getting hurt.”

His solemn declaration made my knees weak. I reached up and traced the bridge of his nose. “Okay.”

“Good.” Maddox showed me what he had in his hand. “I went to get a condom,” he explained. “And I could only find one.”

“You have sex that much?” It shouldn’t bother me to hear about his other women, but it still did.

“Jealous, kitten?”

“Maybe a little,” I replied, shocking even myself that I admitted to it.

He smiled. “All the condoms were expired. My housekeeper makes sure it’s stocked up, but I don’t make use of them.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face. “Will I expect to see your housekeeper around?”

Maddox shook his head. “Connor comes around during the day when we’re both at work.”

“Good to know.”

He circled my wrist with his long, thick fingers. “No more talking, kitten. We’ve stalled long enough.”

I swallowed and nodded, the anticipation making me fidget.

“Ready?” He held the condom out to me. “Get on your knees and put this on my cock.”

His harsh demand made my core pulse. “We’ll do this only once,” I said, a little breathless. *Maybe it’ll get him out of my system.*

He responded with a dangerous, cocky smile. “Oh, kitten, you’re so cute.”

My hands were shaking when they went to his waistband. I’d only slept with several men, and usually after dating for quite a while. It was an emotional act for me, but this was going to be casual.

What am I doing?

When his briefs dropped to the floor, I stumbled back and flopped onto the bed.

I stared in horror at that... appendage between his legs. It was proportionate to his large, tall frame, maybe over ten inches, and *thick*.

I scooted away from him, my legs tangling in the sheets. “Yeah, no way, I changed my mind. You’re too much.” I was tiny compared to him. I wrapped my arms around my knees.

“Oh, you can take all of me,” Maddox said calmly, approaching the bed. His hand caressed my ankle. “You were made for my cock.”

But I couldn’t stop staring at him, at his muscular body, and at the realization that we were doing this.

I was going to sleep with Maddox Nicoli.

And now that he was right in front of me, I didn’t know how to feel about it. He showed up at my door, and with our attraction, I was drawn to the idea.

Even so, I grabbed onto a pillow and hugged it to my chest. This was all too sudden, and he was such a powerful force I didn't know if I could handle him.

I wasn't a virgin, but no guy was ever like Maddox. And right now, at this very moment, I wasn't ready.

“Maddox—”

He was an immortal. The top guy. Hundreds of years old. Reality was smacking me in the face and no, the lust wasn't enough to distract me.

“Saige.” He came around the bed and sat down next to me, the bed sinking slightly with his weight. “Are you alright?”

“I don't know,” I whispered. “Can you give me some time?” My mind needed to play catch-up with how I was feeling, or else I'd wake up with regrets. I never thought I'd ever have casual sex, but this man might be the exception.

“I thought this wasn't a big deal for you,” Maddox said, “since you've had Ryder and Alex.” His lips twisted after he finished speaking.

I reeled back. “*What?*”

He rose his eyebrows. “It's not uncommon in the immortal world. We're not hung up on monogamy.”

“I haven't had sex with either of them!”

He rubbed his hand over his jaw, and his expression grew stormy. “Fuck, my intel has been shit lately.” He tapped his fingers on the bed and frowned. His cock was still jutting out obscenely, but his mind was otherwise occupied.

I couldn't stop admiring him. He was a beautiful man, and looked, for the lack of a better word, *virile*. Intricate tattoos decorated his bulging veins and wide shoulders, making him a breathing piece of art. “And besides, aren't you guys feuding? You're willing to have sex with the same woman?”

Maddox sighed. “There have been certain developments with my immortals, and I think that having others look out for you isn't the worst idea.” He fixed his serious stare on me. “I wasn't lying when I said I'd accept anything to keep you safe.

I'm not arrogant enough to think that I have control over every situation."

"Wanting to sleep with me doesn't mean they're willing to take risks for me."

He chuckled and stretched out on his side of the bed. "We're still talking about Alex and Ryder, right? I know both of them better than anyone. It's different with you. I'm doing my best to separate how I feel about them and what I believe you need."

"It's that easy?" I asked. "Aren't you angry with both of them? You can't simply shut that off."

Maddox scoffed. "Don't I know it. It's easier with Ryder than with Alex. But I want you too much, and you won't stay away from them, right?"

I looked down, sliding a hand over the bedspread. "Ryder, maybe. Nothing has happened with Alex."

"Yet," he snapped, and his hostility leaked into the rumble of his voice.

This wasn't how I wanted the night to go. Almost arguing instead of sex. But I couldn't help my hesitancy. However, I wasn't in the wrong for wanting to reconcile with the reality of having sex with him, or anyone, for that matter.

I gestured to the bed awkwardly. "Rain check?" My words pitched higher, my uncertainty bleeding into my voice.

How did this beast of a man handle rejection?

Maddox must have had tons of women who didn't put up a fuss. Maybe this was it for us. Hell, it would be so awkward to live with him after this.

I needed to go apartment hunting.

Where's my phone?

Before I could scramble off, wanting distance between us before I could ramble off an excuse to leave, Maddox placed his hand on my forearm. His fingers completely curled around my arm, even overlapping a bit.

“It’s okay.” His face didn’t display any disappointment. “I can wait for you.”

“You don’t have to,” I replied weakly.

Maddox took my face in his hand and rubbed his thumb over my mouth. “When you take my cock for the first time, you won’t have this look on your face. Maybe you’ll be nervous as hell, but you’ll want my cum inside of you.”

I could see the seriousness in his gaze, and the blackness of his pupils when they dilated as he spoke.

His lips curled into a devious smile, and shadows shifted across his face. “You see, little one? You’ll belong to me eventually.”

MADDOX

I was a bastard. And by being one, I'd earned the respect of my immortals and the unsuspecting humans that worked for Pendulum.

So when I played my hand and got Saige to move in with me, I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about the ease of getting her into my bed.

I'd simply wanted her after hearing about Alex and Ryder's fascination, but I'd craved her after meeting her that first time.

I hardly pursued women, and after gaining my immortality, I'd found that the world had a lot more to offer than just carnal pleasures. Somehow, in the past week, I'd rediscovered that side of me.

It was a welcome change, but not good timing.

Lately, there had been more dissent from my immortals. It made everyone uneasy to know that the situation with the human government remained unresolved. It appeared like the humans didn't mind having more of their innocents die.

What a shame. Killing wasn't fun without a satisfying reaction. The several immortals I'd sent out to do the deed may be having a good time, but that was it.

Although it pained me to even consider it, I might have to work with Alex for a more delicate approach to solve this conflict. It had gone on long enough.

The idea made me press too hard on the piece of paper I was sketching on. The black ink bled into the white sheet, leaving a messy stain.

I tore off the sheet, crumpling the dainty paper and tossing it onto the floor with all the others.

It was three in the morning now, and I was sitting in one of the smaller rooms in my apartment that I'd set aside for my tattoo workshop. I spent most of the time at the workbench, sitting on a tiny stool, hunched over papers with a black pen. The walls had wooden panels set up, allowing me to pin up designs I'd sketched. All the ideas would mostly never be inked, but it was a helpful way for me to exercise my creativity.

Everything I drew was black and white. I'd never been tempted to do anything with colour, even though I had the pens and ink to do it.

But now... I stared at the shades of reds and blues.

It was silly how meeting Saige was changing me.

I'd always been a secret romantic at heart, a fact that only Ryder and Alex knew. But when I saw Saige, romance was the last thing on my mind. An animalistic urge to take her filled my very being, an all-consuming desire to make her *mine* before anyone else could.

Could that be love? I wasn't sure, but either way, Saige belonged to me.

"Knock knock."

I didn't look up from my sketch. "You have work in the morning, what are you doing still up?" I'd heard her soft footsteps down the hall but expected her to walk to the kitchen. I felt her presence next to me after she dragged over one of the rolling stools.

"I couldn't sleep. I always have trouble when I'm in new places."

After finishing a rough outline of a feather, I set down my black pen and turned to face her. "Will a glass of warm milk

help?”

Saige looked beautiful as she always was, except her brown hair was now messy and tangled from trying to sleep. Her shorts allowed me to appreciate her long, delicious legs. She typically wore more baggy clothing to work, so this was a new look.

“Is this all for tattooing?” she asked, looking around the room. “It’s like a tattoo parlour here.”

I gave the room a perfunctory glance. “I suppose so. It’s been decades since I’d been to an actual tattoo parlour.”

“So, are most of your tattoos done by yourself?” She sounded impressed. “Those designs are so intricate.”

I twisted my neck and tapped on the tattoo that sat above my collarbone. She swallowed as her eyes trailed down my throat. “I had a friend do this one and my chest. Those were my first tattoos.”

Saige bit her lip as she stared at my bare chest. Her breathing picked up.

I didn’t like to wear shirts at home because it felt constricting, but I just found another reason to forego my clothes.

“Maddox, I actually wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh?” I tapped on the workbench, watching how she squirmed in her seat. “Sure. But only for a while, since you need sleep.”

One of the more helpful enhancements I had allowed me to never need sleep. Occasionally I rested my eyes, but my body ran fine without it. However, since the city slowed down in the evenings, I often slowed down with work too.

“Yeah, I know.” She sighed loudly and leaned her elbow against the table while resting her chin in her hand. “I don’t think I can sleep without speaking to you first, though.”

I nodded and waited for her to collect her thoughts. The way she wrinkled her nose and how her brows pulled in made me feel a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Was something wrong?

I immediately grew more alert, my body tense, ready to face this invisible enemy. Seeing her chew on her lips in indecision made my chest hurt. I fucking hated that look on her face. She should be happy and content around me, anything less than that was fucking unacceptable.

“I feel embarrassed,” Saige finally said. “I can’t stop thinking about what happened earlier.”

I frowned, relaxing. “What specifically?” She’d gone through a lot.

She waved her hands around. “The sex thing.”

The sex thing.

The way she phrased it made my lips curl up. I crossed my arms and pushed away from the table, extending my legs out. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I know.” Saige was looking at one of my designs, but I could tell she wasn’t really *seeing* it. “I can’t help it.”

Anyone in this situation could tell that she was inexperienced. And rejecting someone when they were literally on top of you may feel awkward for many people. “Saige, it’s alright. If I’m pressuring you too much, tell me.” I went to her room with certain expectations, but I would’ve backed off if she wasn’t ready. “Talk to me.”

She sighed. “No, that’s not it.”

“Explain.” If only I had the mind reading enhancement on hand...

Saige peeked over at me. “I’m not big on casual dating. In fact, for my whole life, I thought I was a serial monogamist.”

“Kitten.” I slid my hand over hers, which was resting on her thigh. “There’s nothing casual about us.”

She blinked, her mouth falling open. “What?”

I tried not to think about having my cock between those luscious lips of hers. “I want only you.”

“But—” she stuttered to a stop. “Why?”

Why, indeed? It was one of those inexplicable moments, a feeling that only people who believed could understand.

“I’ve long waited for the woman for me, and with one look at you, I knew. A part of me expected it. My grandfather used to talk about my grandmother like that.” And just like every time I remembered my relatives, a lingering pain reminded me they were long gone. So many years had passed, and my memories of my childhood were now blurry.

“That sounds like something out of a movie,” Saige whispered. “You believe in love at first sight?”

The reality of loving her made me tense up. She’d be a clear weakness with a target on her back. “I believe in how I feel about you.”

“No wonder you’re acting like a freaky stalker,” she muttered.

I pinched her leg. “This freaky stalker is your man.”

She sucked in a breath. “I can’t believe that.”

“Well, start believing.”

Saige played with my fingers as she grappled with what I said.

Suddenly, I became grateful for the healing enhancements I had as an immortal. My skin would always be smooth. She would never touch the welts, gunshots, cuts, burns, or any other scars I got from my line of work. Saige was everything pure, and my world should never taint her.

Her dainty hands were so much smaller than mine. She was so breakable. I could crush her so easily with my bare hands, it was laughable.

How could I feel comfortable having her go out and about when she was quickly becoming my whole life? I knew the city and how, underneath the bustling streets and shining skyscrapers, all there was left was filth and dirty deals.

“I just want you to clarify something. You mentioned Ryder and Alex before. Would you mind if I started anything with others? I want to be open about this.”

“No humans,” I instantly snapped. Intense jealousy raged through me. She may wake up one day and realize that a normal life was better.

But Saige was interested in polygamy? That was uncommon amongst humans. Excitement surged through me. I didn’t consider myself monogamous, I’d always loved the idea of a woman with multiple men.

“I’m thinking more like Ryder.” She swivelled on the stool, catching herself on the edge of the workbench when she made a rotation. “Now I know how you feel about me. But I’m not going to lie, I feel something for him too.”

I gritted my teeth. Hearing about her attraction to others tore me apart inside. But at the same time, I wasn’t all that surprised. Alex brought up sharing that day at my office. While he was delusional to think Ryder would do anything with him, Ryder and I were on better, albeit tenuous, terms.

I hated what happened, how Alex tore away all the goodwill between the three of us through his shitty decision-making.

“I mean, you and I aren’t together or anything. We’re not in a relationship. But it doesn’t sit right with me to—”

Before I could hold myself in check, I was out of my seat and hovering over her. She yelped and kicked her feet, making her stool roll back. I grabbed onto it to hold her still and glared down into her wide eyes. “Listen to me. *We’re together.*”

Cupping her face in my hand, I relished how her shock at my closeness slowly morphed into a dazed look.

Every time we touched, she reacted so openly to me.

Oh, when we fucked, it would be glorious.

“Okay,” she squeaked. Then she cleared her throat. “I might be crazy, but I like the sound of that.”

My lips curled upwards. “Good. You’ve been such a hardass since we’ve met, I thought you’d be fighting tooth and nail.”

Saige crossed her arms and sniffed. “You don’t have a concept of boundaries, Maddox.”

I yanked her stool closer to me and trapped her against the table. Sliding my nose over the side of her face and along the shell of her ear, I whispered, “Admit it, you like it.”

She shuddered, her body trembling in my embrace.

So reactive...

I pulled back enough so our gazes could meet. “I can tolerate Ryder. Maybe.” Things were still awkward and polite between us. But we were alike in ways that Alex could never match. “But that’s all I can say for now.”

I was a better lover than Ryder, even though I hadn’t had sex for so long. With all the debauchery and parties I threw, I knew seduction. Ryder was so isolated and lost in his weak vices, he would never stand a chance.

But if she wanted to try him out too, so be it. My kitten wanted to experiment with one of my ex-best friends. If this all blew up in our faces, I’d be here to catch her when she falls.

Saige placed a hand on my forearm and pushed weakly. “You know...”

I moved back, watching as she shuffled through the designs on the workbench.

“I always wanted a tattoo,” she admitted. “A small one.”

“Let me do it for you.” I hid my exhilaration from my voice. I could wait for her to give me her sweet pussy, but I was itching to do something *more*. This was my chance. “What design do you want?”

While Saige flipped through my work, I started preparing the inks and the gun. I swiped down my work area with disinfectant sprays and paper towels.

“This one.”

I turned to see what design she was pointing at. The sketch looked like a tiny maze, with a thinner swirl overlaid on top. The intricate details were more complex than I’d expected for her first tattoo.

It was a design I created after Alex described it to me about two decades back. I loved how it turned out, but the way things were now left a bitter taste in my mouth. Even though it was a coincidence, I still bristled. “Are you sure?” My question came out gravelly.

Saige’s eyes widened. “Is this not okay? I can choose another one.”

I shook my head. “No, you can have it.”

She stared at me for a moment before turning back to the book. “I’ll continue looking.” Even though she flipped to the other pages, she kept a hand holding onto that page.

I mentally brushed off my reservations about the history of that design. “Choose the one that speaks to you. It is permanent, after all.”

After a while, Saige squared her shoulder and pointed at the original one she’d picked. “I want this one.”

“Okay. Go sit over there.”

I dragged over the rolling tray that held my tools and inks. “Where do you want it?”

She sighed. “Not somewhere super visible. My mom would kill me.”

I eyed her body. “Hidden with clothes? Even in something like a bathing suit? Or lingerie?”

Fuck, the idea of peeling off her panties and seeing my tattoo there made my cock hard. Knowing that I tattooed it on her, permanently marking her, made me feel a deep sense of masculine satisfaction. This woman drew out the savage parts of me, and it was fucking thrilling.

“Maybe slightly under your panty line?” I kept my tone casual, but I was burning up inside.

All for her.

Saige frowned, and she drew her shirt up. Absentmindedly, she slid a finger over the waistband of her underwear. “Yeah, I like that idea. On the front here is good, I want to see it easily.”

“Take off your pants and pull down your panties.” When she opened her mouth to protest, I raised my hands. “Just a bit of the waistband. It’s easier with no obstructions. You’ll also need to lift your shirt.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Still, she shot me an annoyed look as she complied.

“Lie back.” Watching her respond immediately to my commands made me pause. *Would she submit to me in bed?*

Before all those lusty thoughts took over me, I started going through the motions of disinfecting her skin and drawing the design carefully. Her body was my canvas, and now I had the honour of adding to it. I held onto her waist lightly, feeling her subtle curves while occasionally taking in the shallow rise of her chest.

Saige was all warmth and beauty, and everything about her was exhilarating. I never thought the woman for me would be so delicate, and she triggered every one of my protective instincts.

When I finally finished all the prep work, Saige exhaled loudly and stared resolutely up at the ceiling. “I want this, but I might freak out watching you.”

“That’s alright,” I replied. “I’ll be gentle. Are you sure you don’t want an enhancement?” There were defensive enhancements that minimized pain.

“Yes. I want to feel it. At least I can brag about it with my friends back home.” She laughed lightly. “We’re all such wimps.”

And so I began.

I fought the urge to caress her thigh and forced myself to concentrate on the tattoo gun. Unlike any other person I'd tattooed, this felt so intimate.

She winced as the needle touched her skin. "Ah, yeah, that hurts more than I expected."

"Hmm," I murmured, "if this hurts you, I can't imagine what it'll feel like when you take my dick."

Saige gasped. "Maddox!"

My lips curled up. "Don't move, baby girl. You don't want me hurting you. Not when I'm holding a tattoo gun."

She muttered insults at me under her breath, and I chuckled. How feisty.

The next ten minutes were quiet, and the room filled with the hum of the tattoo gun. But just as I was about to fill in the lines, Saige suddenly gasped.

A sheen of sweat was visible on her hairline. "Sorry, I've been trying not to react. I don't want to distract your work."

"This is hard for you." I peered into her eyes, which reflected her pain. I placed the tattoo gun down. "You're doing great. But maybe you're too tense. Let me loosen you up."

"Huh? How?" Saige blinked innocently at me, making my cock stir.

Fucking hell.

"Like this." I placed my hands on either side of her waist. Slowly sliding her panties down, I resisted the urge to rip them off savagely.

Her small hands grasped my hair, causing a sting on my scalp. "Stop."

"What do we have here?" I murmured, my voice deepening. "You're so fucking wet, Saige." I studied her face while I gently placed my fingers against her opening.

Her eyes glazed over. "Oh."

I grazed her clit, and my thrill spiked through me at how her body grew lax. She was putty under my touch, and her wetness was practically dripping.

“Look at you,” I said softly, dipping into her pussy to press against the spot I knew would drive her wild.

Her choked gasp made me chuckle.

I can't wait to fuck her.

I could extend her orgasm longer, make her beg for me, but I knew it was a long night already. After her hesitancy earlier, I didn't want to confuse her more. I curled my fingers inside of her and watched the bliss capture her delicate features.

She threw her head back as her climax seized her, and I dove in to nuzzle her neck, leaving a hint of a kiss on her sweaty skin. The inside of her thighs was slick with her arousal, and I wanted to coat my palms with her delicious scent.

While she continued to rest, I started to finish the last of her tattoo. Using my enhancements, my motions were a blur. She already got the real tattooing experience earlier. “Just a bit more to go. Do you want a break?”

Saige was quiet for a moment before she smiled up at me. Her small hand caught mine, and we grinned at each other.

“Can I run to the bathroom?” She bit her lip. “Will that mess it up? I should've gone before.”

“No, it's fine. Go ahead.” I stood and cracked my neck. “Take your time, but don't get water on it.”

While she ventured off to the bathroom, I washed my hands at the sink before walking over to the desk that sat in front of the far wall. As I reached for my mug of coffee, a plastic baggy that I'd placed there earlier in the week ensnared my attention.

It was a tracker.

Preston brought over extras when I planted one in an unconscious enemy that was brought here a week ago. It was

rare that my immortals brought captured men to my apartment, but we caught him sneaking around in the building staircase.

I should lock it in one of my safes and forget about it, but I took out the tiny tracker and held it in my palm.

The intention of it was to keep tabs on any enemies of the Quorum, immortal or human. With the tracker, I would know exactly where they were.

I ran a hand over my beard. Even after washing my hands with soap, my enhanced senses made it so I could smell her on my fingers.

Ideas whirled around my mind. Forbidden ones that definitely crossed the line. With this tracker, I could know where she was, if she made it home safely, or how she spent her time.

What if my enemies kidnapped her? She could be taken because of her connection to me. I would tear the entire world apart to find her, but I couldn't bear the thought of her being stolen away like that.

Saige would freak out if she knew I planted a tracker in her, but she wouldn't ever need to know about it. It would soothe my mind to know I had this safeguard in place, and I could only wish that I'd never actually need it to protect her life.

Hopefully, it would only be for my perverse interest in her as a person. Was my obsession with her stronger than my desire to respect her free will?

This makes me fucking terrible, but yes.

"I'm going to call in sick to work," Saige announced as she entered the room again. "It's so late."

"Good plan." I closed my hand around the tracker and walked back over to her. She was already lying on her back, ready to continue. "This is going to hurt more, so be ready."

"Oh, fun." She shut her eyes. "Okay, just do it."

I made quick work of it all, using my speed to implant the tracker before she could notice. Or before I could grow a sense

of ethics and change my mind.

I snorted. Those days were long gone. Blood stained my hands and honestly, my role in the Quorum and my leadership of my immortals felt like a second skin.

Perhaps I was born for this.

It took me a bit of time to finish up her tattoo, and when it was complete, I got up to grab a fresh bandage. “You can sit up.”

I knelt in front of her and watched as she gaped at her new tattoo.

After the initial shock wore off, she smiled down at me. “I love it. Thank you.”

The way her brown hair fell over her face and the sparkle in her eyes made my stomach flutter.

And goddammit. I didn't feel stuff like that.

Forgetting about the bandage for a second, I lifted my chin and pressed my lips firmly to hers. While her hands rested on my shoulders, I cradled her head in my hands.

Every fucking time I touched her, I was reminded of how she was such a small, gentle thing. All that did was spike a sense of fear into me.

New York was a big, bustling city, and anyone could snatch her up and steal her away from me. This was maddening. How did people function properly when they held such a treasure in their arms?

No wonder love drove people mad.

SAIGE

I rested my cheek in my hand, and my long curls dipped onto the table. Although I was facing the massive TV screen across the room, I wasn't paying the hockey game any attention.

Tonight I put in extra effort to dress up and curl my hair. It felt nice to look good.

This was my second time at Cinders.

The bar looked brighter and busier than I remembered. This renowned bar wasn't open for normal folks like me, but it sure did for my good friend and world-famous singer and actress, Ali Hayes. After meeting her here to catch up, she'd made sure I was always on the approved guest list.

Before my first meeting with Ryder, I'd made plans to see her again. Now that I was involved with immortals, I didn't want to risk accidentally exposing something to Ali and causing her to get hurt. Maybe they'd just wipe her memory, but I didn't want to chance it.

My drink sat loosely in my grip and I was a tad tipsy. Alcohol probably wasn't a great idea since I had a busy day tomorrow travelling to Washington for Helen's wedding. But I didn't often feel like going out on Friday nights.

Tonight, Cinders had a themed evening with Latin dancing. There were four couples on the floor, their bodies swivelling in time to the sultry music. They held their partners close, and the ladies all had ruby red lipstick.

I caught my reflection in the shiny golden record on the wall. I wore my only lipstick tonight, just a pink hue with a hint of peach.

“New to the city?”

I looked at the bartender, who was a young woman, maybe in her late twenties. “Why do you say that?”

She chuckled. “You don’t seem jaded enough to have lived here long.”

I smiled. “You’re right, I’ll give it some more time.”

Perhaps she noticed I wasn’t feeling a conversation because she left me alone after that. I wished that someday I could develop such perceptiveness.

I’d been living with Maddox for over a week now, and we’d developed a comfortable routine coexisting in the same space. Over the past couple of days, I realized I was always keeping track of what he does at home. His habits and his interests intrigued me.

I wanted to crack open that wild man and learn exactly what made him tick. Figure out why I was so intriguing to him.

Love at first sight, or whatever the heck we were, didn’t make sense, but being wanted like that was addicting. And unhealthy, depending on who you asked. I was keeping my distance still, not ready to take the next step.

Wanting to forget everything for a night, I turned to watch the hockey game. I would do anything to preoccupy my busy mind.

“Excuse me.”

My hand froze midair as I was in the middle of taking another sip from my glass. There was something about that voice that made me feel uneasy.

I was almost afraid to peer over at this mystery man, but I had to. When I realized who it was, I hopped off the barstool and took a step back. “It’s you!”

It was the shady man I saw bring my stuff up at Maddox's place. Based on that, I should be able to trust him. But he gave off hostile vibes, and his dark expression made me watch him warily. He wore a leather jacket and black jeans, the same outfit I saw before.

"What do you want?" I demanded. I winced inwardly at how rude I sounded.

He leaned against the bar casually before crooking a finger at the bartender. She slid a drink over to him before hurrying away.

I watched her go, wishing that I could hightail it out of here.

The man watched me intently. "I want to talk to you."

I pursed my lips. "We have nothing to talk about."

"I disagree."

Tearing my eyes away from his, I took a swig from my glass. I was mildly curious about why he would seek me out, but I wasn't going to ask him.

Time slipped by when I focused on the hockey game, and I tried my best to ignore the heavy presence of the man beside me. Just as the game switched to overtime, he spoke up.

"I'm here because of Ali Hayes."

That made me swivel in my seat. "What about her? I won't introduce you or anything like that." Maybe the paparazzi photographed us together? I didn't know how she lived with all her fame, it must feel exhausting.

"The Senseless Ripper is after her."

"*What?*" I gaped over at him, and my hand jerked erratically, almost knocking over my drink. I slid it over and tucked my hands into my lap.

Although people felt on edge at the beginning of the Ripper's killing spree, life went on. Since the threat wasn't going away, it appeared like everyone grew lax. I did too.

But this time, the potential victim was a friend, making it personal.

Trying to grapple with this news, I gripped the back of my neck. “Did Maddox order this? Why did he?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re not lying?”

He rolled his shoulders and tapped his fingers on the table. “Why would I lie?”

“You might have your own agenda.” There was something about him that felt lethal. It didn’t help that he embraced a cold aura, not cracking a smile, and his eyes were deep and unfathomable.

I couldn’t read him, and that was frightening.

“I’m telling you the facts. You can confirm with Maddox if you’d like. He doesn’t handle minor issues like this directly, but he’d look into it for you.”

I was absolutely going to do that. “But why are you telling me this?”

He paused, tilting his head slightly. “I have a... vested interest in her well-being.”

Right. “How vague.”

“The point is, you can do something about it.” His stare was unnerving. “You can protect your friend.”

“Why don’t you ask Maddox to not target her?” I crossed my arms tightly over my chest. “He probably wouldn’t say no.”

He nodded in acknowledgement of that fact. “But it would cost me a favour, no? With you...” Something flashed across his face. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind it as much. I’m also curious about how much he cares about you.”

My jaw clenched. “So, you’re using me.”

“You wouldn’t want your friend hurt, would you? Not when you know you could’ve done something.” His gaze was calculating.

I chewed on my lip. I hated how he was baiting me, but it certainly worked. Ali was one of the few friends I had, and that meant something to me. “Maddox is away on business.”

“He should be back by next week.” The man stood up and yanked on the collar of his jacket. “Remember what I said. See you around.”

He was already walking away when I called after him. “Tell me one thing. What’s your name?”

While he stopped, he didn’t look back. Finally, he spoke up in a gravelly tone. “Preston.”

I mouthed his name as he left, but it didn’t ring a bell. Pulling out my phone, I tried to call Maddox, but I had to leave a voicemail.

“Hey, I wanted to ask about what your”— I glanced around the bar before lowering my voice to a hush—“*serial killer* is doing with Ali Hayes. She’s my friend. I don’t want her hurt. Call me back.”

After shoving my phone back into my purse, I slid off the barstool. I wanted a chill night, but Preston ruined that for me. I let out a heavy sigh and headed to the door. When I neared the small stage where the live jazz band was playing, I stopped to take in the soothing, soft music.

A man and woman were crooning to the tune, enraptured in each other’s gaze. He wore a classic suit while she was wrapped up in a shiny dress. They gently swayed towards each other, selling their lyrics well with their undeniable chemistry. Right when they reached out to clasp hands, someone pushed me from behind, making me stumble forward.

Grumbling under my breath, I knelt to grab my purse, which I’d dropped. After I straightened up, I whipped my head around to glare at the offender. “Watch it!”

The man smiled at me politely, flashing his slightly crooked teeth. He looked business professional, with a short, neat haircut and a navy blue suit. He was relatively shorter and slim but still stood taller than me. “Excuse me, ma’am.”

I nodded, not wanting to entertain any more conversation with a stranger.

But tonight wasn't my night, I suppose.

"Saige Kinley."

I stiffened at his matter-of-fact tone. "How do you know my name?"

He stepped in closer to me. "Don't you recognize me?"

I squinted at him, trying to put a name to his face. Nope. Stranger to me. "Should I know you?"

The man placed a hand on my bare shoulder, where the strap of my dress was slipping. His touch could've been innocent, but it *felt* wrong. I edged away from him, but he seemed to move with me. "Back off. You're making me feel uncomfortable."

My sharp words didn't seem to register with him. "I just want to talk to you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Then back the fuck up."

A hint of a sneer framed his twisted mouth. "Fine." He raised his arms and took a dramatic step backwards. "Happy?"

His attitude wasn't helping. "What do you want?"

"My name is Chester Winsler," the entitled asshole revealed. "I'm a human."

A sudden coldness washed over me. I chuckled awkwardly. "What a shock. As opposed to what?"

He leaned in closer to me. "I'm acquainted with Alexander Moreau. And as we both know, he's much more than a mere human."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say. This was an odd situation since I'd only met Alex twice, and both in a work setting. "And you approached me because of him? I don't know him well."

"Really? Interesting." Chester's face was unreadable, but there was a sarcastic lilt in his tone. "Well, regardless, I want

to introduce myself and make my position known to you.”

His crypticness made my head spin and my patience wore thin. “What the hell are you talking about? What position?”

“I support the immortals’ cause.” He paused. “I hold a prominent position in the government, so my support is valuable.”

I frowned, my brows wrinkling as I considered his words. “But you work for the government. Isn’t that some sort of violation? To not support your own people?”

“Change is needed,” Chester replied. Suddenly, he straightened his posture and peered around the bar. “And their agenda right now is heading in the wrong direction.”

Seeing how his attention strayed, I glanced around but saw nothing that alarmed me. Just the same people drinking and chatting. “So, you’re fine with the killings?”

He smiled wryly. “I never said that.”

“But you’re sympathetic to the immortals.” After these past couple of weeks, I was wavering a little in my apprehension myself.

“The suspicion and stance the government has implemented against the immortals are deplorable.” His face twisted with anger. “Humans deserve what they’re getting.”

Okay... That seemed to confirm my earlier idea that he was fine with the killings.

Chester made me feel icky. And it wasn’t because of his lackadaisical attitude towards the serial killer terrorizing the city. It was the light in his eyes and the way he spat his words out, like the loss of human life was worth less than nothing at all.

The hollow feeling in my stomach wasn’t going away, and I pressed my hand against my front. I wanted nothing to do with someone who raised my inner alarm bells like this.

Right as I was about to excuse myself and get the hell away from this man, his gaze shifted to something behind me. “That’s all from me.” Without another look, he turned and

jogged off, heading towards the hallway near the back of Cinders.

I stared at the spot where he disappeared before shaking my head. That was a strange way to end our conversation, but at least I didn't need to entertain him anymore.

Shaking my head, I headed over to the exit. My ankles ached from my high heels, and my will to live died a little just thinking about walking home.

My phone vibrated in my purse, and I stopped to send a quick reply.

MADDOX

I sent someone to look into it. No one's going to hurt your friend.

ME

Hurry, please

I entered the quiet hallway that led to the front entrance. When I took a step, my left foot felt loose in my shoe, so I bent down to adjust the strap.

But suddenly, I felt someone watching me. It was an overwhelming presence that bristled my skin and demanded my attention. I straightened and scanned the empty hallway, but nothing seemed amiss. The doors were all shut and all I could hear was the noise from the bar.

I tightened my grip on my purse, my pulse quickening. Should I call someone? It felt ridiculous to reach out when all I had was a *feeling*.

“Who was that?”

I jumped, twisting quickly.

It was Ryder. And he was standing so close to me.

Too close.

Before I could back away, his hand was on my lower back and our hips pressed together. I gasped at the contact, and his smouldering gaze captured my eyes.

“I thought you went back to Oregon,” I whispered.

Ryder angled his head, and the dim light from the ceiling reflected the golden flecks in his brown eyes. “I couldn’t stay away.”

“Ryder—” My breath was knocked out of my lungs when I suddenly felt a strong sense of vertigo. The surrounding space became a blur. Ryder’s hand cradled my head, and I burrowed my face in his chest.

“Darling, we’re here.”

I could barely hear him since my ears were ringing. Knowing how unsteady my legs were, I clutched onto him helplessly. “Jesus, what was that? Where is here?”

His breath wafted over my ear. “Washington. Your friend’s wedding venue is down the street.”

“Was that teleportation?” When he nodded, I resisted the urge to squeal.

Oh my god, a part of me didn’t believe that teleportation was an actual thing. It didn’t feel natural or comfortable, and I was still resisting the urge to vomit, but I couldn’t believe I travelled to an entirely different state in a few seconds.

I lifted my head and peered around. “Ryder, I’m pretty sure this isn’t the hotel room I booked.”

Yeah, there was no way I could afford a place like this.

We were standing in the living room, and there was a spacious kitchen and dining table right next to us. A winding, fancy wooden staircase led up to what must be the bedroom. Everything in the room was in comfortable cream tones, and the painting on the wall depicted abstract paint splatters. The curtains were nearly completely drawn over the windows, but the minuscule lights lining the outer edges of the ceiling illuminated the room.

Ryder didn’t even spare our surroundings a glance. “You’re staying here.”

He stated that like there was no room for an argument, and I squinted my eyes at him. “Try that again.”

His teeth sunk into his lower lip as he looked down at me. *He shouldn't do stupidly sexy things like that.* “What do you want me to say? You booked yourself a disgusting dump of a motel, and I want you to stay in one piece?”

I didn't want to shell out a ton of money on this weekend trip, so I cut back my expenses on lodging. The two-star motel truly was scary, but I would suck it up for two nights.

My lips twitched. “Better.” However, I sighed, hating how much I liked this luxurious room. “How can I repay you for this?”

“Your skin looks so soft. But it's even softer to touch,” Ryder murmured, running his finger along my cheek. “Wow.”

“Are you even listening to me?”

He caught my chin and gave me a long kiss. When he pulled away, I nearly went with him, aching to close our distance. “You don't repay me. The least I can do is take care of you. Provide for you.”

Ryder was taking chivalry to another level. “That's not your job.”

An intense, savage look crossed his face. “It's not Maddox Nicoli's job either.”

My mind flashed back to that night in New York when Maddox saw me and Ryder holding hands on the street. I wasn't a fan of being caught between an alpha male standoff or a century-long feud. And Ryder kissed me right there.

Did he just do it to spite Maddox? The potential revelation left a bitter tang in my mouth.

Immediately, I tried to break out of his arms. “Is that what this is? You want to one-up him by stealing my attention?”

His grip on me grew tighter, and it was growing uncomfortable. “Where the fuck did that come from?”

“I'm trying to piece this whole situation together. You immortals had years to perfect the art of messing with people.”

Ryder stared down at me, his jaw working. “*Fuck.*” His expletive sounded gritty. With a swipe of his arm, he picked me up and started walking. The stony look on his face grew hardened and more determined.

“Let me down!” I demanded. But he had my arms trapped, and all I could do was glare at him.

When we reached the bedroom, he gently set me on my feet but didn’t extract his arms. Instead, he pushed me onto my back on the bed and held himself over me.

“What are you doing?” I snapped, slapping my hand against his chest. No matter how hard I pushed, he wouldn’t budge. His body was as hard as a rock, and a vein bulged in his neck. “Ryder!” His eye contact felt overwhelming, and I inhaled his delicious, musky scent with every breath I took.

“Saige.”

“Say what you have to say.” Even though I wanted to look away from him, I couldn’t. His hands framed my cheeks, and it would be sweet if I didn’t feel like he was holding me still.

“I’ve never felt this way about someone before,” Ryder began lowly. “That first day we met when you didn’t tell me what I wanted to know, I thought about torturing you. But even then, I knew I wanted you. It wasn’t a conscious decision and still isn’t. I *need* you.”

“But Maddox...”

“This crawling urge for you under my skin, the crippling need to see you so I stay sane, that has nothing to do with him.” He brushed the pad of his right thumb over my temple. “You can hate me, rightfully, for many reasons, but never doubt how I feel about you. I didn’t think I had the capacity for so much feeling, it’s quite baffling. And trust me, I have little experience with humans.”

“Are we really that different?” I asked, a growing lump in my throat. Maddox had shown no signs of that. But he could be better at hiding it.

“Perhaps it’s all about perspective. The roller coaster of emotions you feel over the little things, all that doesn’t register

with me. Decades have gone by in the blink of an eye. I'd experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows." Ryder's piercing gaze burned. "You came to me and distracted me from the monotony of living. I won't let you go."

His possessiveness was clear to see, and unlike in the beginning, I felt further drawn to him because of it. Perhaps it was because I'd gotten used to Maddox's intensity.

"I feel so empty," Ryder remarked plainly. "If I was a better man, I'd leave you alone. But I've never been good. I'm not starting now."

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry about what I said about Maddox and you. Now can you get off? Let's get something to eat."

"No." He shifted even closer to me, and his heavy weight made my mind flash to dirty places. "Since you mentioned Maddox, we might as well talk about him."

"Fine." I watched how his satisfied grin made his handsome face light up.

"You're living with Maddox," he remarked.

I flushed. "Yup."

"How involved are you two?" I didn't trust how unaffected he sounded at all.

"We've spoken about it, and I don't do casual relationships. But there's uncertainty still." But my defences were coming down, even though I was hesitant. Part of it was how he was tempting me by walking around shirtless, especially after working out.

I had needs too, and right now I was not satisfied.

"But what about Moreau?" Ryder growled.

I blinked at the sudden animosity in his tone. "What about Alex?"

His nostrils flared. "Are you fucking him?"

At his crass words, my leg jerked up, and I almost made contact with his crotch.

With a curse, he clutched me to him and rolled on his side. I tried to ignore how nice it felt to be wrapped in his arms.

“Stop trying, you’re not stronger than me.” Ryder’s tone held a tinge of lazy amusement. “You’re like a dainty fairy. Holding you like this”—he exhaled loudly, and I could feel his heavy length against me—“I can’t stop imagining your mouth on my dick.”

My whole body vibrated at his confession. “First, I didn’t have sex with Alex. And second, I have questions for you.” Screw it, if he was going to keep me trapped like this, I might as well feed my curiosity. I relaxed on the bed, accepting my fate for a while.

“Oh?”

“Tell me what happened between you and Alex,” I whispered. “Or else I won’t consider sucking your cock.” I was slowly piecing together the issues between these three immortals.

He caressed my chin, rubbing his fingers there as if I had a chin dimple. “Only consider? You won’t even guarantee it? That isn’t a fair deal.”

“It’s the only deal you’re getting.”

“I’ll give you a taste,” he murmured, “and one day I’ll let you uncover all my secrets.”

I stared at the pounding pulse in his throat. “I can live with that.”

“The three of us grew up together, but there were differences between us. I was a servant boy at the Nicoli family estate. I’ve always been Maddox’s friend and confidant first.”

“You don’t get along with Alex?” I asked.

“Not at the time.” At the mention of him, Ryder’s expression changed to a surly one. “Alex has an esteemed bloodline and sat on top of the social order. I don’t miss the past when your life was so predetermined by chance.”

“But after so many years, and forming the Quorum, I’d assume the three of you grew closer.”

Shadows crossed his face, and he gritted his teeth. “We did, but it isn’t that simple. My memory is too long, and there is too much I can’t forget. Sometimes I wish I wasn’t immortal.”

My eyes widened. “Ryder, please don’t say that.”

He smiled wryly at me, and his hand crept underneath my shirt. “Without my immortality, I’d be long dead. If I knew I was going to meet you, I’d pay more attention to modern humans. Figure out how to make you purr for me.”

“It’s not too late.” But I squirmed away from his touch. Since I recognized his evasiveness, I shifted the conversation away from Alex. “Maddox told me about you not caring about his immortals dying at the hands of the government. Is that true?”

His lips twisted, and contrite rang true in the lines of his mouth. “That was a mistake, and I admitted as much to him.”

“You did?”

Ryder stretched his arm over his head. “I miss my friendships with them, but there’s no turning back with Alex. It’s hard to find anyone to trust. Maddox and I are as close as it gets now that the Quorum is in shambles.” He gave me a sideways look. “I detest how he handles situations, but I’m sure we’ll have to suck it up to share you.”

I reared back. “Sharing?”

“That’s the only way either of us can have you.” He raised an eyebrow. “You won’t choose between us. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I bit my lip. “Honestly, I haven’t thought about the practicalities of it.”

“Well,” he murmured, “while you’re thinking that through, you need to pay up on our deal. You’re not going to suck my dick,” he growled. He leaned in closer until our noses touched. “I’m going to fuck your mouth.”

Ryder pulled me out of the bed. His hand landed on my shoulder, and he forcefully pushed me down to my knees. I landed heavily, my hands bracing the floor at the impact.

“A warning would’ve been nice,” I muttered.

He smiled as he unzipped his fly. “Take it out on my cock, darling.”

Oh, now that idea was appealing. I licked my lips as he freed his cock from his pants, and it was already erect and bobbing at my face. After that day at the park when he fingered me, I’d been aching to discover his taste.

I wrapped my lips around him, hollowing out my cheeks as I slid further down. I traced the throbbing veins with my fingers, and the feeling alone made me grow wetter.

“Fucking hell.” His gruff tone reflected his awe. If I wasn’t so focused on blowing his mind, I’d want to see his expression.

I felt like I was overheating and my clothes were all so tight. When I choked myself on his cock, he loudly sucked in a breath and shifted his stance. The muscles of his thigh tightened underneath my palm.

“Only my Saige can look so pretty with a dick in her mouth,” Ryder whispered as he caressed my temple with his thumb.

I whimpered, my tongue lingering on his tip. His words hit me perfectly, and now my panties were completely soaked through.

He thrust his hips forward when I didn’t continue to suck, making my jaw ache.

I jerked back and bared my teeth at him.

Ryder just laughed. “I’m dripping for you, darling.”

A bead of his cum was leaking out of his tip and the sight made me catch my breath, and I couldn’t resist him anymore. As I continued to bob up and down over his cock, my eyes flicked up to watch his face.

He'd turned into another man, his eyes veiled over by his hunger for me. There was a hint of cruelty outlining his mouth as he gazed down upon me like a victorious conqueror.

I liked that edge in him.

His low groan spurred me on, and I worked him harder, my grip tight around the base of his cock. His saltiness hit my tongue, and I swallowed. There was so much of it, so much of him.

Ryder stroked my throat. "There you go, swallow all of me. This time I'm filling your mouth, next time it'll be your tight pussy."

I pulled my head back to get a gasp of air, but he didn't let me go far.

"Don't move, Saige." He smeared his cum over my lips and under my nose. "I want you to smell my cum while being marked by my seed."

He expects me to keep his cum on my face?

In an impulsive move, I dipped my fingers into my panties and smeared my juices onto his cheek. If he was going to act all caveman on me, I was going to retaliate so he could see how crazy he was acting.

But he gave me a smug smirk. "So tiny and breakable, yet you want to mark me too, Saige? *Fuck me, I like it.*"

Then he slammed his lips onto mine, and I reared up to meet his mouth.

Madness.

We were both mad, and I felt like he made me this way. Made me rabid for him, the same way he was for me. Ryder was so damned magnetic, and I had no choice but to be helplessly lost for him.

SAIGE

I stretched my arms over my head, trying to work out the knots in my shoulders.

I already had sore shoulders from sitting at a desk all day, but I also helped carry heavy boxes of decorations for the wedding ceremony earlier. It felt nice to help, but my body wasn't made for that much physical exertion.

After I cracked my neck, feeling the slight release in strained pressure, I flopped onto my back in my hotel bed and grabbed my phone. I silently thanked Ryder for this luxury suite once again. After he left, I tossed and turned all night. My skin felt hypersensitive for hours afterwards, and the space between my thighs ached.

I should've asked him to stay with me.

My finger swiped through all the photos that were sent to the wedding group chat. I zoomed into the ones I spotted myself in.

It didn't look like I was running on three hours of sleep. That was enough of a win in my book.

I set my phone down and yawned.

Helen's morning wedding was lovely. I wasn't a big fan of weddings, so she didn't put me in it. I was there to support her and her relationship with Darryl. Helen was one of my friends in college, and she majored in theatre. We met at a college party while lining up to use the bathroom, and the rest was history.

We hadn't seen each other in several months, and she found me at the rehearsal for a quick conversation.

I sat on the edge of the stage, an unopened water bottle in my hand.

"So, how have you been?" Helen asked, jumping up to sit next to me. She wore the prettiest baby blue polka-dotted dress which fluttered about when she kicked her legs.

"Shouldn't you be running around, trying to make sure all of this is perfect?" I gestured at the wedding shenanigans around us. Across the room, a woman holding a clipboard marched aggressively over to the bridesmaids lined up in the front.

Helen waved a hand. "My husband-to-be is going to deal with it." Her eyes got a little dreamy calling Darryl that, and I smiled at her obvious happiness.

They had a storybook romance, from childhood sweethearts to a mature, sustainable relationship. There was mutual respect between them that underlined their passion for each other.

Did I want that? If I did, could I ever have it?

"Hey, little lady." Darryl sauntered over to us, but he had his eyes for only his bride. They kissed each other, and it was a simple peck on the lips. But since they were both smiling so adoringly, it looked sugary sweet. Darryl turned to me. "Saige. Thank you for coming."

I clasped his offered hand. "Wouldn't be anywhere else. You're looking real dapper today, Darryl."

He puffed up his chest dramatically, filling out his button-up shirt even more. "Gotta look my best for my Helen."

Oh my god, they're so freaking cute. It should be illegal.

"Alright, alright." Helen laughed and pushed him away playfully. "Go away and let us chat."

After Darryl complied, I said, "Helen, I'm so happy for you." When I saw the way she perked up with a mischievous

look on her face, I gave her a warning glare. “Don’t start. I’ve had enough of it from our friends.”

Weddings brought out many relationship gurus and matchmaking. It certainly didn’t help that I came alone, opening me up to a lot of questions and sly smiles as my good-natured friends tried to hook me up with other guests.

“It’s just that I know how happy I am, and I want that for you,” she said with a wistful sigh.

“I get it,” I murmured. “But I don’t want the pressure. I don’t want to push it. If I find someone”—the physiques and faces of Ryder and Maddox jumped to the forefront of my mind—“I’ll embrace them. It’s annoying to have to keep repeating to people that I’m not interested.”

“I’m sorry.” Helen placed her hand on mine. “It’s the wedding, getting married, all that gooey stuff. I hear you, and I won’t say anything anymore.”

“Thank you.”

“How’s your job? Living your dream in New York City?” She used to hear all my dreams for the future and helped me prepare for my interviews.

“It’s a lot, but I absolutely love it.” I stuck my tongue out at her. “I went to see a Broadway show.”

Just as I expected, she gasped and smacked me on the arm. “What the hell? I’m so jealous. You got to see one before I do! I used to beg you to go to the local theatre shows.”

“My colleagues had tickets. I went just to fit in.” Theatre was loud and exciting, but it wasn’t quite my thing. “I want my next time to be with you.”

“Heck yeah. Pinky promise.”

We linked fingers, and it was like we were back in college again.

I considered staying in and napping some more, but my stomach growled in protest. Room service was way too expensive.

My phone dinged with a text from Helen's sister.

QUINTA

Down to hang at the bar? Drinks on me!

She tacked on a couple of champagne glass emojis at the end of her text.

Quinta and I sat at the same table at the wedding, and I got to experience her nonstop chatter once again. I'd forgotten how much of a social butterfly she was, and how she loved to talk for hours on end.

Tonight, I wanted a quiet evening.

I politely turned her down before sliding off the bed and slipping on my cardigan. I left the hotel, intent on wandering around until I discovered what I wanted to eat.

After almost tripping over cracks on the sidewalk for the fifth time, I was already regretting not staying in. The only bright side was encountering my favourite chain coffee shop and ordering my comfort drink, a hot mocha with whipped cream.

Right as I started heading back to my hotel, a deep baritone voice interrupted me. "Hello."

I nearly did a double-take. "Alex! What are you doing here?"

Alex walked up to me and stopped an arm's length away. His eyes swept over me from head to toe, and my breath caught in my throat at his obvious gesture. "I suppose I could ask you the same question."

I stuffed my hand into the pocket of my cardigan, and carefully balanced my drink in the other. "Yes, you could."

Alex smiled at me then, highlighting his sharp jawline. He reminded me of a movie star from black and white films, especially with his long dark gray blazer. He paired it with a black turtleneck, suit pants, and shiny leather shoes.

"Seeing you here is a strange coincidence," I informed him. "Are you here to seek me out?"

“That’s quite the accusation,” he murmured. “Perhaps I’ve always been around you, and you never noticed.”

I set the lid back onto my drink, making sure it fit on snugly. When I looked up, Alex had his hand up. “Umm...”

“I’ll carry it for you so it doesn’t spill as it did for you last week. You’re not drinking it right now, correct?”

So he has someone following me around as well?

I handed my drink over. “Some men carry purses and you carry hot drinks. And since you know about my hot coffee mishap, that adds further evidence that you planned to meet me here. You must know everything about me.”

Alex didn’t reply and continued watching me with his indecipherable eyes. When he stepped in closer, I held my breath. But all he did was place his hand on the small of my back and gently nudge me. “Let’s get off the street, Saige. Have you had dinner yet?”

We started walking. “Nope.”

“Lucky me,” he replied. “Come up to my place. I’ll cook for you.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to impose on your night.”

“If I don’t spend it with you, I’d be working.” Alex held his arm out to provide a barrier between me and the strangers passing us. “Give me an excuse to take time off.”

“You don’t seem like the type of man to ever relax.” He was the most quietly intense man I’d ever encountered, and I doubted he ever turned it off.

“I’d love to cook you a steak, Saige. A glass of wine would be a nice way to wind down.”

I thought about my directionless evening so far. “You’ve convinced me.”

It was a short walk to his apartment, and when I got inside, it was surprisingly cozy. There were white walls and carpeted floors, and the fabric couch had a plethora of cushions. Alex

immediately went to the wooden cabinets and started pulling out cooking equipment.

“This is my temporary living space until I find another apartment.” He turned on the stove.

I studied the *Live Laugh Love* sign on the wall while I finished the last gulp of my coffee. “That makes more sense.” Imagining Alex hanging it up made me chuckle. Pivoting to the kitchen, I leaned against the granite island and watched him work.

He had his sleeves rolled up, revealing his powerful forearms and the intricate silver watch on his wrist. His back flexed as he seared the meat and plated it, and I couldn’t stop staring. After adding the baked veggies to the dish, he slid the plate over to me. “Sit and enjoy.”

“Thank you. Do immortals need to eat?” I asked, chewing happily.

This man can cook.

Alex poured out two glasses of red wine. “No, but I enjoy the flavours occasionally. It doesn’t affect my health at all.”

“I get so much pleasure from food and snacks. Maybe immortality is worth it just so I don’t need to maintain a healthy diet,” I joked.

He didn’t laugh. “Everyone has their reasons to make the switch.”

As I finished up the food, he watched me eat. It was as if he was relishing every bite I took, and his eyes gleamed when he took my empty plate.

“So,” I started, swirling the glass of wine, “you live here in Washington?”

I let him take my hand and lead me to the living room. I wasn’t a very touchy person, but even though Alex was barely more than a stranger, his touch felt natural.

“I go wherever I’m needed, and that place has been Washington,” Alex replied. “I don’t have a reason to permanently settle in one place. Yet.”

While he sat back, I tucked my legs in and curled up on the comfy couch. “You travel for work? What exactly do you do?” Ryder and Maddox seemed to have set up their primary residences in certain cities, so it must not be a Quorum obligation.

“All these questions. Are you interested in me?”

I was ready to say “yes”, but stopped at the last second. Interested as in *you’re a cool person* or *I want to date you*? Maybe I was overthinking it, but I chickened out of my reply. “I just heard that my parents work for you, and I want to know more about that. They don’t tell me much about your world.”

He looked amused. “Have you told them about meeting the three of us?”

I sighed. “No.” *My independent streak might get me killed.*

“They’re very good at what they do. I see a lot of them in you.”

My chest was brimming with pride, and I grinned back at him. “Glad to hear it.”

The light in his eye dimmed a bit as he gazed at me. “You have a delightful smile.”

I blinked at the sudden compliment.

“They work at my labs,” Alex continued. “Your mother, especially, is a key part of the team. So many breakthroughs.”

“Like research labs?” I wasn’t aware that either of my parents knew much about science. They were social science majors.

“Yes. Both your parents are talented chemists.”

“So they lied to me about their backgrounds.” It wasn’t such a big deal, but it made me question everything they told me.

How much did they hide? I always knew they kept things from me, but learning about their outright deception felt like a betrayal.

“The few humans who work for us are very careful,” Alex said gently. “Keeping secrets from their families is the way they protect them.”

Still, the realization shook me. I ran my palm over my face and jumped up to pace.

I'm such an idiot. I'd always known they worked closely with immortals. Their supposed sociology and economics majors probably wouldn't make them that valuable.

My ponytail was getting loose, so I slipped off the hair tie. I wandered around the room, searching for a mirror or any reflective surface to fix my hair. I settled in front of a large decorative gold disc that was sitting on the small table.

As I tilted my head back, in the corner of my eye, I could see Alex approaching me from behind.

“Let me.”

His slim fingers brushed mine when he took over. The skin on the back of my neck pebbled at his inadvertent caresses. I felt like I was being flooded with warmth all over, and I had to set my arms against the table to keep my balance.

After he finished my ponytail, his hand slid around my neck. He held me there, his grip loose. His nose ghosted over the top of my head, and I could feel his chest rise and fall against my back.

Our eyes met in the warped reflection, and *fuck*, the desire on my face was so plain to see. I'd never seen myself like this before, and my body shuddered.

“Mon amour,” he whispered. With a final exhale, he let me go, cursing underneath his breath.

I appreciated how he stepped away, letting me get a hold of myself again. Through the reflection, I watched how he stormed over and downed his glass of wine.

I'm not the only one so affected.

ALEX

Earlier...

I stepped out of the van and held my hand out.

Sandra Kingston ignored it and hopped out onto the pavement. Her short heels made a clicking sound on impact.

I gave her a brief bow. “Until next time, Sandra.”

She gave me an indecipherable look before she walked away.

Her frustration was palpable, but I wasn’t increasing funding until I saw more concrete results. I wanted my rejection to galvanize her work.

I didn’t tolerate a contentious attitude with most people, and even when I had a problem with it, I’d never show it.

But Sandra, my best researcher, was once one of my closest friends. Sometimes I’d reminisce back to the times when we shared ideas surrounding equality and science that went beyond societal constraints. It was centuries ago, yet the memories were so easily retrievable, they could’ve happened yesterday.

My immortals weren’t caught up in the past like I was. While everyone moved on, I tried to maintain my French. I stayed up-to-date with politics and business in France. Those were my roots.

“I’ll walk,” I told Carl, my driver. After watching the van disappear into the distance, I tilted my head back and stared up

at the sky. I ran my fingers over the back of my hand, and my eyes slowly shut.

She's here. I didn't know how I knew, but I was certain about it.

I'd allowed my body to be used to test enhancements since the possibility of death and suffering honestly didn't bother me. But now I occasionally woke up with new abilities.

My intuition treated me very well these days.

Mon amour. She was here to attend her friend's wedding.

It was as if there was something intangible connecting the both of us, and I let my instincts lead me to her.

And alas, there she was. Right in front of me.

Saige stood outside a coffee shop, holding a paper cup. She appeared out of place, awkwardly looking up and down the street. Her hair escaped her ponytail and the lines of her face were more defined, bringing out her fatigue.

The others aren't taking care of her well enough.

Maybe I should stay away, but I couldn't. Something inside of me refused to, and naturally, I gravitated toward her. "Hello."

Saige gasped, her cup hovering at her lips. "Alex! What are you doing here?"

I could barely remember our conversation after that. It was all a blur, and my mind raced with ways to get her off the street. I calculated how to word my request to have her come back to my apartment.

Her cardigan was too thin, and the chilly wind could make her sick. Humans were fragile like that. I could give her one of the new concoctions from my lab, but testing was still in the initial stages.

The faint sound of her stomach growling was the last straw.

Now she was here in my apartment, well-fed, and within touch. That combination tested my hard-earned control. Her

hair was silky soft, the strands gliding through my fingers. What did it for me was when her eyes glossed over. She didn't hide her expression from me, and perhaps she wasn't even capable of it.

I adjusted my pants and headed to the kitchen to snatch up the decanter. A crack appeared on the countertop as my tension boiled over. I released my grip on the edge and cracked my knuckles.

Instead of dealing with the wine, I drew out the metal box of mints from my pant pocket. The cool, spicy candy felt soothing as the taste coated my tongue.

“What brand are your mints?” Saige asked from behind me. It was a testament to how preoccupied I was with my emotions to miss her approach. “I thought all minty candy tastes the same, but there's something special about those ones.”

If I told her, she wouldn't have to ask me for them anymore. “Here.” I uncurled her clenched hand and placed a mint on her palm.

Faint amusement flickered in her brown eyes. “Not an answer to my question, but thank you anyway.”

She leaned against the island next to me.

I ached to drink her in, to lock my attention on her in a way that would probably make her uncomfortable. “Are you feeling alright? What else do you want to know?”

“I'm fine. I've always been rather sheltered, especially by my parents. It's just unexpected, and I should've known.” Saige chewed on her cheek. “What research do your labs do?”

“Enhancements. Nothing else.”

“Oh, it's all normal science? I don't know, I expected something magical, I guess,” she said sheepishly.

“All those myths, from vampires to werewolves, it's all happenstance. A random mutation.”

She shook her head, running a hand through her long locks. “Wow. I never thought vampires and all those

paranormal... creatures could be real. But since you exist, I guess it's not that big of a stretch."

"Their numbers are inconsequential," I revealed. "They are overlooked everywhere except in books and movies, it seems."

Saige sighed. "People do love the fantasy."

Her face had fallen slightly, and it hit me in my chest how much it bothered me. "Science can be pretty magical. My labs are all dedicated to creating more effective enhancements, and I'm the only supplier."

"How can you be sure there aren't others out there?"

"There's no doubt." It was a strict rule in our society. I had eyes and ears everywhere, as did Maddox.

In the cases we discovered dissidents, we had the tools to deal with them. There were many dangerous enhancements, used for torture and stealth, that only the three of us knew about.

And as much as we were split apart, I was certain that Ryder and Maddox wouldn't betray our vows as the leadership of our immortals. The big picture trumped personal disagreements.

Because of my business of manufacturing all those vials, I held a disproportionate amount of power amongst the Quorum. Specifically, economic power. Although they never cared about the business side of things, I wondered if it factored into our breakdown.

I strode over to the dining room table and sat down. Saige followed me, sinking into the seat right next to me. As she drummed her fingernails on the table rhythmically, I tore my gaze away from her.

The windows revealed the utter blackness outside. Nightfall had come without either of us noticing it.

I stared out into the abyss, wondering what secret thrills I was missing out on. Wondering why I wouldn't trade anything to leave her side. If only being around her wasn't a temporary present, but a permanent future.

I wanted to be a stable fixture in her life, and the mere thought made my heart jump, my cock harden, and my muscles tighten.

“You look contemplative,” Saige murmured. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“I’m picturing being with you forever.” Saying it out loud further cemented the idea in my mind. “Maybe to eternity, and perhaps beyond that.”

She choked on her mint. “*What?*” She thumped her chest several times with a closed fist to regain her breath. “Forever is a fucking long time!”

I steadily held her gaze. “Saige, I’m an immortal. I don’t think in terms of months and years.”

“Sometimes I forget that fact about you. You don’t act extremely different from people I know.” Saige faced me fully. “Tell me about you. Who were you before you were *this* Alexander Moreau?”

Her question surprised me, and I pursed my lips. “It’s been so long since I had to introduce myself.”

“Everyone knows you, huh?”

People didn’t question me. Unless I let them, that is. “Most new people I meet are for business.” When people approached me, it was usually with a specific goal in mind. All conversation beyond the stale aloofness of a deal were veiled attempts at flattery.

Saige’s phone, which lay face down on the table, buzzed.

It struck me how easy it was to communicate these days. How simple it would be to betray someone. Sure, there was greater privacy, but secrecy made nefarious acts much more accessible.

She picked up her phone and typed something. As she did, her tongue stuck out.

How endearing.

But who was she texting? Could it be another man? As long as it was Ryder or Maddox...

“Back in my day, we sent letters,” I said.

She stared at me with her phone still in her palm. “You did not just ‘back in my day’ me. And about a time when technology didn’t exist.”

“Modern technology,” I corrected her. “During what you would call the Industrial Revolution, I invested in factory machinery and steam engines.”

Now her eyes were wide. “My god, *you’re so old.*”

I rose an eyebrow, a little amused by the dismay in her voice. “Was that ever in question?”

Saige shook her head in disbelief, her mouth slightly apart. “Goodness.” When she reached up to brush her hair back, my eyes caught on her slender wrists. I caught her hand in mine, hearing her slight gulp with my enhanced hearing.

Her reactions served as a tantalizing hint for what was to come. No promises or threats would ever keep me away from her for long.

I’d held myself in check for most of our time together, but now I let my feelings bleed into my gaze. Something... darker stirred in me. It was a spreading heat, like a puddle of ink. Every word out of her mouth and every second we spent together fed into my desire for her.

I licked my lips, raising her wrist to my nose. Trying to reconcile her scent with notes of wine or scents of perfume proved impossible.

How is it possible to be so beguiled by someone’s presence? Has anyone captured my attention quite like Saige Kinley?

“I find myself endlessly fascinated by you,” I whispered, tracing her jaw with my fingers. “Mon amour, you’re delectable.”

She flushed. “I wouldn’t say that about myself.”

“Then you don’t see yourself how I do.”

“With you, Ryder, and Maddox,” Saige whispered, “none of it makes sense. There’s attraction, but it’s all so sudden—”

“It doesn’t have to make sense. I’ve given myself over to my instincts long ago.” And if I stepped back and considered my decisions rationally, I’d probably believe I’d lost my mind.

Discovering Saige was a miracle. But she was also fickle and had hints of being a dreamer.

She was human.

I knew from the first glance that she would be an important part of my life. And if I could help it, she would be the key to bringing us all together again.

Arranging her interview with Granier was easy, and since she was so qualified and prepared, it took little effort at all. And Ryder fell for her, just as I’d expected.

Ryder:

I didn’t regret much in my life. Time would feel longer if I dwelled on past choices. But with Ryder, it was tough not to wish things hadn’t gone the way they had. He had a longer memory than most and a deeper sense of loyalty than I fathomed.

It was a mistake on my part, and I was paying for it daily.

“Do you ever sit here at night and look out at the view?” Saige asked, breaking through my reverie.

I looked at her profile view, and *god*, she was beautiful. “No. I have too much to do.”

“We don’t fit in so many ways. You need to appreciate the little things. Especially when you have all this.” She shook her head morosely and gestured to the cityscape.

I nodded slowly. “I’m starting to realize that.” It was going to be enlightening to see the world through her eyes.

Saige took the last sip of her wine and stood. “I have to go. It’s so late.”

I wanted to ask her to stay, but she already had two pushy immortals in her life. If I wanted to gain her respect and eventual acceptance, all things I desperately needed, I had to handle her delicately.

At least for now.

“You had wine. Let me drive you back to your hotel.”

“But you had drinks too!” she protested.

Alcohol didn’t affect immortals that way, but I didn’t elaborate. “Carl can drive us.”

So there we were, in the back of my van, driving several blocks to her hotel. The building was extremely fancy, perfect for someone as special as her.

Ryder did well.

Before she could take off her seatbelt, I decided to test the waters. “I want to see you again. Soon.” I punctuated the last word with a deeper, more gravelly tone.

She sunk her teeth into her luscious lips. But her indecision wasn’t enough for her to hide the truth. “I’d like that too, Alex.”

And there it is.

RYDER

S*he spent the day with Alex.*

My hands curled into fists, and my skin gave way to my fingernails. The metallic smell of blood filled the air. It didn't last long since my skin healed in seconds.

I followed them on the streets of Washington, unwilling to reveal myself as Maddox did. There were several moments where it looked like they would kiss.

Remembering those instances made my blood boil.

I'd lived for centuries and hardly ever kissed anyone. What was the point? It was like a shitty precursor to sex. But after I kissed Saige for the first time, I could barely think of anything else.

She was everything intoxicating, a sudden addiction that felt too damned good to be real. This high was something people warned you about, but instead of running away, I was taking her all in.

After our first meeting and her timid reaction to me, I'd tried to dial it down. But it was hard. I'd spent more time around humans these past couple of weeks than I had for the last century— all for her.

I needed to know how to be what she craved, how to make her want me.

And that was why I was in her hotel room in the middle of the night. I wanted to decipher the puzzle that was Saige Kinley.

She rolled over in the bed, still deeply asleep. She shoved the covers down, revealing the expanse of her throat. With a kick, her leg slipped out too. From the subtle arch of her foot to her shapely calves... I had to force myself to look away.

I strode over to the far wall and turned down the thermostat. When I turned back to look at her, I froze.

Jesus, she's only wearing a bathrobe. The hotel bathrobe, to be specific. With how she moved in her sleep, it had come completely undone.

I didn't hesitate.

When I drew out my cock, my movements were on autopilot. My grip on myself was tight enough for it to hurt, and suddenly I was angry. My lips flattened as I glared down at my hard cock. As my pleasure spread, I gritted my teeth to prevent myself from cursing.

I hated my loss of control, but indulging myself was awfully tantalizing.

When I reached my peak, I stumbled to Saige's bedside and let ropes and ropes of my cum land on her prone body. Every spurt made me tremble until all I had left was the sound of my own gasps ringing in my ears.

Her breathing didn't change at all, yet there she lay, streaks of white on her skin like a living work of art. I needed to immortalize this image and sear it into my mind.

My low groan sounded tortured, and my hand hovered over her stomach, trembling with the desire to rub it all in.

I shouldn't leave my seed to dry on her skin, but I wanted to. For now, I settled for feasting on the sight of it until I had to leave.

Her legs were slightly apart, revealing her pink pussy. It was so tempting to lick her there or slide myself inside of her, but I couldn't...

Or perhaps just a little.

I knelt on the side of the bed before positioning myself on top of her, careful to hover over her body. My cock was

rapidly lengthening in anticipation. I couldn't risk waking her up, and I didn't want to use any enhancements to keep her asleep.

This was a diabolical idea and my morals were fucked. But if I was going to cross any lines, it would be without my immortal abilities.

“Oh,” Saige moaned, her body writhing against the sheets. Her eyes moved behind her eyelids, and her teeth tugged on the bottom of her lip. “God, that feels good. Yeah.”

She must be dreaming, and with the way she was flushing, I wished I could be in her mind right now.

“Fuck, Ryder!” she whimpered. In an abrupt movement, her legs came around me and she pulled me down until our bodies were slightly touching.

I froze, lost in the feeling of being pressed against her.

My cock lay between her thighs, and I couldn't hold myself back from nudging myself closer, so my tip caught on the open lips of her pussy.

I sucked in a breath at the burning heat, and I knew my seed was dripping out from my tip. I slid in a tiny bit more and shut my eyes, knowing that drops of my white cum were now gradually trickling inside the woman of my dreams.

Although I heard her mention taking birth control, I still felt a tingle run down my spine at the thought of my seed taking root in her womb. Visions of Saige's stomach round with our child flashed through my mind, and it took everything in me to resist pounding into her.

Saige hummed softly, and I tried to calm myself. My arms quivered from my effort.

Slowly, I ran my hand up her side and over her breasts. When she shifted, my touch stilled, and my eyes flashed to her face. But she was still breathing heavily, her lips glistening.

“You're ruining me,” she whispered. With a sigh, she turned her head and pressed her cheek to the pillow. Her legs loosened around my hips.

She was dozing off again, her body growing slack. My cock was still plugged into her, and I nudged my hips in deeper, urging an involuntary moan out of her parted lips. I needed my seed deeper, as far as it could go.

I licked my way up her cheek, tasting the saltiness of her sweat before pressing my lips to her ear. “Would you blame me if I did? I can’t help it.”

But I already lost her to sleep, and that was somewhere I couldn’t chase her.

After cleaning up in the bathroom, I sat back down in the seat beside her bed.

I didn’t blame Maddox for finding an excuse to move her into his apartment. He could do this every single night. And at least I knew he could protect her well.

The same couldn’t be said about Alex, but she was interested in him enough to follow him home.

Saige had gone to Oregon several times to do translating work for me. I had another desk arranged in my personal office, one right next to mine. While we worked, I fielded her questions.

Saige slid her pen over her lips in deep thought.

Later, I was going to steal that pen from her. I zeroed in on the barely perceptible smear of her pink lipstick on the plastic. It tasted delicious from her lips, but since I didn’t have access to her all the time, I’d settle for her pen.

She frowned. “Wait a second. Just how many people know about immortals?”

I shook his head. “Too many.” And it was causing too much trouble. Maddox thought violence was the answer, and as for Alex... His attempt to garner support for immortals meant revealing more about us.

Maddox was the lesser of two evils because at least he was upfront about his plans.

Just thinking about Alex’s secretive meetings made fury rush through me, and the handle of the mug I held cracked

under my grip. I'd chosen to enhance my strength too, because why the heck not? But human creations weren't made for our enhanced strength.

"Sorry about all the questions," Saige said. "I feel like I'm interrogating you."

"How about one more?" I would answer a lot more to keep her around, but I would never tell her that. "Anything goes."

"Do immortals take their promises seriously?" Saige sounded nonchalant, but her dark eyes betrayed her seriousness. "It seems like pop culture makes supernaturals value vows and stuff like that."

"Some of us are old-fashioned in that way," I acknowledged. "But others have embraced the modern lifestyle and culture."

"So, no chivalry and more douchebags?"

I laughed. "I suppose so. Rakes have lost their depth. They don't pretend to be respectable anymore."

"And I thought I'd be reforming a nineteenth-century rake," she said with a heavy sigh. But her grin was dazzling. "How disappointing."

The curve of her upper lip reminded me of a heart. "You don't want to make someone change. You want someone to voluntarily change for you."

And I'd do that. Hell, I knew I'd changed already.

Saige ducked her head and flipped over the paper she was reading. "Yeah, you're right."

We worked in silence for an hour more until she spoke up again. By then, I had lost all my concentration and was merely watching her do her job. I tried to memorize the way she gripped her pen and how her eyebrows furrowed in obvious frustration.

"What's your role in the Quorum?" Saige pushed away from the desk and stretched. "I have an inkling, but I want to hear it from you."

“I just want to live in peace and harmony with humans. I don’t want to get involved with politics, the legal system or climbing the ranks of society like Alex is. Unlike Maddox, I don’t crave the darkness of criminal underdealings.”

If I wanted to embrace my power, I so easily could. But it was poisonous to me. I had my fair share of issues, and as she watched me with those expectant eyes, I tried not to think about it.

My fingers twitched, and my breath hitched. Memories assaulted my mind, and I knew I’d need to deal with this itch soon.

“Ryder?”

The concern in her voice made me bolt out of the room. Once I slammed the door shut behind me, I ran down the hallway.

Nicole, probably hearing the excessive noise, rushed over to greet me. Without a word of acknowledgement, she teleported over to the room I was looking for and pushed me inside.

The lock clicked behind me ominously, leaving me all alone. There were the familiar stone walls and the sounds of shuffling and whimpering coming from right around the corner.

“Tell Saige I’m fine. Use any excuse,” I growled.

“Understood.” There was a beat of silence, and I could feel that she had something more to say. “You’re going to have to let it go,” Nicole murmured. “Especially if you want to keep her.” She was the only one who knew that I’d enhanced my hearing enough to hear through this holding room.

I can’t. I fucking can’t.

I wanted to scream and shout, rage at the heavens for making me the way I was. It was so ingrained so deeply that I didn’t know how to shed my skin even if I wanted to.

Now I stared at Saige. She was consumed by her innocence, a blank canvas that was slowly being tainted by me

and the others in the Quorum. Our interest in her would rot her away from the inside.

I still wanted her. Wanted her right now.

And that desperate feeling rose inside of me again, and I knew my control was slipping precariously tonight.

Cursing silently, I rushed down the stairs to the kitchen and threw open the drawers. Grabbing a knife, I dragged it through my forearm. It stung for just a second before fading away.

I need it to last. But it never did.

I could hold myself back for now.

Just right now.

But... I held my arm up, watching the blood drip to the floor. How long will it take for me to completely snap?

SAIGE

I couldn't stop thinking about Alex. The information he revealed and his enigmatic demeanour were clinging to the forefront of my mind.

Even though I enjoyed my time with him, whenever I wasn't in his presence, I felt odd. It was like my mind wasn't sure about him.

With a grunt, I heaved my laundry basket and stumbled over to the laundry room. Maddox offered to have his housekeeper clean my clothes, but I turned him down. He was already letting me stay here for free, and I didn't want to be more indebted to him.

I almost snorted. Like laundry could compare to rent.

There were several scents of detergent, and I chose a different one this time. I had no idea what "Ocean Mist" smelled like, but I was about to.

"Hey."

I jumped, knocking my hand on the washing machine. "Ow!" Blinking away my tears, I spun around to glare at the man before me.

Maddox took my hand and studied my skin, which was turning red from the impact. "Fuck. Sorry, Saige." His dark eyes bore into mine. "How much does it hurt?"

It wasn't that big of a deal. "I'm okay. No harm done." I made the move to pull away, but he dragged me into his arms.

“I got you something.” With no visible effort, Maddox swept me up and started carrying me.

“Maddox!” I gasped.

“Your legs are too short, kitten. Makes you too slow.”

I slapped his shoulder. “You take that back!”

He smirked and brushed the tip of his nose against mine. “No.”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

It was surprising to see Maddox home so early. He ran an international security company, so he always had work to do. The bits and pieces he revealed told me Pendulum had foreign government contracts and high-profile clients.

“I delegate the work,” he’d said. “So you’ll be seeing me around. I won’t be leaving for long periods of time.” The look he gave me made my toes curl.

Maddox set me on the kitchen countertop. I was still slightly shorter than him sitting there. I watched him walk off and swoop down to grab the emerald green paper bag right inside the front door.

“About Ali, you promise nothing will happen to her?” I debated whether to mention it to Ali, but I didn’t want her to panic needlessly. But since I didn’t feel comfortable lying to her, I’d continuously postponed our plans to hang out.

“Saige, I keep my word.” He came back over to me and nudged my chin up, ensuring I saw his unrelenting expression. “She won’t be physically harmed.”

I blew out an unsteady stream of air. “Alright.” I believed him, especially when it came to security matters. “By the way, you trust Preston, right?”

“Preston?” Maddox dropped the bag on the counter next to me. “Yes, I trust him with my life. Why do you ask?”

“He’s one of the few men I’ve seen around here,” I pointed out. Hopefully, he wouldn’t ask too many questions. I had a feeling he wouldn’t enjoy hearing that Preston approached me

in a bar. “You can’t be around all the time, so it’s nice to know who I can go to if I ever need something.”

“You can trust him. After I give you your gift, I’ll introduce you to several others. I should’ve done that long ago.” He frowned. “That’s my oversight.”

“Enough about that.” I picked up the bag. “What did you get me?”

“Take it out.” He watched me with a glint in his eye.

The shape of the box made me predict it was a baked good. As I held it up to the light, the silky fabric lining the box shimmered. “The packaging is beautiful.”

But the slice of chocolate cake inside was even better. My mouth watered at the luscious brown colour and the heavenly scent of the cocoa. I could recognize an expensive cake when I saw one. “Sacher?” On top of the dessert sat a round slice of chocolate with that word on it.

“This cake is called the Sacher Torte. It’s a classic Viennese dessert that was served in the Imperial Court. My last meetings were in Austria, so I took a slight detour to pick this up.”

I marvelled at the beautiful cake. In my life, I only ever had grocery store birthday cakes. “How does it look so pristine when you had to travel so far?”

Maddox knocked my forehead lightly with his giant fist. “Teleportation, kitten.”

Yup, I was showing my idiot side today. “Right. At least you’re using your powers for good.”

“Shall I be your personal bellboy?” he purred, a mocking tone underlining his voice. “At your beck and call?”

“Like you’d ever listen to anyone else’s orders.”

“Saige Kinley, you’re as close as it gets.”

The deep intensity of his gaze stole my attention. His stark possessiveness made him look almost hungry... for me. As I reached up to touch his cheek, his eyes tracked my movements

like a wild animal. He looked just like the immortal I saw in his throne hall that first day we met.

I faltered, my hand hovering before his skin.

His hand caught my wrist, and Maddox pressed his face to my touch. “Never be afraid to touch me, Saige.”

“I’m not afraid,” I whispered, petting his beard.

“Then don’t ever hesitate around me,” he growled.

I nodded demurely, and a sense of mutual understanding passed between us.

Maddox nodded at the cake. “Do you want to try it now?”

Shaking my head, I shut the box. “I’m pretty full from dinner. Maybe in the morning.”

He took the cake from me and placed it in the fridge.

A sharp ring came through the speakers in the apartment, and I nearly leaped out of my skin.

“Come in,” Maddox said at a normal volume.

Of course, his immortals heard him.

A blonde man and a dark-haired woman walked in. They weren’t wearing the more formal blazers and suits I’d seen with most of Maddox’s immortals. Instead, both had on black t-shirts and cargo pants.

Both of them bowed their heads. “My Liege.”

Maddox barely glanced their way. “Training going well?”

I was still sitting atop the countertop, and Maddox casually slid an arm around my hip. His forearm rested against my thigh, and I placed my hand on top of it. While I traced his bulging veins on his hot skin, I studied the two immortals cautiously.

“Progressing nicely,” the man said. “Once we finish here, we’re training the new arrivals.”

“This will be quick, then. Saige, meet Taylor and Arti,” Maddox rumbled in my ear. His chin hovered over my shoulder. “Both are senior officers within Pendulum, and if

there are any issues, you can feel comfortable seeking them out.”

I cleared my throat. “Hello, I’m Saige.”

Taylor nodded at me, and we exchanged a polite friendly look. Arti gave me a hostile stare with a slightly perceptible tilt of his head.

“You will protect her with your lives.” Maddox glared at both of them but narrowed his eyes at Arti. “You hear me?”

He straightened his posture, his arms snapping behind his back. “Yes, My Liege.”

“Good.” Maddox waved his hand. “I’ll visit the grounds tomorrow.”

The immortals bowed and, in a blink, disappeared.

I slid off the countertop. “Arti doesn’t seem to like me,”

“He doesn’t have to,” he replied. “I want him to do his job well, and otherwise stay the fuck away from you.”

His jealousy was so freaking hot.

“Hmm, he might be interesting to talk to. He has that mysteriousness going for him,” I said cheekily, dancing out of his reach.

“Is that right?” It took him two steps to cross the distance between us, and I found myself flush against him. “You catch the eye of the most dangerous immortals, and you still want another?” He slid his palm over my cheek, making my breath catch. His eyes were so dark that I could hardly see the colour in them. “Answer me.”

I relished the feeling of having this virile man all over me. His rough order made me tremble, and I swallowed deeply.

“Can’t say anything?” He tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. “If you want to play with fire again, next time I’m going to *make you burn*.”

My panties grew wet at his solemn promise. Given his answering smirk, it was as if he knew it.

The room suddenly darkened, and I jolted like I was in a stupor. Maddox had the lights set to automatically dim later in the evening. “I, uh, have to take a shower.” And cool off there.

“Then go.” When I didn’t move, he raised an eyebrow. “I’m not holding you back.”

I blushed when I realized I was clutching onto his torso desperately, not the other way around. I ran out of the room, all while hearing his low chuckle follow me.

It was a colder shower than usual, and the streaming water allowed me to get lost in my fantasies. I slid my hand over my pussy, feeling how swollen my folds were. With how these immortals tempted me, I knew I couldn’t take this much longer. I had several men who would be more than happy to take care of my needs.

After my shower, I had accumulated enough white clothes to wash. I lugged my laundry basket back into the laundry room and threw the newly washed clothes into the dryer.

I picked up my whites and tossed the bundle into the washing machine. When I turned around, Maddox stood there with my panties in his hand. It was the pair I just took off to clean.

“What’s this?” He smirked. His hair was wet from his shower. “You wet for me, kitten?”

“I’m not!” I grabbed the fabric. “It’s normal for women. I’m just ovulating.” I used to keep track of my cycle, but I didn’t anymore.

“Ovulating?” His eyes glinted. “Is that right?”

“I know you immortals never heard of boundaries, but this is pushing it.” He let me drag him out of the laundry room, and I slammed the door shut harder than I usually did.

He followed me back into my bedroom.

“I ran into Alex in Washington,” I said, running the comb through my tangly hair. I was hyperaware of him sitting there on the edge of my bed, but I did my best to focus on the mirror in front of me.

“Oh?” The tone of his voice was a bit too nonchalant.

“Yeah.” I dropped the comb and set my hands on my hips. “He’s quite different.”

Maddox raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t we all?”

“Right. It could be an immortal thing. I don’t have that much experience with other immortals other than you guys.”

His lips curled upwards. “I like that.”

“You’d like it more if it was just you, huh?” Despite how I felt about the others, knowing how much he wanted me alone excited me.

Maddox cracked his knuckles. “Don’t remind me.”

“From what I’d seen so far, you all act more cordial than I’d expected.”

“We do business together.” His face was still stony. “That relationship cannot be severed.”

“I want to ask you a question about Alex, and I need you to be honest.” This probably wasn’t the smartest decision, but I wanted another opinion. Whenever I wasn’t sure about someone, I usually went to their friends. But this time, Maddox or Ryder were the only ones with any insight.

His features smoothed over. “Alright.”

“Is he a genuine person?” I couldn’t put a finger on why I needed more reassurance about Alex. “Like, does he lie a lot?”

Maddox froze, and his mouth pinched. “Did he say something to you?”

“It’s just a feeling. I mean, he’s interested in me, but... I don’t know.”

“I haven’t ever seen Alex with a lover. Woman or man. For the longest time, I believed he didn’t care about desire and attraction. I don’t know if Alex could truly love anyone.” Maddox paused. “He’s addicted to power, and he calculates every move to the max.”

“Like you?” I couldn’t hide the sarcasm in my voice. “You have Pendulum and you’re involved in the criminal underworld, Nicoli.”

He smiled slowly. “And there you are, using my last name.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not saying he can’t love, but I think he’s so used to using people that you can always see things both ways. Yes, he might want you because he cares about you. But he could also want you because he noticed Ryder and my reaction to you. Do you see what I mean?”

Again, this was the reason I wanted a normal life.

I’d come home from my office job to maybe a cat or two, and on weekends I’d go on dates with my introverted boyfriend who liked to play video games. My only major source of stress would be how to climb the corporate ladder. Nobody around me would be at odds with the government or murder innocents in their free time.

“It isn’t a problem if you choose to accept that reality or choose to believe that it’s all love,” Maddox continued. He had completely undone my braid and was now watching my strands unravel.

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I admitted. “I’d always have doubts.” But I wouldn’t write Alex off until I knew him better. Currently, he was just hard to read, which wasn’t damning. “If only everyone could be forthright.”

“Then just keep me,” he said immediately. “I’m more than enough, aren’t I?”

I rolled my eyes. He could play me like a fiddle, and he knew it.

Maddox crooked his finger at me and patted the spot next to him on the bed.

Typically, I didn’t like it when people beckoned me like that, but the promise in his gaze drew me to follow his demand.

“You’ll find that I’m a very generous lover,” he purred, gradually easing me onto my back.

I stared up at him as he loomed over me. This was finally going to happen, and I could feel myself getting slick in anticipation.

“Look at those wide eyes, how sweet you are,” he murmured, trailing a finger down my face. “How *innocent*.”

“Not that innocent,” I said. “I’m not a virgin.”

His expression immediately clouded over, and his hand tightened around my jaw. “Don’t you dare remind me of other men when you’re in my fucking bed.”

“They were barely men, more like boys.” Most of my sexual experiences had been tame and okay, with partners who were still learning. “You’re different.”

Maddox scoffed, deliberately grinding his hips against me. The bulge in his pants I often saw didn’t hold a candle to what I felt. “I’d say so. But still.” He nipped my bottom lip. “No mentioning other men.”

The possessiveness in his eyes made my pussy even wetter. It was frightening how quickly my body responded when he looked at me like that. “I understand.”

He cradled my cheeks. “Good girl.”

My eyes slowly closed as he started to undress me. The fabric gently slid over my shoulders and down my legs. Then his reverent hands brushed over my stomach and down to my pussy.

“Now, what do we have right here? Look how wet you are.” His fingers dipped into my center and with every twist of his touch, the pleasurable sensations spread from head to toe. “My kitten is dripping for me.”

“Maddox.” My hands curled into fists. “Hurry up and fuck me.” When he stopped moving, my eyelids fluttered open and my gaze flitted to his face.

“You’re not the one making demands here,” he rumbled lowly. He slapped my pussy, making me gasp loudly. “*I am*.”

My core pulsed, and I writhed on the sheets as he shoved his pants down. “Maddox, please.” Here I was completely naked, while all he had was his cock out.

“I adore you,” he growled, “but in bed, I’m going to fuck you like I hate you.”

“Yes,” I whispered, my mind growing hazy with lust. All I could think of was him and his cock. The barely-there hints of cologne, those enticing tattoos, and his deep voice consumed my senses.

“I’m going to ruin you and fill you up to the brim. I’ll be all you think about, all you smell like, and every step you take will remind you that I’ve been deep inside you.” Maddox palmed my pussy in an undeniable claim, his voice hissing when he felt how hot and slick I was. “And you’re going to love it.”

With that, he collapsed on top of me and shoved his cock into my body. He was thicker than I’d ever had, and he stretched me considerably.

“Ow! You’re too big, slow down!” I cried out. I felt like I was being torn up inside, yet in a perplexing way, it also felt good.

“Take it,” he snarled, his hands twisting my hair and yanking my face around. “You can’t get away from my fat cock tonight.”

The place between my legs burned and stung as he ravaged me. I struggled to accommodate the size of his length, and the pain brought tears to my eyes. But I could feel myself get wetter, and he slid in and out of me more easily.

“Now there’s my baby,” he murmured. “My baby girl can handle some pain, right?”

I bit into my bottom lip and nodded as waves of euphoria made me squirm. Goddamn, this man knew how to work me.

He jerked his hips sharply, drawing a cry from my lips from the ache at my cervix. “I want to hear you.”

“Fuck, I like pain when it’s with you.” I clawed the back of his shirt, futilely trying to find a grip. The sensations were too much as his cock continued to piston in and out of me. “It feels so good!”

His beard chafed over my skin as he sucked on the side of my neck. He brushed his lips from my cheeks to my lips.

When our mouths made contact, I grabbed onto his shoulders and kissed him furiously. He let me take the lead for a few seconds before he took control again. As he maneuvered my left leg over his shoulder to sink inside me at a deeper angle, I found I liked being his submissive.

“I’m going to cum inside your mouth,” he whispered against my lips.

Oh, yes.

I moaned loudly as the rising heat made me tremble. My pussy clenched around him so tightly that he cursed wildly in my ears.

“I can’t wait,” he snarled, withdrawing his cock from me.

The abrupt move left me feeling a resounding emptiness, but I had no time to dwell on it. With a yank of his arm, I was sliding down on the bed, and his cock bobbed in front of my face.

“Open,” he ordered.

I quietly accepted his load in my mouth, even sucking the tip lightly before letting him go.

Maddox smiled approvingly at the sight of his sticky cum in my mouth and hanging on the edges of my lips.

I licked the last drops of him seductively, watching his eyes track my tongue. When I was done, he grabbed my shoulders and took me into his arms.

He squeezed my chin between two fingers. “Stop being such a tease when you’ve caught me already.”

I was certainly caught by him too. As I peered up at him, enamoured by that devilish look on his face, I knew I didn’t

want to be released anytime soon.

MADDOX

Whenever I left New York for work abroad, I felt more relaxed knowing I had Saige's location on my phone at all times. I still had my immortals look out for her, but having direct information from her tracker soothed my restless mind.

But nothing compared to having her right here beside me.

Living with her affirmed how perfect she was for me. She was an independent woman, but she accepted my possessiveness. One of my favourite things to do was pick out her outfits. Oftentimes, I crept into her room to lay out her clothes when I had to go to work in the early mornings.

Knowing that she let me control how she presented herself always made my cock stir. I wasn't used to my pants feeling so tight, and now the uncomfortable feeling made me think of her.

Saige sighed out loud and turned into me, pressing her cheek to my bare skin. Her little breaths ghosted over my chest, and I touched my nose to the top of her head. Her arm slid over my stomach, and she held onto me the way I was holding onto her.

Her unconscious movements toward me heightened the depths of my attachment to her. My gaze swallowed the view of her naked body, and I shifted the covers to get a better look. When she shivered slightly, I immediately tucked her in again.

My Liege.

My muscles tensed for a second before I relaxed again.
Pierce.

Woah, this is insane.

My lips quirked up. *Get used to it for a while, at least.*

We were trying out a new enhancement that allowed for telepathic communication. Speaking from my mind felt oddly natural, and I didn't need to put in any effort.

It was strange that Alex would offer me the enhancement so early in the experimental process, but I wouldn't turn it away. It could have important implications for future protection against threats.

The Hannah situation is progressing. Still no moves from us?

Hannah was the Senseless Ripper.

After Saige's request, I personally oversaw several of my immortals questioning Hannah. We used the simplest way, honesty enhancements. It was easy enough to make her forget it all afterwards.

From what I could gather, Hannah's target wasn't Ali Hayes at all. She wanted to scare the superstar, for sure, but there was no follow-through. But as for Ali's harem of men... that was another story.

Theo Maxwell, one of her men, came to my office the other day. His arrogance irked me. Of course, in the face of love, the billionaire dared to confront me about Pendulum's role in the serial killings. But his claim of a rogue agent within my company confirmed my suspicions.

As much as Hannah was working on behalf of Pendulum, she had her own agenda. I needed to investigate whether she was the only one.

No, stay hands-off for now. Ali wasn't in any immediate danger, and I made no promises about anybody else.

Got it.

Pierce's presence disappeared from my head, and I fell back against the pillow. There was much to do because Hannah was only the top of the iceberg. I did not tolerate dissent and hesitancy to follow orders within Pendulum.

I slid my tongue over my teeth, relishing the upcoming bloodshed.

"You're looking a little murderous," Saige murmured.

I glanced down at her, my features softening.

Her round eyes scoured my face as she sat up. "I never met someone with eyes this dark," she mused, absentmindedly brushing my hair back. "It's so intense."

She was looking at me, hyper-focused on my eye colour. When she blinked and realized how close her face was to mine, she flushed. "Oh, sorry—"

I grabbed her waist and dragged her to me, making her collapse against my chest. "Don't be." I almost audibly groaned at the feeling of her breasts against my body and her fingertips that were barely touching my neck. "I want you like this, and I need to have you all around me."

Preferably with her pussy fluttering around my cock and those luscious lips capturing my mouth.

She shifted in my embrace, but my arms tightened around her slight frame. She tugged a bit, but there was no way she could escape from me.

She tilted her head up. "Maddox."

"Hmm?" I was too focused on my plans for her.

Her long eyelashes fluttered. "Up for another round?"

Even though she was probably sore, I was going to take her offer. "I'm going to taste your sweet pussy," I murmured. "Sit on my face."

"Sit?" When her confusion cleared, she blushed furiously. "Maddox, I don't know about that. I've never done it before."

"You've been neglected." I gnashed my teeth, making a mental note to find her selfish exes. "I'm going to change

that.”

Her rosy cheeks made me smirk.

She hesitated. “I’m not sure about this…”

“Right now, I’m asking.” I leaned in closer to her, enough to hear her faint inhale and see her pupils dilate. “But soon, I’ll be *demanding*.” I slapped her perky ass. “Get moving.”

She complied, her movements clumsy.

When she was in place, I clutched onto her thighs and blew my breath over her pussy lips. The bed frame creaked when she crashed against it as her knees buckled. I inhaled her delicate scent before sucking and nibbling on her clit.

“Oh!” Saige whispered breathlessly, her fingertips digging into the sides of my head. My long hair was tangled up in her grip and she yanked my locks as she humped her pussy in my face. “Don’t stop!”

I smirked against her flesh, delving my tongue into her warm hole. “I’m not going to let you cum yet.”

She was riding my mouth, and it took a few seconds for her to hear my words. “Maddox, no!”

I held her open with my thumbs to better feast on her juices as she bucked her hips, her moans escalating. Her curses rang through the room as I bit her clit.

With one last pinch on her ass, I slid out from under her and tackled her onto her back. Her dazed eyes stared up at me and her frustration lined her mouth.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I warned, sliding my length over her wet pussy. “Or I won’t let you cum at all.” To emphasize my point, I teased my length at her entrance, dipping in and pulling back. “Beg for my cock, baby girl.”

Her mouth opened as a flash of defiance lit up in her gaze.

“I won’t tolerate you talking back when we’re in bed.” I twisted her sensitive nipples between my fingers. “If I feed you my cock, you say ‘thank you.’ Go on then, beg.”

I needed her to submit to me, and she was going to do it. My hand snapped to hold her hips still when she tilted her hips up. I leaned in to suck on her bottom lip, running my touch over the sensitive curve of her neck.

“Please.” Saige had her head thrown back, her knees coming up to press against my hip bones. “I’ll do anything. Give me your cock, Maddox.”

Smirking, I pulled back to admire her swollen lips. “Not going to fight me any harder? You’re being such a good girl for me, and that deserves a reward.”

I eased myself into her slowly, letting her pussy gradually adjust to my thick size. Every stroke made her whine and whimper, and from her breathless moans, I knew she was close. I rubbed her swollen clit vigorously, my attention fixated on how her nose scrunched up as her pleasure washed over her.

“Oh, I’m coming!” Saige cried out.

The bliss cascading over her face made her look so beautiful. Her pussy contracted around my cock as she convulsed, and the tight squeeze on my length was enough for me to go over the edge.

“*Fuck.*” I buried my face against the side of her neck as I lazily pumped the last of my cum into her. Her warm, welcoming heat massaged my twitching cock, and I wanted to stay there forever.

But eventually, I withdrew, and we lay together, catching our breaths.

I’d already embraced her living in my apartment, but from now on, I wouldn’t have to resist fucking her where she stood.

She often walked around the apartment wearing the tiniest pyjama shorts that displayed a glimpse of the curve of her ass. When I had the chance to leave work early, I’d either cook or bring home a bite to eat. Watching her luscious lips and her delicate tongue move was rapidly becoming my newest obsession.

“I don’t have any friends who have tattoos.”

“Well, now you do.” The word *friend* irked me the wrong way. “But I’m not your fucking friend.”

“You sound like a pouty kid,” she said with a laugh.

I shifted my hips, sliding my thick length between her legs. “Care to say that again, kitten?” I nearly groaned out loud at the heat of her skin.

Her breath hitched, and her thighs snapped closed. “I’m trying to talk to you.”

I tugged on her earlobe with my teeth, and whispered, “Then talk.” Saige’s nails clawed at my shoulders, and I held myself still for a moment before sliding off of her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and I slid my finger over her lips. “I can’t think when you touch me like this.”

I smirked, feeling like a fucking king. “Good.”

Saige peeked up at me, then rolled her eyes at me. “There’s your shit-eating grin.”

She reared up and I let her roll me onto my back. Saige perched over me, and she studied my body carefully. “Can I touch it?” she asked, her hand hovering over the tattoos on my upper chest.

Those tattoos were swirling lines that stopped right under my collarbone. There wasn’t a deeper meaning for why I got the design other than it looked good.

I chuckled. “We’ve done a lot more than that. Go ahead.”

Her fingertips were light and hesitant as she traced the lines of the art inked on my skin.

“Wow,” she breathed. “It’s so intricate.”

I stretched my arms over my head, cracking the crick in my neck. Her small nipples brushed over me as she leaned over, and a hint of pink flashed over her cheeks. Her teeth dug into her lower lip.

I ached to flip her over and fuck her into oblivion, but this wasn’t the time. While she asked me innocuous questions, I

watched her, and I let her continue her exploration of my body art.

Yeah, I can get used to this.

ALEX

“I’m open to a more diplomatic approach.”

I sat back, taking my elbows off of the desk. “You’ve heard my ideas before. What changes do you want to implement?”

Maddox was glowering, obviously not happy about having to relinquish his control over the situation. Serial killing humans wasn’t making the government budge. Our immortals were still being targeted.

“I don’t fucking want us to be the ones to pull back.” Maddox glowered, knocking his fist on the table.

I didn’t either, but we needed to be prudent. “It’s pointless to eliminate random people. There will be a time when we can deal with the thorns on our back.”

The important decision makers were the ones we should focus on to ensure our immortals could live without distractions.

“This is fucking bullshit!” Ryder snapped. He had his rugged boots kicked up on the table, but now he lurched onto his feet. His hand went to the back of his neck and he clashed his teeth.

The three of us were in New York for a scheduled Quorum meeting. The fact that Ryder was now frequently in the city meant things were changing, just as I’d hoped. But these meetings haven’t been productive, even though they’ve been more frequent lately.

For the past couple of months, I'd been trying to convince them to act more strategically and not rely on violence so much. All our decisions were made by majority rule, so Maddox's changed stance to my side was significant.

Sure, I could gloat and throw my victory in his or Ryder's face, but that would be counterproductive, no? I got my way, and it didn't matter to me how it happened.

"Why are we changing now?" Ryder demanded. "This was the plan all along—"

"Well, it's not working, is it?" Maddox threw back at him. "I'm the only one here responsible for ordering the killings. I'd know."

Ryder dropped heavily back into his seat, his face impassive.

Ever since our friendships fell apart, Ryder always sided with Maddox. Right now, he certainly could be trying to act against me. But I also knew Ryder had a bloodthirsty side.

I flipped through my notebook, running the tip of my pen under the lines of writing. "I've been building good relationships with imperative members of the government. We're making significant progress."

Many were on our side. Once we had more support, we could take control. Having people voluntarily support us would waste fewer enhancements. Or we could replace them entirely when they exhausted their use.

It was important for immortals to remain under the radar. Having insiders would help influence proposed legislation and warn us of any imminent threats.

"Good to hear. I have issues in Pendulum that need my attention," Maddox growled. "It's my priority for now." He gave me a curt nod.

He reached out to me earlier about surveillance and torture enhancements. I handed over several of the more promising ones, but not without warning him of potential side effects.

"Do what you have to do," I said. "Keep us updated."

It was a convenient coincidence that Pendulum was suffering from internal disruption right now. It made Maddox much more inclined to give up his stubbornness over how to handle human-immortal relations. He had problems to deal with that took precedence over Quorum business.

Ryder crossed his arms and turned his cheek, his jaw working.

“Then it’s settled.” Maddox stared at him for a second before exhaling loudly. “If you have further issues, you come to me, Ryder. Don’t forget that you have been doing fuck-all this whole time.” With that last snarled observation, he disappeared.

Maddox wouldn’t go too far, since we were at the Pendulum headquarters.

Ryder jumped to his feet, his face twisted with ugly anger, then also teleported away. Probably to confront Maddox over what he said.

I’ll let them sort everything out on their own.

Now that I had the majority, I could openly talk to them about what I’d been working on for so long. But the next steps...

I knew what I had to do, and this was going to be risky. If I pulled it off, it would be a major win for not only our immortals but for our brotherhood, for Quorum.

And it was time to see if Saige was going to cooperate. If she didn’t, well...

There was no turning back.

SAIGE

Alex contacted me yesterday, asking whether I wanted to spend time together. Of course, I had to say yes. I didn't have plans for the evening, but I would've cancelled them if I did.

He came to pick me up after work, and it was obvious there was no real plan for us. The spontaneity felt refreshing, especially compared to a lot of other dates I'd been on.

This isn't a date, I reminded myself. It would be clear if this was a date, wouldn't it?

We were walking down the street away from my office building, and he gestured to a car that was waiting on the curb. "How about we drive around and see if there are any restaurants that catch your eye?"

"Sounds good."

The doors opened automatically as we approached, and he helped me climb in. After greeting Carl, I put on my seatbelt and the car pulled out into traffic. I watched people scurry about on the sidewalks. When I walked home, I tried not to rush. But when everyone around you walked so quickly, it felt weird to stroll along.

"So." I turned to Alex and said the first thing that popped into my brain. "What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"That's quite the question."

I was feeling bold today, and my exhaustion from the day made me even more loose-lipped. "It's just a random thought."

Would he answer? And if he did, how much would he tell me?

“I’ve lied, killed, and betrayed my closest friends and family.”

I held my breath and slowly turned my head to meet his gaze. There was no smile, no smirk, no... anything. Alex wore his signature indecipherable mask.

“Can you handle that?” he asked softly.

In my mind, he was asking, “*Can you handle me?*”

These immortals have lived multiple lives, going through so much that I couldn’t quite fathom. Maybe one day one of them would reveal a sliver of their secrets.

I licked my lips, my mouth dry. “Do you have any regrets about it?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “Some. But many of my decisions have led to imperative developments for immortals. All the research, for example.”

“You kill people... for research?” I wasn’t a fan of Alex operating labs full of mad scientists.

“Yes. And also we have to keep our secrets. Unless we give permission, researchers and test subjects in our labs aren’t allowed to contact outsiders. If they do, we eliminate them.”

Eliminate. It sounded so clinical.

“You’re using euphemisms, but basically you kill innocent people,” I said haltingly.

“Define innocent.” Alex adjusted his tie clip. “Those people jeopardized us by revealing information they shouldn’t. They signed their contracts knowing the risks. Our rules are more than clear.”

“I’m still getting used to all the killing.” It was easier to watch the people on the sidewalk than look at him. “I was always taught to avoid violence. You all act primitively rather than civilized. It’s ironic that living forever led immortals to move backwards in that way.”

“Perhaps all the extra time taught us to not suppress our baser urges.” The intimate tone of his voice hit me hard. I could feel his stare on the side of my face.

Unlike the other two immortals, Alex could say very little and yet affect me like a match to a candle. The power he wielded over me was terrifying.

My response came out huskily. “Spoken like a true savage.”

Alex inclined his chin in acknowledgement. “Although lapses in control can be dangerous.”

The car continued to cruise along, and I sat up more when I recognized the building in front of us. “Wait a second.”

“What is it?”

“Yes, that’s the place!” I pointed to the next building on our left before looking back and beaming at him. “Sally, one of my coworkers, swears it’s the best banh mi she’s ever had. I’ve been dying to try it.”

“We certainly can’t pass up the opportunity, then.” He directed Carl to stop ahead, and the car pulled over.

I practically leaped out, landing heavily on my feet. Outside of the rare instances when I ordered takeout, I’d been living off of steamed vegetables. Lately, Maddox was always home too late to police my meals.

The tiny deli was situated conveniently on the first floor inside an office building, and for that reason only, I wished I worked there.

I lingered in front of the menu taped in the window. “I’ll have the classic, with the Vietnamese ham and mayo. What about you?”

Alex studied the choices. “Is there another option that seems worth trying to you?”

“The pork lemongrass sounds pretty good.” It was my second choice, but it was marked as a new item. I liked to play it safe with new restaurants.

“Stay here, Saige.” After brushing his hand over mine, he disappeared into the deli. He joined the small line and drew his wallet out of his back pocket.

I smiled, turning and pressing my shoulder against the wall next to the deli. Standing here, I had a good view of Alexander Moreau, and man did I look my fill. He was all sharp edges, particularly his square jaw. The commanding way he held himself drew male and female attention alike.

He was *that* guy.

When he got back with our orders, we settled at a metal picnic table set up in front of the deli. All the other customers hurried away with their sandwiches.

The sandwich’s thin crispy crust was heavenly to bite into, and the savoury filling burst with flavour. I tried not to chew too fast to enhance the experience. But to be fair, I didn’t have lunch today, and everything tasted better when you’re hungry.

When we’d both polished off our banh mi, I leaned forward expectantly, my chin in my hand. “Well?”

Alex brushed off stray crumbs from his lap before flashing his clear blue eyes my way. “Not bad.”

I hummed happily. “Good to hear. It’s better than I’d thought.” I crumpled up the paper wrappers and went to throw them away.

After I got back, Alex studied me intently. “This isn’t how I thought the evening would go.”

“What were you expecting?”

Alex gave our surroundings a perfunctory glance, and his lips quirked up. “A fancy, candlelit restaurant, an orchestral accompaniment, and quality wine.”

Sounds like a date.

My mood brightened, and I felt so much lighter. “You’re such a fancy man.” The Duke of Vale had that royal air about him.

“With me, you can be my fancy lady.”

I kicked my feet, hearing my sneakers knock together. “Only occasionally. I think I’m much more comfortable living a casual lifestyle.”

“You won’t know until you try it, Saige. You might find you were born for the role.”

I doubted him, but I didn’t want to argue. “Could be.”

In a swift move, Alex stood over me. His arms came around me, trapping me against the table. Alex had a faint five o’clock shadow, and it made him feel more real to me.

As he dipped his head closer to mine, my head grew dizzy, and my mind went blank. His gaze flicked between my eyes to my mouth, and his lips parted slightly.

Was he waiting for something?

“Kiss me,” I whispered. The words tumbled out of my mouth like there was no other option.

Triumph erupted in his eyes, and he cradled my face in his hands. He looked at me seriously before tipping my head back and taking my lips in his.

Fireworks.

Or was it something less tangible than that?

It felt *right*.

My mouth opened for him immediately in a soft sigh, a sign of capitulation, as Alex drew every breath of mine with the push and pull of his kiss. His hands stayed respectful, carefully cradling my head.

But I was on fire, and I wanted so much more than that.

His eyes opened, and I drowned in pools of blue. Now that he wasn’t kissing me, I realized my back was aching from the metal picnic table digging into my back. Still, I held onto his arms that still framed my body.

He had me trapped, but I liked it.

“I have a proposition for you,” he murmured.

“And what is that?”

“Marry me.” Conviction strengthened his words, and I felt his arms flex as his muscles tensed.

I reeled back as much as I could. “I’m s-sorry, what did you just say?”

Alex rubbed my back. There was nowhere for me to go to keep a clear head. He was here, all around me, and now he was saying unbelievable things.

Ridiculous things.

I wanted to run away, yet I felt like I’d find my way back to him.

“Marry me,” he repeated, this time softer. “And let me give you the world.”

I was choking on my words, and I didn’t know—

“She’s looking distressed, Moreau. Back away.”

Maddox stood just inside the building entrance with his arms crossed. He was decked out in black, as he often was.

Oh, thank god. I needed someone to act as a buffer.

Alex let me go, freeing me to slide off the bench.

Maddox arched an eyebrow before stalking toward us.

“Hey, Mad...” I didn’t want to look at Alex, not after what he asked of me.

What the hell kind of proposal was that? We barely knew each other.

Maddox stopped before me. “So I have a new nickname.”

I winced. That came from my awkwardness. “Mad, Maddox, all the same.” *No, it really isn’t.*

His attention flitted from me to Alex.

Alex nodded in greeting. “Maddox, what brings you around here?”

A sly look crossed his face. “I happen to be in the area.”

“What a coincidence,” Alex replied dryly.

“Isn’t it?” Maddox smirked, but tension radiated from his body. “I love coincidences.”

They stared at each other, and I looked from Alex’s impassive face to Maddox’s arrogant one.

Another standoff. Great.

When I moved to walk around Maddox, his arm snaked out to abruptly yank me into his embrace. I braced myself against his hard stomach as I landed, my cheek pressed to his chest.

“You haven’t greeted me properly, kitten,” he murmured. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I just kissed Alex,” I said without thinking.

Maddox’s pupils engulfed his eyes until all I saw was pitch black. “Is that supposed to stop me?” His fingers skimmed my collarbone. He pinched that spot right at the nape of my neck, making me go boneless against him. “I know your body better than he does,” he hissed into my ear.

Alex murmured something low enough that I couldn’t hear it, and Maddox’s head snapped up. “Shut the fuck up,” he snarled.

Maddox didn’t let me turn around to face Alex. I could feel his body heat tick up. His jaw was clenched so tight, and the veins on his neck protruded more than I’d ever seen. “Stop riling him up, Alex.”

I pushed away from Maddox and headed to the entrance. Before I touched the handle, Alex was there to hold the door open for me.

“My lady.” He ducked his head.

I stepped out and faced him fully. “Thanks.”

He swallowed, and he glanced upwards quickly. His long eyelashes swept over his blue eyes. “You look so beautiful under this light.”

“Everyone does. Dusk is great for pictures.” While the waning sun would look especially nice in a natural backdrop, I didn’t mind how the orange-yellow sky reflected on the sleek skyscrapers.

“Saige.” He slipped his hands into his pockets and paced a couple of steps. “About what I said earlier, don’t overthink it.”

“You asked me to marry you, Alex. I can’t think about it enough!” I shot back at him. My mind reeling, I threw a look over my shoulder. Maddox was still in the building, and we were pretty far out. Hopefully, his enhanced hearing wasn’t *that* good.

“All you need to know is that’s the endgame for me. I’m serious about this. About you.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “I hear you.” *It’s funny how they could throw out being with me “forever” and I’m fine. The second Alex mentions marriage, I freak out.*

It was the overwhelming human in me.

“Kitten, let’s go.”

Maddox came up beside me, and I took the arm he offered. After we walked several steps, my phone started ringing with a call from Ali. Before I could say anything, she was already speaking.

“Saige. What are you doing with Maddox Nicoli? And Alexander?”

The disbelief in her voice made me whirl around, skimming the lineup of cars on the street. “Where are you? Are you watching me?” I wasn’t fond of the feeling of being spied on. When she told me she was in the black van idling at the curb, I pivoted to stomp over to her.

My two men stayed by my side for a while before falling back to leave me alone.

My men? Even thinking that made me falter. Did I see them as mine already?

As Ali slid out of the car, I suddenly didn’t quite know how to face her. I couldn’t tell her anything about immortals,

nor did I want to. She stood under the tree with Carson, her bodyguard, wringing her hands.

Ali grabbed me as soon as I was within her reach. Her long, silver earrings dangled wildly at her sudden movement. “Are you okay?”

I pushed her away. “I’m fine, why would you think otherwise?” Two immortals of the Quorum were with me, and I didn’t want Ali to suspect too much. I didn’t want a repeat of what happened to that woman at my apartment building.

“Because that was fucking Maddox Nicoli and the Duke of Vale.” Carson glared at me and shifted closer to his charge.

His anger fuelled my ire, and I glared right back. “You don’t know them.”

“Saige—“

“I know what I’m doing.” I felt knots in my stomach as my sharp words made my friend’s face fall. “Things aren’t that simple. There are a lot of situations, people, that you can’t explain away. There’s a lot more you don’t know about.” I met Carson’s distrustful glower. “And even you.”

Ali’s lips pinched, and her wide eyes flitted over my face. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She didn’t have to understand, but I needed her to stay away until...

Until when?

When will these immortals leave me alone, and I revert to being just Saige Kinley, the newbie out in the big city?

“Ali, listen to me.” I grabbed her arm. “Get out of here, you’re in over your head.”

“That’s what I’m telling you! You don’t know who these people are. Come with me. I’ll explain everything.”

She wasn’t letting this go!

Maddox and Alex were giving us space, but now they approached us.

Maddox's arm slid around me and he drawled, "This is sweet and all. But Saige, we're needed elsewhere." He jerked his shoulder, nudging me back a step.

Alex rested his hand on my back and I let him steer me away. I averted my gaze from Ali, hating how my evasiveness was making her worry.

"Wait!" I heard her cry out, but the car door shut behind me.

It was better this way.

Alex was walking back to Maddox, and as I turned to watch, I knocked my hand against the headrest in front of me. "Oh, jeez." My phone fell out of my hand, and I had to squeeze down into the small space to reach it.

When I sat upright again, Maddox was ducking into the car. He knocked on the separator, and we started moving.

I frowned, twisting in my seat to look back at the building. "Wait, where's Alex?"

"Teleported." Maddox grasped my arm, and a devious smirk graced his lips. "In fact, how about we follow suit?"

"Wait—"

A burst of dizziness accompanied a sudden lurch in my chest, and my surroundings blurred all around me. I felt like I was losing balance, somehow free-falling while standing. My hand clapped over my mouth to prepare for any projectile vomit.

Maddox half-carried me through the apartment doorway and led me over to the living room.

"Why do you use cars, anyway?" I asked when I caught my breath, slumping on the couch. "This absolutely sucks for me, but it's convenient and easy for you."

"To keep up pretences." Maddox flashed his straight white teeth at me. "I'm just another useless, weak human."

I crossed my arms. "I'm a human too, remember?"

"You don't count."

Of course.

SAIGE

The pleasantly calming music set the tone as we walked through the department store.

Xavier, my coworker and newfound friend, led the way. “The exit to the mall is ahead of us, and then the pretzel place is right around the corner.”

I gave him a side-eye. “You know your way around, huh?”

He shrugged. “I grew up here. My mom and I used to walk through this store to enter the mall all the time. It’s a shortcut to the food court.”

“What’s it like growing up in New York City?”

“Cramped. Hectic. Noisy. Pollution from all the cars despite the horrific traffic.” Xavier smiled. “But I’m still here, so it’s not so bad.”

We separated briefly to give space to a family trying to walk around us. Since we were ambling by so slowly, I knew we were those assholes who got in the way.

“How’s making friends?” Xavier asked. “I don’t like the idea of you all alone in the big city.”

I sighed. “Well I have you, don’t I? Sally?” And my immortals, but I couldn’t mention them.

“The point of having more friends is so you have options when they ditch you to go on dates. Sally is a good example.”

When I’d leaned over Sally’s cubicle to ask about her weekend plans, she was applying bright red lipstick.

“I have places to be, darling”—she gave me a rare wink, so she must’ve been in an unprecedented good mood—“and people to do.”

Her brazen words made me blink and blush, and I glanced around the empty office like I was awaiting a scolding.

“You won’t encounter that problem with me. I’ve been single my whole life!” Xavier announced, puffing his chest out. “I’m a rare one.”

“As in, you had no relationships or only had casual ones?” I hoped I didn’t sound judgemental because that wasn’t my intention. “If you feel okay sharing, that is.”

He laughed. “I’m an open book. Never had a relationship. Nada.”

“Do you mind it?” I wasn’t one to urge people into doing things they didn’t care for, no matter what social convention said. “Now that I think about it, you might be the happiest guy I know.”

We stopped in front of the pretzel place, and he tapped his finger on his chin as he inspected the menu.

“I don’t think I’m unhappy,” he finally said. “Because I only really think *what if* when I see my friends dating. I’m very content being alone.”

“That’s good to hear.” I skimmed the menu myself and decided on a cinnamon sugar pretzel. “I think it’s great to embrace being alone. It doesn’t mean being lonely.” I’d been in and out of relationships myself, enough to know I was happy either way.

A man did ask me to marry him, though.

Nope. Like Alex told me, I shouldn’t overthink it. People say the most ridiculous things, right?

“Exactly.” He grinned at me. “Now, what pretzel do you want? My treat.”

After our orders were ready, we sat down on one of the benches littered throughout the mall. I bit into my chewy,

sugary bread, and dribbled my feet in delight at the explosion in my tastebuds.

Xavier chuckled, his eyes crinkling. “Woah there.”

“Sorry, it’s the dopamine rush.” Some of the cinnamon sugar fell onto my lap, and I brushed it off. “How’s yours?” Xavier ordered a cheddar jalapeño flavour.

“I like it!” He emphasized his point by taking another enormous bite. “Delicious!” His exclamation came through his mouthful of bread.

I shook my head in mock disapproval at his cheeky smile. “You’re going to choke, Xavier. I can’t handle you dying. I’ll have to sit next to someone new.”

He finished his pretzel. “It’s more likely you’ll sit next to an empty cubicle. Granier might never hire again.”

“Let’s get going.”

We headed around the stores, making a game out of picking outfits for each other.

Xavier snorted as he looked at my chosen yellow checkered shirt and overalls. “Saige, you have no taste.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I stuck my tongue out at him.

By the time we said our goodbyes, I had a bounce in my step. I swung my arms as I walked back to Maddox’s apartment. Instead of taking the shortcut through the park, I went the long way.

Having a normal day out with a friend felt so refreshing. No work, nothing but a chill time doing mindless things. I enjoyed being productive, but sometimes a girl needs time off.

But now that I was alone again, all the stress and messiness with my relationships were coming back.

All three of my immortals were so different from my past boyfriends. They turned it on to a million from the moment we met, and every time we interacted, I felt the full impact of their intense attention.

Even though I rationally knew it didn't make sense, being with them felt right, in ways that I'd never felt before.

Some people would say we were unhealthy, that their obsession with me was toxic. But surely something that felt so right, something that made me feel so complete, couldn't be that bad?

I nearly tripped over my feet, and I had to grab onto a light pole to keep my balance.

Too much thinking.

After waving at Arti and Taylor when they exited Maddox's apartment, I collapsed onto the couch. Lately, I'd seen many more of Pendulum's immortals around. When I mentioned it to Maddox, he brushed me off.

It was his apartment, so I didn't push the issue any further.

I leaned my head back against the couch. The ceiling of this apartment was so different from my rental. There were no cracks or discoloured paint, and the light was white rather than sickishly yellow.

My search for an apartment was an absolute failure. Most places were way too overpriced, and the few tours I'd reluctantly arranged all fell through last minute.

In the meantime, I'd been enjoying my time living with Maddox. It was remarkably easy. But getting used to this luxury felt like I was becoming too dependent on him. The longer I stayed, the harder it'd be to leave. I knew that rationally, yet...

Hell, was I in too deep already?

After I got back to my bedroom, I tossed my purse onto my desk and slid into bed. It was still late afternoon, but I felt like going down a rabbit hole online. Lazing around was the best thing about not having to work.

I must've dozed off at some point because when I woke up, I was swimming in silky sheets and a familiar musky, masculine scent.

“Mad.” I groaned, throwing my arm over my eyes to avoid the light from the ceiling. “You have to stop bringing me to your bed.”

Nowadays, Maddox came home from work much later and subsequently developed a tendency to carry me to his bed. But he was back early today. Now he was leaning over me, his breath fanning over my face.

“I want you in my space,” my immortal purred, his deep voice washing over me like a smooth caress. “I like having you all wrapped up around me, and then dragging you over my cock.”

It was like he’d trained me to respond to that tone of his voice, and I licked my lips, my eyelids growing hooded.

Maddox’s satisfaction gleamed in his gaze as his hand curled around my neck.

I tilted my head up, offering my lips to him.

He cocked his head, and his fingers softly brushed over my cheek. When I thought he was going to pull away, he suddenly grabbed a handful of my hair in his grip and jerked my face back. He devoured my mouth, his lips moving insistently over mine.

I couldn’t keep up, and all I could do was follow his lead as his kiss burned me up.

“I’ve got plans for us,” Maddox whispered. Then he murmured teasingly, “Here we go.”

What—

That familiar feeling of teleportation burst within me again, and I gasped, wrapping my arms around him. I muffled my heavy breathing in his shirt, and he held me for a minute after the spinning stopped.

“My Liege.”

Maddox’s chest rumbled. “Pierce. Perimeters secured?”

“Yes.”

His palm slid over my back. “Good.” Grasping my hand, he drew me from his chest and to his side. “Take a look, kitten.”

Pierce was nowhere to be found, but I peered around at the flashing lights and gyrating bodies on the dance floor. We were standing against the wall towards the back of the wide open space.

“You brought me to a club?” I frowned, unable to shake off the feeling that something was off. “Wait a second. It’s so quiet.” When it dawned on me, I did my best to hold back my laughter as I watched people dancing in absolute silence.

Maddox must have used an enhancement to put us in a quiet bubble.

“I thought you wouldn’t want to hear the pounding music. It can be sensory overload, especially after we teleported in.”

My heart warmed. “Thanks. How sweet of you.”

“A lot of my men are here tonight. I want you by my side so they can recognize you if anything happens.” He narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the crowd.

“Should I be worried?” I asked, taking his offered arm. “Like with Ali? She’s still fine, right?”

Maddox glanced down at me with a scowl. “Stop worrying so much about others, kitten. You can’t control everything.”

That was such a cop-out answer. I opened my mouth to tell him just that when he stopped in his tracks, making me run into his broad back.

“Seamus,” Maddox said in a gravelly tone.

Seamus sunk onto one knee, bending his neck respectfully. “My Liege.” He was a man of average height, with brown wavy hair and a baby face.

I was still slightly behind Maddox, and Seamus lifted his head and glanced over at me. When our eyes met, his gaze jerked away.

Weird.

In fact, I noticed a lot of the men were careful not to make eye contact with me. I had a sneaking suspicion my immortal had something to do with it.

Maddox waved his hand, and Seamus jumped up before melting back into the crowd.

We continued our way along the perimeter of the club, and the sound grew gradually louder.

“Are you doing that?” I asked him. “You can turn the sound up and down like a TV remote?”

He shot me a bemused look. “Yes. But it’s more like I can control the level of mute.” We stopped outside a doorway with a black velvet curtain covering it. “Ready?”

Maddox looked so handsome under this light. Handsome wasn’t an adjective that immediately jumped to my mind when describing him. He always gave off a lethal, wild aura.

But tonight, he fit the bill.

I followed the outline of his tattoos and admired his unruly beard. “You’re looking good tonight, Mad.” On impulse, I pressed a kiss to his jawline.

His arm came around me to steady my stance, and he pulled me in until we couldn’t get any closer. His lips grazed mine, and I hummed under my breath and got on my tiptoes to kiss him properly.

When we parted, he smiled down at me. There was no hint of his typical superior arrogance. Rather, he sported an intimate expression that made the lines of his face soften.

I ran a finger down the bridge of his nose. “We’re super in public right now.”

“True.” He scanned the people around us. Suddenly, he swore under his breath. “Why the hell is he here?”

I turned and followed his line of gaze.

Ryder: He was watching us.

The look on Ryder’s face was... devastating. His hair was all messy, and bruises crawled up his left cheek. The shadows

of the club made him look utterly menacing, with tense muscles and held fists.

Nicole appeared at his side. As she spoke to him hurriedly, her eyes darted around the club.

Ryder's jaw clenched even harder as he gritted his teeth, and his glare dropped lower to meet my gaze. A minuscule change in his expression made him look hungrier, and the twist of his lips brought out a crazed beauty in him.

Should I approach him?

My stomach felt rock hard, and I gulped. But when Nicole spotted me, I ignored my instincts and took a step forward. She immediately shook her head, making me stop in my tracks.

Maddox grabbed my wrist. "Stop, let them go. It's not safe for you."

While I was trying to shake him off, Ryder and Nicole both disappeared from sight. "I don't get it. What's wrong with him?"

He took my arm and practically dragged me through the doorway. It was a much quieter area, with sophisticatedly dressed men and women sitting on couches and at the bar tables. The walls and floors had wood panelling, reminding me of a tiny, quaint mountainside bar.

We sat down at a bar table, and the server set down two drinks without us ordering.

"Part of it comes from being an immortal, and part of it is because of Ryder's temperament," Maddox said. "Next time you see him, ask." He must've read my worry because he added, "Ryder's going to be fine. This isn't the first time. Call it a side effect of living a long time."

I didn't see how being an immortal made you look like you were beaten up in the boxing ring. But I had an on-site assignment in Oregon with Ryder tomorrow, so I could talk to him then.

The drink set in front of me had an artificial raspberry blue colour, with a thin layer of white foam at the top. Maddox's was a deep green colour, and he hadn't touched his glass yet.

I stirred the liquid around with the metal straw, a little hesitant to take a sip. "Are these your go-to drinks? We didn't even have to order."

"Not exactly. Bessie, the mixologist here, comes up with these new concoctions. Since I'm not picky, she often uses me as a lab rat." He watched as I risked a taste. "She could poison me, who knows?"

"The only way anyone could poison you is if you let it happen." I swirled the liquid around with my tongue, and he reached over to play with my free hand. "It's very tangy."

Behind Maddox, a tall, blonde-haired woman approached. She paired her risqué red dress with an elegant, twisted bun and a necklace of pearls.

Heads turned as she swayed over to us. Her confidence leaked out of every step.

"Maddox," the woman purred, splaying her hands out on the side of our table. She leaned forward provocatively, her breasts spilling out of the top of her dress. "Nice to see you again."

I swallowed. A part of me wanted to leave. I used to purposely date guys without long dating histories so I could avoid confrontations like this.

"Who are you?" Maddox sat back in his chair and glared at her.

"Dawn. You met me at a restaurant two months ago, and we had a memorable conversation." The woman's anger flashed over her face for a second before her seductive mask smoothed over it. "It's not an issue. We can get to know each other all over again. Maybe this time in a bedroom."

The suggestive tone of her voice made my stomach churn. Should I say something? Jealousy was such an ugly emotion, and my previous boyfriends hated it, saying it felt stifling.

I hunched over my drink, my throat growing scratchy.

Maddox plucked her fingers off of his arm.

Two of his men appeared behind the woman, grabbed her shoulders, and started dragging her away.

“Wait!” she gasped loudly. Then she tore away from the men and lifted her chin. “I’ll go on my own.” She walked off with perfect posture, her heels clicking loudly.

“Ban her,” Maddox demanded. “I don’t want to see her here.”

Nothing happened, and nobody was near us now. But I knew his immortals were always listening for orders from him. “Is this your club? You can just ban people?”

“We’re leaving,” he clipped, ignoring me entirely. In the next moment, he tugged me into the shadows and teleported us back to his apartment.

Similar to earlier, Maddox held me close as I got my bearings back. But after his attitude and seeing that woman, I grew more and more upset.

“Get off of me,” I muttered, struggling out of his arms. I snatched up my purse and stalked towards the hallway to my bedroom. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“So that’s it?”

I whirled around to see him standing across the room with a wide stance, his arms crossed. “What are you talking about?”

His lips curled. “Why didn’t you stop her?” Maddox stalked over, his chest expanding with his heavy breathing. When he towered over me, my breath caught at how he was vibrating with tension and...

“Why are you angry?” I had to tilt my head back to look at him.

“Why didn’t you stop that woman, *Dawn*”—he sneered her name—“from touching me?”

“So I have to be the one to ward off all your women?” My voice grew bitter. “That probably happens daily to you.”

Maddox leaned in, and his hands clutched my cheeks so I couldn't look away. "Tell me, Saige. Do you even fucking care?"

How could he say that?

"I don't want to be that petty, jealous girlfriend, okay?" I shouted right in his face. "You can handle your exes or past flings or whatever. I'll let you deal with it."

Maddox stilled, and his touch grew gentler.

Then he stepped in closer.

I backed up until my back pressed against the wall, and he'd effectively trapped me in place. "Maddox, I'll be pissed off, but I can't jump in every time a woman approaches you."

"And why not?" A smirk danced on his lips. "It seems you still don't understand, kitten."

His patronizing tone fuelled my simmering ire. "Get away from me." I pushed at his chest, but he held firm.

"So *now* you're angry? Where was this back at the club? You decide to care now?"

I felt like my breath was sucked right out of me. "What the hell? You're acting crazy. What do you want from me?"

"I want you to be jealous. Possessive. I want you to mark your territory. *I'm yours*, baby. Can you fucking act like it?" He bared his teeth. "Because I'd burn the world down and announce to every person that there's no one else for me."

Maddox had always felt like a formidable, untouchable beast to me, and a part of me held back because of that. To not be swallowed up by him and his world, I had to be his equal.

His heartbeat quickened under my fingertips, and I wondered what he was thinking.

"Take me to bed," I whispered, peering up at him under my eyelashes.

His grip on me tightened for a second, and then we were in his bedroom. He sprawled out on the bed, his now-hungry gaze still on me.

I love how he looks at me.

I took a couple of steps back to appreciate how powerful and virile he appeared. It was all types of unfathomable, but somehow *Maddox is my man*.

I tore off my clothes as I approached him. Without a second thought, I crushed my lips against his, clawing at his clothes, aching for his cock.

“Shh.” Maddox ran his palm over my hair and down my back. He kept a possessive hand right above my ass. “No need to rush, I’m all yours, baby girl.”

“Only mine?” I held my breath, thinking of his reputation.

“You think you can handle that? I’m hard to satisfy,” Maddox countered,

This was the last time I’d let myself doubt him. “I wonder if you can handle *me*.”

He smirked. “That’s my girl.”

“Ground rules. No cheating,” I held a finger to his face. “I’m serious. If you cheat, I’m gone. Cheating physically, emotionally, whatever. I will not be the better person and magnanimously forgive you.”

Maddox chuckled. His touch on my bare hip was making me lose my mind.

My eyes narrowed. “How is this funny?”

Before I could move, he was on top of me, my wrists clutched in his left hand. The other traced my nose and tapped on my upper lip. “It’s fucking stupid is what it is. I don’t want any other woman. I’m only attracted to you. Whenever I’m not working, I’m thinking about you. It’s actually irritating how you draw my attention and make me forget my responsibilities.”

He was looking angry now. “That isn’t my fault.”

Maddox tilted his head, a smirk hanging off his mouth. “I blame you anyway.” With one heave of his arm, he flipped me over onto my stomach and pressed his knee between my legs.

I jumped as I felt cold metal touch my wrists. “What is that?”

“Handcuffs.” My hand jerked when he tugged on the chain. “Now hold on.” With a smooth motion, his cock breached my pussy, and he filled me up to the brim.

“Oh!” I arched my back at his sudden intrusion, and my wrists stung from my sharp tugs.

He withdrew from me with a curse. “Not deep enough,” Maddox muttered. Splaying a hand on my stomach, he pushed me up onto my knees, making me arch my back.

This position felt like I was offering myself to him. I turned my face to peek at him, and his savage, obsessive leer at my pussy sure made it look like it.

With his palm caressing my neck, he plunged back into me. “Oh fuck, there it is.”

As he plowed into me, I pressed my face into the pillow, and my breasts were squished against the mattress. I gasped, grabbing onto the bedframe as his every thrust punched my cervix. My knees were slipping, and I wanted to collapse against the bed.

His fingers tangled into my hair, and he yanked my head back. “Stay up, Saige. Don’t make me tie your legs.”

The idea of ropes encircling my wrists and ankles flashed through my mind, and I had to hold back my moan.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” His heavy breathing punctuated his words, and I hung my head, completely lost in the rising heat inside of me. “My girl loves feeling helpless with a cock digging into her sweet pussy.”

“Yes,” I groaned.

“Now cum for me,” he snarled.

I cried out as I shattered, and my limbs shook from the power of my orgasm. As his cock started spewing his warmth inside of me, I swayed my hips to encourage him further.

Maddox lay on top of me for a while before I felt the handcuffs disappear. Then he let me get up to clean up in the bathroom. When I got back, he snatched me back into his embrace.

Sleep came easily to me, especially since I was so tired. But when I woke up, it was still dark outside. Maddox had his arm around me, effectively crushing me to his side.

I shifted, tugging my body out from under his grip. Just as one foot touched the ground, he yanked me back into his chest.

“Where are you going?” he growled and nipped at my ear.

I sucked in my breath as his fingers crawled up the helm of my shirt. I’d put one back on earlier. “Mad, I need to pee.”

“No,” he whispered darkly. “You wanted to leave me. That’s not happening.”

I hid my smile and let him distract me with his mouth.

Sometime later...

Maddox’s phone buzzed on the bedside table.

“Check who it is,” he murmured lazily, his finger tracing patterns on my hip.

I blindly grabbed it and tilted the screen up. “It’s Ryder.”

He took the phone from me, and his face clouded over as he took the call. “What?” The sharp word broke our relaxing silence, messing with our afterglow. “I’m fucking done with you. You’re a part of us, so deal with it.”

I watched him toss the phone across the room. Even though his throw appeared light, somehow the phone cracked against the opposite wall, denting it, and crumbled to the ground. “Everything okay?”

He sat up fully, and the sheet slid down his delectable chest. “I fucking hate to say this, but I need to find him.”

I bit my lip. “Right now?”

Maddox nodded. “Listen. Ryder’s been problematic lately.”

My eyebrows furrowed. “Problematic as in...”

“Unhinged. Crazy. Loss of reason. This isn’t uncommon for him.”

It didn’t seem normal for anyone—immortal or not—to fall into bouts of insanity. “What’s really wrong with him?”

He exhaled before setting his dark eyes on mine. “He’ll tell you one day, I’m sure of it. But I have to go now.” In the blink of an eye, he was standing next to the bed with his clothes back on, looking as polished as ever. He swooped down to kiss my temple, his mouth lingering longer than usual.

Then he was gone.

SAIGE

I placed my mug on the coffee table and curled up on the couch.

This was another on-site translating job in Oregon. Being back in my home state felt amazing. I drank in all the green trees and relished the taste of the wisps of wind on my tongue.

I'd expected to have to drive back and forth between the sprawling Victorian mansion and the nearest motel. But this time, Brian, one of Ryder's immortals, set me up in a suite. It was basically a hotel room with the same amenities such as shampoo and an electric kettle.

A bird chirped from my slightly cracked open window. I'd pulled back the heavy grey curtains, wanting to see the wild nature outside.

The wooden panels on the floor creaked as I got up to grab a packet of cookies. I had to squint at the packaging to choose my preferred chocolate flavour. Dusk was settling in, but I was reluctant to turn on the lights.

I hadn't seen Ryder the whole day. Instead, Brian handed me the documents to translate and left me all alone. I felt like there was little to nobody at the estate. Everything was so eerily quiet, save for the typical sounds of an old house settling.

Maddox didn't tell me much about what happened with Ryder that made him leave the bed, but he tensed up when I questioned him about it.

“Huh?” I shuffled through my papers, my eyebrows furrowed. I must’ve left one of the middle pages down at the office. After checking one last time, I sighed and slipped on my shoes.

It was a quick trip downstairs to grab what I needed. On my way back, I swooped into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. They stocked the fridge to the brim with fresh fruit, yogurt, and sandwiches.

“If you don’t want to head out for food, you’re free to eat anything here.” Brian gestured around the kitchen. “It’s all prepared for you.”

“Just for me?” Through the glass on the cupboards, I could see the boxes of snacks and candies. “Really?”

Brian chuckled and ran a hand through his curly black hair. “Ryder ordered us to stock up on food for you, including healthy options. Most of us here don’t care about eating.”

I chose a turkey sandwich and headed back up to my room. As I reached the top of the staircase, a man came down the hallway. It was only when he turned his head that I recognized him.

“Ryder?” I frowned at his dishevelled appearance. His formal suit was creased and dirty, and his tie hung loosely around his neck. The bruises I saw on his face the other night were still visible. Wouldn’t he be healed by now? “What happened to you?”

He said nothing but continued to approach me with slow, deliberate steps. Ryder’s movements reminded me of a predator in the midst of hunting its prey. His corded neck and mottled skin became clearer as he came closer.

Immediately, my hackles rose, and I outstretched my hand as if to ward him away. Ryder rarely scared me, but right now, there was something... unhinged in his demeanour.

“Why are you acting like this?” I whispered. “I thought you weren’t here today.” His eyes tracked me as I took an unsteady step back.

“Teleported.”

“Okay.” Behind my back, my hands blindly grasped the bannister, aching for that support.

I should call for someone.

“No one here will save you from me. You’re who I’ve been aching to see,” he hissed. “C’mere.” He crooked his finger at me.

The wooden rail dug into my spine as I inched my way to the left.

“Darling.” Ryder narrowed his eyes, and his manic look made way to a more cruel one.

It drew ice into my veins and sparked every desire in me to flee.

This is my last chance.

I turned and fled down the staircase, nearly falling down the last few steps. My heartbeat was on overdrive as I tore through the hallway. The closest door to the outside was in the kitchen, and that was exactly where I went.

The door slammed shut loudly behind me but I didn’t stop running. I stumbled and slipped on the wet grass, and I caught myself with my hands. The gravel bit into my palms with a sharp sting and under the shining moonlight, I could see the red welts.

As I tried to catch my breath, I looked back. Ryder wasn’t there. Did he not follow me?

“Saige.”

My head snapped around to catch the sound of his voice. But his movements blurred, and in the next second, his hands were grabbing my waist.

He threw me over his shoulder and carried me over to the shadowy cluster of trees that marked the beginning of the vast forest that surrounded the mansion.

As he did, I kicked and screamed, but it was no use.

Who was this man? He hadn’t hurt me yet, but he was chasing me down like he wanted to.

God, what happened to the Ryder I knew and liked?

When he set me down, I could barely see the lights from the mansion in the distance. It was a relief to have a direction to go towards, and I had to try.

I'd only sprinted a couple of steps when his body slammed against mine from behind. I hit the ground, and my cheek pressed against the cold, rough surface. Every nerve ending burned, and I blinked away my tears from the pain.

"I only want you to stay with me in that cabin behind us," Ryder grunted in my ear.

"I don't want to!" I shot back. "Let me get my car and leave!"

Ryder's hand snapped around my throat. "You're not fucking going anywhere. You're mine." I heard the unmistakable sound of his zipper and his leg shoved mine apart.

"What are you doing?" I whispered. "Oh no, no."

He licked the shell of my ear. "I'm going to fuck you."

"No, I don't want you to! Let's talk this over." But I was trapped. He was twice my weight and was an immortal. There was no way out. My predicament made my voice come out high and desperate. "Please, Ryder. No."

He easily tore my pants off and he ripped a hole in my panties before he notched his cock to my opening. "You're *mine*, Saige Kinley. You belong to me. Don't you forget it." With one fluid motion, he thrust himself completely into my pussy.

I groaned at the intrusion as he stretched me open so fully. My mouth fell open and my fingertips dug into the dirt floor. The sensations I was feeling were like nothing I'd ever felt before.

He slowly withdrew from me before violently thrusting back in. He filled me up to the hilt, and his low groan made my pussy throb.

Ryder yanked me up onto my hands and knees. The new angle allowed his cock to hit spots inside of me that made me let out audible moans. “Your pussy opens up to me like the prettiest flower. You were made to take my cock.”

I was... *getting off on this.*

Every knock of his length ground against my cervix. “I can’t wait to fill you up right here.” His hand flattened over my stomach. “Mmm, yeah. All of my seed, growing inside of you.”

Although I take birth control pills, hearing him mention getting me pregnant brought a surge of adrenaline through me. The idea that he wanted to tie himself to me like that was dangerously attractive. My pussy clenched around him tighter.

“You like hearing that, darling?” Ryder cupped my swinging breasts and tugged on my nipples. His teeth scratched over my shoulder. “I’ll knock you up. I’ll do anything for you.”

“No, no.” I hung my head in defeat as my pleasure rose inside of me. I was going to cum, and this whole situation made my head spin. “Ryder, please. Don’t.” It felt so good, and the pleasure made my toes curl. My widely spread legs provided him with maximum access to me, and I didn’t know what I wanted anymore.

“Shh.” Ryder’s breaths quickened and his fingers dug into my waist. With a sharp jerk of his hip, he nestled his cock as deep as he could. spurts of his cum spread inside of me, the warmth pooling in my womb. “You’re okay.”

It was all too much. I threw my head back as I shook with my orgasm, my moans tearing through my lips. The dark forest grew hazy as my vision blurred and I collapsed, my limbs too weak to hold myself up.

He gathered me into his arms, and before I knew it, we were back in my bed.

I blinked up at the dim lights.

That was easily the most intense sexual experience I’d ever had, and it came with Ryder chasing me down and forcing

himself inside of me. It made no sense, yet I couldn't deny it. My body felt so relaxed now, but my brain was too active.

It was way too hot, and I took off the tattered remnants of my shirt. Sex on the rocky, forest floor tore through the thin fabric.

"Come here," Ryder murmured. He was lying on his back beside me, his head turned to meet my gaze.

I reached out my hand to him, and he slid over to me. He curled his leg over my hips and pushed his cock back inside of me.

"There. Let's keep you plugged up," he said with a sigh.

Every word he said made me shudder. I swallowed, feeling our combined sticky juices slip down my buttocks and onto the bedsheets.

"Why did you do that to me?" I asked softly.

Even though I should, I couldn't hate him. I still wanted him.

"I fucked up." Ryder's face shut down. "Go to sleep, darling."

He couldn't expect me to not ask questions, but now that he brought up sleep, I felt my exhaustion wash over me. Still, I tilted my head up to address him again. "What happened to you?"

Ryder's mouth tightened.

I felt like a ridiculous person, because rationally I knew what he did to me, but emotionally... I liked our rough sex and cared about him.

I didn't feel like he would ever hurt me deliberately, even after tonight.

Maybe there was something wrong with me, but something must have happened to him too.

RYDER

I was sitting up, wide awake. Perhaps more awake than I'd felt in decades. The howling winds outside punctured the silence of the room. The unruly weather was only fitting, given the night we had.

Saige lay by my side, her hand curled around my thigh. Her warm breath ghosted over my skin and she shifted until her naked body was completely pressed up against me.

God, the shape of her made the most perfect silhouette.

I smoothed the hair back from her face, and she was so exhausted that she didn't react to my touch. Her eyes moved behind her eyelids.

I wondered if she was dreaming about me. In her slumber, my head could be between her thighs, licking up her sweet cream. She could be seeing all my lurid fantasies in her sleep.

Or maybe she was caught up in a nightmare.

After what I did to her, it was more likely the latter. Humans were so easy to break, I knew that from experience. Just a twitch of my wrist, and there would be no going back.

Suddenly, I remembered what I noticed a little earlier. With a yank of my arm, I pulled off the covers.

Shit. Her new tattoo.

My lips flattened. After all these years, I easily recognized Maddox's work. Smart of him to choose a place where it

wasn't so noticeable. Luckily, I'd already satiated my hunger because seeing that mark made me want to claim her again.

After tucking her back in, I slipped out of the bed and padded over to the window. The moon shined high and bright, and a flying flock of birds completed the backdrop.

I cracked my knuckles, feeling the slight fatigue from all the drugs I'd taken.

I smiled humorously.

This time I'd really done it. These aftereffects were new to me. My system quickly absorbed the synthetic chemicals after a momentary high, but I'd never taken enough to experience this. A near total relinquishing of control.

Finally, some feeling.

Ever since Saige came into my life, life wasn't so fucking dull. Yet I ached for this high only she or drugs could give me.

But last night, I hurt her.

Next time, I needed her far, far away. But wouldn't I seek her out? She was now my obsession, I'd find her anywhere.

A rustling sound came from the bed, but I didn't turn around.

"You never answered me," Saige murmured, her voice hoarse. "What happened to you?"

I stiffened, not expecting that to be the first thing she said. "What I did to you was wrong."

"Tell me, Ryder. You owe me that much."

I didn't answer to people. Blood, slow, torturous interrogations were more on my agenda.

"Come over to me."

My feet moved on their own accord, and when I fell back into the bed, Saige maneuvered me so my head was in her lap.

From this angle, the round picture frame above the bed was just atop her head. "I think I can see your halo."

"What?"

I traced the air languidly. “You’re my angel.” I wouldn’t depend on her to salvage me, to fix me, but her presence calmed the excruciating memories. My head spun looking up at her, and my neck ached. Yet I was transfixed at how her brow wrinkled, creating those delicate lines on her forehead.

She was worried about me.

Recognizing that made me smile.

“Are you okay?” Saige bit her lip, and I zeroed in on the motion. Delicious. “Talk to me, Ryder.”

“I should ask you that.” Now that I thought about it, her reaction was, quite frankly, weird. “Don’t you remember what I did to you?”

Images flashed through my head.

My hands crawling up her spine, my cock thrusting into her tight heat, and our breaths mingling in desperate release.

I wanted her again. Even though I forced her last night, it was easily the most exhilarating moment in my long life.

Fuck, I’d fallen so low, it was a miracle I wasn’t far deep into hell already.

I didn’t deserve my immortality.

“Yes, I remember. I was there.” Her conflicted expression cleared. “But you didn’t seem to be entirely there. Like, you didn’t seem like yourself.”

I shook my head. “That was all me. I have no excuses.”

“Your pupils were all blown out, and you acted manically. Were you on something? Or is it an immortal thing? Maddox menti—”

My hand shot out to circle her throat, abruptly cutting off her words. “*Don’t say his name.* I just found his tattoo on you.” When she nodded jerkily, I dropped my arm. “I’m trying to get used to you and Maddox, but he’s fucking pushing it.”

“I wanted the tattoo,” Saige told me earnestly. “He didn’t ask me to get it.”

Of course, she had to defend her lover.

I sighed, letting my gaze trail to the ceiling. “You’re all I have, Saige.” I led my immortals almost mindlessly, but with her, I felt like I had direction.

Was it time to share my past?

After what I put her through, and knowing that I wanted to build a future with her, I didn’t want to hold back anymore.

“My sister was the most important person to me.” My voice was flat and emotionless. Anything else and I may rage or break down. My emotions were still bubbling at the surface, and I had no victim to run my knife through or lose my temper over.

Saige wouldn’t be my victim again.

“What was her name?”

“Kaylee. She was the most outspoken girl I knew. Kaylee wanted to wear trousers, go to school, and start a business. And she had a lovely, cheerful personality.” I tried to picture her face, but enough time had passed to make the memory fuzzy. “Women didn’t have choices back then and seeing beyond all the conventional crap was rare. You know, I think you’d be good friends.”

Saige’s smile was gentle. “I agree.”

My eyes roved over her delicate, open expression. There was no expectation on her face, just patience.

“Our parents were pieces of shit. We were poor, and they took their frustrations out on us. Screaming, blaming us, all of that. When I got old enough, they sent me to work at the Nicoli estate, so I didn’t know that”—I took in a deep breath as my fury swept through me—“the abuse became physical. And when everybody in the community is struggling to eat, nobody cares.”

Saige set her hand on my cheek. “That’s awful.” She was hunched over to listen to my quiet words more closely.

“This whole immortality thing felt farfetched. But the three of us tried all of Alex’s new enhancements, and it worked. So

we went with it.”

Her lips twitched. “And people wonder why men die early. The stats don’t lie. You guys were playing with fire.”

I rubbed my cheek against her palm. She stuck her tongue out cheekily at me and stroked my face like I wanted her to. “After ten years, we realized we weren’t aging. And we started making plans to disappear and start anew. I asked Alex to give Kaylee immortality.”

It was hard not to be bitter, even after all this time.

“Early on, he warned us he wouldn’t use that enhancement again until we were sure it worked. Neither he nor Maddox had particularly strong attachments, anyway. But I thought we were good enough friends that he’d make an exception for me.”

A chirp came from the crack in the window. I looked away from my woman to appreciate the soft pinks and oranges as dawn touched the tops of the green trees. Oregon was my chosen home, partly because of all the nature. And largely because of its seclusion.

“He denied me. And I accepted that because at that point I thought my sister was in a happy marriage. I couldn’t pull her away from that.” My jaw hardened. “I was wrong. She was in no better hands than my parents.”

“No,” Saige said. “Ryder, oh no.”

“The only person I loved so much. I found her in a ditch, dying. And then I begged Alex.” My pulse sped up and my fingers twitched. “*I begged him*, Saige, to save her. Got on my knees, threw away my pride, and promised him everything.”

I could still remember that foggy morning in a grassy field, and my friend’s indifferent refusal.

“And he wouldn’t do it.” Saige’s eyes grew sorrowful. “That’s worse than I thought.”

“I killed so many people,” I whispered, and a part of me anxiously awaited her reaction.

Her hand stilled against my temple. “What?”

“I raged and killed after Kaylee died. There was this small village. I just wiped them all out.” The pools of crimson red and devastating screams haunted my nights. Most immortals knew I could be lethal if provoked, but only a handful knew it was my coping mechanism. “Then when we put together the Quorum, I was in charge of eliminating enemies.”

Saige was quiet, and I counted the number of times she breathed before she moved.

One. Two. Three. Fifteen. Sixteen. Twenty-five. Twenty-six.

Finally, she wrapped her arms around me. “Ryder, I don’t know what to say. But I’m sorry that happened to you.”

I sat up and leaned into her embrace, surprised and a little relieved that she was still willing to face me. “It’s done now.”

Some immortals knew about my history and expressed their sympathy, having experienced similar losses. But as the years went by, they’d let go of the past.

“Do you think I’m pathetic?” I asked her. Her answer meant more than she would ever know. “It’s been centuries.” Still, when I thought of Kaylee, my chest hurt. And whenever I remembered how I lost control afterwards... there was shame but it also ignited the lethal side of me.

Alternating between those two wild emotions drove me to insanity.

“The depths of your loyalty and care for your family are admirable,” Saige began. “Most people nowadays don’t have to make the decisions you did.”

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Aren’t they lucky?”

“I think you’re caring to a fault. By hanging onto Kaylee and all the terrible things you’ve done, you’ll never move on. You’re doing yourself a disservice, and hurting others in the process.”

Nobody had spoken to me like this before. Even before, when I still got along with Alex and Maddox, I just got frustrating and disparaging looks because they didn’t get it.

I had to keep this treasure by my side. No drawing or photograph could capture the way she affected me. Her beauty hid her depths and layers. The light in her eyes had me enamoured.

Give me another week and I may be crazed without her touch. Completely lost once again.

I held my breath as I smoothed my hand over her forehead, down her cheek, and along the gentle slope of her neck. My fingertips tingled, and I became flooded with warmth.

Let me memorize this feeling.

“Here,” Saige murmured, breaking me out of my overwhelming haze. “Let me take care of you. You must be exhausted.”

In more ways than one.

I let her tug me along to the bathroom. Before she could let go of my hand, I dropped to my knees in front of her.

“Ryder—”

“I don’t want to hurt you again,” I whispered, pressing my face to her stomach and breathing in her scent.

Her fingers ran through my hair. “Then don’t,” she said simply.

I didn’t trust myself at all, especially around Saige. But I wanted to believe in her faith in me.

SAIGE

I stared into the mirror. The reflection was familiar, yet I felt different in ways that were hard to explain.

It wasn't the myriad of bruises that lined my throat, hips, and my inner thighs. Nor was it the turmoil of emotions in me after hearing about Ryder's past.

I knew my immortals may not have clean, normal pasts. But murderous rampages weren't something I envisioned. It was way too extreme, so much so that I tried not to dwell on it. But it allowed me to peel away another layer of Ryder Belshaw.

Last night was... dark and desperate, yet tantalizing and sensational. So much happened, and I wasn't trying to dismiss what he did to me, but I couldn't stop reliving those memories. Remembering his demanding roughness and brutal attention made my mouth dry.

It was as if something was unlocked inside of me, and I'd discovered another side of myself.

Geez, what am I thinking?

I busied myself with picking through the towels, secretly peeking at Ryder in the mirror. It was a tiny bathroom, even for my standards, so Ryder seemed to take up the entire space. After he splashed water over his hair and face, he sat down on the edge of the bathtub.

Once he was settled, I swiped the damp towel over his forehead. "You told me about your past. But what happened

last night?" Images flashed through my mind at his depravity, and my pussy throbbed.

Goddammit. *Even after all he did to me.*

Ryder solemnly stared over my shoulder. He was looking at himself in the mirror, and by the twisted disgust on his face, I wondered just what he saw. "I'm sorry."

I bit my lip. "I needed to hear that. But I also want an explanation."

His mood obviously darkened, and he pressed into me, resting his chin on my breast, and closing his eyes.

My hand stilled, clutching onto the towel. I let it fall to the ground and instead raked my fingers through his damp locks. "Ryder." It wasn't an uncomfortable weight.

I never really got to look down upon him like this. All three of the immortal leaders were giants compared to me. In more ways than one.

When he opened his eyes, the bright dazzling colours startled me. Flecks of lighter caramel shone throughout the hazel brown. "The monotony of life gets to me," he finally said. "And to feel something, I've tried a lot of things. Alcohol. Drugs. Sex."

"You weren't drunk last night." I couldn't smell any alcohol on his breath. So that left two options, and I hated both of them.

"No. And I have no intention of fucking anyone else but you."

I'd heard that sentiment so many times last night, but I still felt warm inside hearing him say it sober. But... drugs? "Ryder, I don't like you taking drugs. It can't be good for you."

"To be fair, all it does is give me a high. I can't get addicted." He smiled wryly. "For immortals, it does exactly what humans want from it. All the benefits without the consequences."

“I still don’t like it.” My human sensibilities were balking at the idea of having him abuse alcohol and drugs, even when it wouldn’t harm him. I couldn’t help my aversion to addictive substances. “I’m serious about this. You scared me last night. You could’ve hurt someone else.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you. I might’ve looked like I’d completely lost it, but the primal part of me recognized you, wanted you.” Ryder clenched his hands and slowly released them. “It was Kaylee’s anniversary last week. But my reaction hasn’t been this bad in a long time. Probably because of all the recent changes lately, and I took more drugs than usual.”

“You lost control last night.” I’d suspected he had a wild side, but I never felt like I didn’t have a say before.

Despite how turned on I was, it was still messed up.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I don’t know how I can make it up to you. Tell me how.”

Don’t do it again, I should say. But did I really want that? “Just promise me you won’t use drugs again.” Imagining him with someone that wasn’t me made me scowl.

Rationally, I knew what he did was despicable, but I oddly liked it. Yet it was terrible. But a part of me craved it and wanted to do it again.

Thinking about it made my panties wet.

Yeah, I’m such a mess.

Ryder watched me warily as I went to wash the towel at the sink. “But I need a release, darling. Are you going to give it to me?” With that last question, a hungry, almost passionately angry expression crossed his face. His gaze swept up and down my body, and he licked his lips.

I was all too familiar with the implications of that look now.

“Whenever I want it, you’re going to open your legs for me?” he murmured, slowly rising to his feet and inching closer to me. “Cure me of those damning nightmares and painful memories? It can only be you.”

I felt dazed. “Not anytime. I have a job, you know.”

What was I saying?

Ryder tilted my head up by pinching my chin. “Saige Kinley.”

My eyes closed as his lips barely brushed over mine. He was smothering my senses, and the things he was saying made me melt into him.

“Stay by my side, darling. Give me everything,” he whispered.

“You already have it,” I replied. And that was the truth. After last night, I had little more to give.

Ryder growled a low sound that made me arch my neck. He slid his palm to the back of my head and just held me. “Then what do you want from me?”

“More of last night.” I could barely say it out loud.

Ryder didn’t react, but his grip tightened. He knew he didn’t need to be so gentle with me anymore. “Is that right?”

I nodded, feeling a sense of shame wash over me. “I don’t know why, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Stop.” His hands slid behind my neck. “Don’t feel bad, you shouldn’t feel bad. That’s on me.”

“*But I liked it,*” I whispered. “After I got over the shock, I started to like it.” Sometimes I read pretty filthy erotica, but I never thought I’d ever experience it.

Ryder licked his lips, but I could see his pupils dilate. “I don’t know what to say. Saige, I don’t want to force you to do anything, you have to believe me.”

“I believe you.” Tonight showed me how much I trusted him. To be honest, my faith in him surprised me.

He cocked his head, running a hand over his jaw. “You want it rough?”

I nodded.

“Say it.” His dark gaze was searing and possessive.

I flushed. "I want it rough."

"Prove it." He pulled his cock out of his pants. "Right now."

I didn't notice last night because, well, I was too preoccupied with him. But his cock was obscenely long and fatter than any I'd ever seen. How did this realization escape me before?

"Ryder," I started hesitantly. "Did you enhance your penis?"

He raised an eyebrow, but he ducked his head.

I choked on a laugh. "Oh my god, you did, didn't you?"

Ryder narrowed his eyes at me.

"That's hilarious!" I doubled over, full-on laughing now. My short breaths made my chest hurt. "Oh, wow, insecure much?"

He kicked out his foot, and I tripped, falling onto my knees. I glared up at him and he smiled chillingly, sitting back down on the edge of the bathtub. "You asked for this, sweetheart."

His legs locked me in place, and he stuck his finger in my mouth, forcing my jaw to fall open for him. He thrust his cock as far as it would go, hitting the back of my throat.

I couldn't breathe, and my face burned as his length suffocated me. He held himself still, and although my vision blurred, I could see his savage features.

He yanked my head, making me take him in and out of my mouth. "Suck," he commanded. "You're not just a warm hole, right?"

I glared at him, and my jaw ached from his brutally rough treatment.

"Aren't those defiant eyes?" Ryder pinched my cheek. "I love your fire, darling. Even when you're completely at my mercy."

I sucked on his cock, working my saliva over his length until I could tell from his groans that he was about to cum. His seed burst into my mouth, and he didn't leave me any choice but to swallow it all.

My eyes watered, and I choked, yet I loved this feeling. I knew he was watching me closely to make sure I was alright, and I wanted to give him a good show.

He released me, and his cock slid from my mouth. A trail of saliva combined with his cum trailed from his tip and over my chest. Ryder hoisted me up and set me on his knee. He rubbed the head over my stomach, dark intent flashing in his eyes.

"Look," he mused. "My cock wants to mark you even when it's not fucking you and you're not sucking me off."

I smoothed my hand over his seed, rubbing the white creaminess over my skin.

"*Fuck*," he swore, grabbing a fistful of my hair. He jerked my head up and pressed a searing kiss to my mouth. "Goddamn, you're dirty and it's fucking hot."

I preened under his praise. "You're not too shabby yourself. But you could be better."

"Oh?" His smile had an edge to it, my challenge making his lips tilt up. "I'll just have to spend my days proving you wrong."

God, that sounded nice.

"Saige." He paused. "You sure you're alright after last night?"

I wrapped my arms around his neck and let our lips touch. "I understand the context behind what you did, and yes, it was wrong. But I'll tell you if I need space, okay?" I was discovering things about myself, and I didn't want him to hold back from me. "Don't treat me any differently than before, please."

Silence fell between us.

Finally, Ryder spoke, and his face was open and vulnerable.

“You’ll keep my nightmares at bay? I have to warn you, I’ll overstep all your boundaries.” His pointer finger traced my bare shoulder. “I love you. Never leave me, Saige. I don’t like who I was before you.”

His profession of love didn’t scare me. With how he said it, so solemnly, there wasn’t much else I could say. “I won’t, Ryder. You’re stuck with me now.”

His whole body shuddered, and his eyes closed tightly. “Hmm, if only we could physically make that happen. That would be heaven.”

“Super inconvenient, you mean.” I laughed. “We’d get sick of each other.”

His large hand squeezed my bare thigh. “Not possible.”

Suddenly, a thought came to me.

“Hey, I’m going to have to tell Maddox about this. I mean, about what happened last night,” I whispered. “Unless I can somehow hide it...”

I highly doubted I could. He read me too well and seemed to know more than I thought was possible.

Ryder coughed out a humourless chuckle. “He’s not stupid. But we should talk it over together. Especially now that we’re going to be around each other more often.”

“Oh, why is that?”

He tapped my nose, amusement reaching the crinkles around his eyes. “Because of you.”

SAIGE

Teleportation was growing on me. Knowing I didn't have to board a plane or go through TSA made me breathe out a deep sigh of relief. I could go anywhere in the time it took to snap my fingers.

Immortals weren't those mystical beings that my parent's reticence led me to believe. But their enhancements sure seemed like magic.

We landed just outside the door to Maddox's apartment.

"Can you teleport inside?" I asked. "It seems dangerous to have immortals capable of appearing anywhere they want."

He nodded. "I can, but only because the three of us aren't restricting anything from each other. But there are ways to control who can enter your claimed areas."

I took out my key and unlocked the door. "I guess it's more polite to not barge in without an invitation."

"Exactly."

Maddox appeared to be waiting for us. He was still dressed in his casual, deep blue clothes since it was barely morning. He took one look at Ryder before he crossed the distance and yanked me to his side.

"You're still on that shit," Maddox rumbled, all low and deep. "I thought you were long done. You said you'd stay away while you're all kinds of fucked up."

I pulled on his arm. "Maddox—"

“Don’t defend him.” His steely gaze met mine before he turned back to Ryder. “Have you lost your damn mind? You know how dangerous you are. You’ve always kept your word. That’s all you’re willing to do. Why stop now?”

Ryder remained silent, but I could see his fists bunched at his sides. His head was down like he was contrite, but he held his body way too tense.

“You know what you’re capable of. I can’t have you hurting her in your *state*.” Maddox spat out that last word.

“Well, *too fucking late*.” Ryder jerked his head to the side, his lips pulled back. He laughed shortly, which was a jeering sound. “You missed your chance to play the hero, Nicoli.”

“What did you say?” Maddox’s steely voice made me flinch, even though he wasn’t facing me. “Explain.”

They glared at each other, and Ryder vibrated with his fury. His reaction seemed extreme to what Maddox said, but they were still at odds with each other.

I had to do something. Ryder was still feeling the effects of the drugs he took, and he wasn’t exactly himself right now. “Hey—” I tried to reach for him, but Maddox held me back.

“It’s alright, Saige.” Ryder’s eyes barely flicked in my direction. “We need to hash this out.”

“Are you sure?” After our early morning, I felt more connected to him. He opened up to me and won my sympathy in the process. I didn’t want to see anything happen to either of these two.

Ryder inclined his head, smiling faintly. “Darling, I like hearing your concern.”

I could feel Maddox’s stare as I went to sit on the couch. But I was too focused on Ryder, who was shaking his shoulders out like he was ready for a fight. He caught my eye, and I shook my head at him.

He raised an eyebrow like *what can I do?*

“I want an explanation. Did you hurt her?” Maddox snarled.

Ryder tilted his head back, showing his sleek jawline as he worked his jaw. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? A reason for you to fuck me up for holding her attention.”

Maddox stalked forward until they were face to face. “I want what’s best for her, and you’re a mess. She doesn’t deserve your crap.”

I didn’t appreciate being talked about like I wasn’t in the room, but they had to work things out. I cared for both of them, and if they couldn’t get along...

Not possible.

They were close before, and I believed they could get back there again.

“You’re right.” Shadows crossed over Ryder’s face. “But I can’t hold myself back, even when I should. Look.” He paused before he stared right into Maddox’s eyes. “I fucked up last night. I... forced her.”

I braced myself, icy shock shooting through my system. I knew we couldn’t hide the truth, but I didn’t expect Ryder to lay it out so plainly.

In a blur of motion, Maddox’s arm flashed out and Ryder’s head snapped to a side with a sickening, crunching sound. He staggered back, taking large, unsteady steps with a hand against his rapidly reddening face. Before he could recover, Maddox’s hands snapped around his neck.

“Are you going to fight back?” Maddox taunted, breathing heavily. “If you can rape the girl you supposedly love, surely you can defend yourself.” Then his eyes opened wider and the veins in his arms bulged as he put in pressure. “*I could kill you.*”

Ryder’s body grew slack, his arms falling to his side.

I scrambled to my feet, my heart in my throat.

But Ryder shook his hand out and snapped his fingers, and a lethal, long knife appeared in his grip. With a forceful shove, Ryder tore himself out of Maddox’s grasp and a flash of silver brought the blade up against Maddox’s neck.

“I didn’t rape her.” Ryder’s low voice, through gritted teeth, sounded tortured.

I didn’t want to use that word between us, even though he did do it. It was awful, it felt good, and everything was just confusing all around.

But what he did was rape, and there was no excusing that fact.

Maddox, looking as cool as he could be with a knife to his neck, cracked his knuckles. “Are you sure, Belshaw? When you’re high and gone, you can’t control your shit. Don’t be delusional.”

Ryder’s arm shuddered, and the blade slipped, revealing the red, bloody wound on Maddox’s skin.

Maddox’s leg jerked up, and Ryder doubled over, letting out a hoarse curse of pain. He held his stomach, a long hiss escaping his lips.

“Stop it.” I strode over to Maddox and grabbed his arm. “Look at me, Maddox.” A menacing look of satisfaction danced over his face as he looked down at Ryder. “*Maddox.*”

When he turned to me, it was like a flip was switched. He dropped his barbaric stance and a sense of urgency swam in his eyes. “That bastard raped— fuck!” He ran a hand over his jaw. “Baby girl, tell me how to take care of you. I don’t know what you need.”

From his slumped position on the ground, Ryder’s devastating expression made my chest ache. “What Ryder did was wrong, but I can forgive him,” I whispered. “I want to.”

Maddox’s hands slid over my cheeks, his thumbs brushing over my lips. “Saige.”

“He shouldn’t have done it, but he didn’t mean to. Think about it, deep down.” I watched the emotions flash across his face. “Would he hurt me on purpose?”

“That isn’t the point,” Maddox growled. “He needs to do this. It’s like clockwork. I can’t risk you getting hurt when he needs to release whatever demons he can’t let go of.”

My mouth grew dry. I knew what Ryder said about using me as his release, but could he really be content with just that? Was I enough for him?

In the next second, Ryder was next to Maddox, and his hand landed hesitantly on my waist.

Maddox shifted, his eyes narrowing to slits, but he didn't make any moves.

Progress.

"I can give him what he needs," I said softly.

"Do you know what you're saying?" Maddox hissed, and his nails dug into my skin. "He ra—"

"I know what he did." I swallowed, the memories of last night clear and hazy at the same time. "It happened to *me*, so please. Just listen. I don't want this to mess things up between you two even more."

Ryder stepped in closer, making Maddox shoot him a menacing glare. "Last night... I fucked up. It was the result of everything coming together at the same time. Kaylee's anniversary, you and Alex flaunting Saige to my face... All those fucking emotions, I couldn't take it."

"And you think you can handle yourself now? What changed? Nothing."

"Everything changed," Ryder shot back, and he glanced at me, his gaze softening. "Saige and I cleared the air."

"Oh?" Maddox's hard stare fell on me once again.

His expectant look made me push away from him. "I don't need to tell you every facet of my life or my relationships," I huffed. "The details are private. But I'm fine, Mad. He was forceful with me, but by the end, I was an active participant."

And I asked him to do me the same way when I woke up.

My phone buzzed in my jean pocket, and I had to shimmy a bit to extract it. Skinny jeans sucked sometimes. Once I took it out, I realized the two immortals were watching me with identical hungry looks in their eyes.

I suddenly had a vision of us all together in one giant bed. My small frame under their large tan hands as they slid into my body... Hell, despite having just had sex, I felt so riled up, it was like I could feel their tongues running over my skin.

I sucked in a breath and whirled around so I could control my need to jump them both. The phone was still buzzing, and I answered the call. "Yes?"

"Saige." Alex's even-toned voice was like velvet to my ears.

"Oh, uh, hey, what's up?" I should've looked at caller ID so I didn't sound so unprepared.

"I want to take you out on Friday to a nice restaurant. Are you interested?"

I hadn't heard from Alex since that day we had banh mi. He was so calm compared to the other two of the Quorum, and I enjoyed his company. I was doing my best to forget his proposal, and I certainly wouldn't bring it up again. "Absolutely."

"I'll pick you up at your apartment."

After I agreed, I hung up the call.

"Saige." Ryder reached out to grasp my shoulders. "You should be careful with Alex." The muscles in his neck were tense and corded.

I kept forgetting about their enhanced hearing. "What do you mean?"

Maddox frowned. "What do you know, Belshaw?"

"I've been digging into Alex's research lately, hoping to find more secrets of his." Ryder drummed his fingers on his leg. "I should've done it long ago."

Maddox grunted, and his face shut down.

Ryder noticed my confused expression. "The main reason the Quorum is so broken apart is that Alex went behind our backs to cooperate with the human government. He acted like a one-man show and lied to us about it."

So it wasn't just because of Kaylee.

Maddox swiftly headed to the kitchen to grab his whiskey bottle. He took a couple of swallows before tossing it to Ryder. "The Duke has been fucking things up again?"

Instead of alcohol, I filled a glass full of water for myself.

We settled down in the living room. I shuffled my feet on the fluffy carpet, absorbing the warmth from the heated floors.

"All the torture enhancements we were experimenting with are now in action." Ryder leaned his elbows on his knees. "On humans and immortals."

"Passed testing, then?" Maddox ran his hand over his beard. "Odd that he wouldn't mention that to us. But it isn't a horrific offence."

"Torture enhancements? What do you mean?" I asked, looking between the two of them. "Like weaponized enhancements?"

Maddox nodded. "We don't release those to the public, but it's on hand for us to use if needed."

That made sense. I'd heard that the government's classified research teams had created technology that was a decade more advanced than we know. In the name of national defence, they would surely put their secret weaponry to use.

"That's not the issue." Ryder rolled his shoulders before staring at Maddox with hard eyes. "I have it on good authority that Alex has grown particularly... attached to one of them."

"Which one?" At Ryder's silence, Maddox sucked in air through his teeth. "*Fuck.*"

My phone lit up with a buzz. It was Alex again, with a text indicating the time and details for our date tomorrow.

Maddox's hand curled around my knee. "Saige, I don't want you seeing him."

"The enhancement is that bad?" I didn't want to stay away from Alex, but I had to get all the information. There was still so much I didn't know about their world. "Explain it to me."

They exchanged a glance, and my irritation rose.

“I won’t follow what you say if you don’t tell me anything,” I said. “You know that.”

“The safe,” Maddox barked. After Ryder jogged out of the room, he ran his palm higher up my thigh until he palmed my pussy over my pants. “Normally, I like some fight from you, but you have to listen this time.”

I snatched his wrist. Even though I couldn’t get him to budge, I applied pressure to make my point. “Maddox, I’m not some simpering maiden. Let me come to my own conclusions so I understand how you want to protect me.”

His dark, unfathomable eyes glinted at my words, and he withdrew his hand. I missed his warmth immediately, but I bit the inside of my cheek and held myself still.

Ryder came back into the room with a brown leather briefcase. He knelt down next to me and took out a particular glass bottle from an entire row of them. He sat on my armrest and handed it to me.

After being around these immortals for so long, including my stints at Ryder’s place in Oregon, I’d seen a lot of these tiny vials of enhancements. This one was noticeably different from the rest because the liquid shined with a gorgeously tinted gold shimmer. It reminded me of the mixtures of glitter and clear glue I used to make as a kid.

“What does this one do?” The liquid inside was iridescent and caught the light. “It’s so shiny.”

Maddox snatched it out of my hand, and his large palm swallowed the bottle up. “I don’t want this anywhere near you.”

“Then you’ll need to get rid of Alex.” Ryder stretched and twisted his neck. “I’m not entirely against it.”

I slapped his chest. “No getting rid of anyone.”

“Anything for you, little fairy.” He rewarded me with a lazy grin, and his finger trailed over the shell of my ear.

My lips parted as my sensitive skin reacted to his skilled touch, and I clenched my thighs together.

Ryder dipped his head down like he was going to kiss me, and his eyelids lowered as he zeroed in on my lips. “Sweetheart,” he murmured.

Oh, I loved pet names...

“Can you two fucking stop?” Maddox barked from my side.

I flushed and pulled back from Ryder. I rubbed my palms over my legs, trying to cool down. “Sorry.” I glanced at the enhancement he still held. “What’s so special about that?”

Maddox held it up to eye level as if he could read the answers from the liquid inside. Then he placed it on the table.

He was stalling, and as my frustration rose at his elusiveness, I reached for the bottle. “Maddox.”

“It allows the user to muddle their target’s mind,” Ryder cut in. “It hijacks the victim’s nervous system and they lose their free will.” He gave it a disgusted look. “They become a walking husk.”

Losing free will? A walking husk?

My hand shook as I carefully pulled my arm back. “You guys created this enhancement?” I was trying hard not to judge them for creating something like this. Given the consequences, it could be a devastating weapon, albeit on a small scale.

“Technically, Alex developed it in his labs,” Ryder said.

Maddox shot him a hard look. “We all signed off on it. And took part in the testing. It’s extremely effective on humans and has a minor effect on immortals. But the effects are temporary.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “Did you use it a lot? During the testing period?” The bottle sat innocuously on the table. This was an enhancement that stripped people of their right to choose. It was oh-so dangerous and scary, and I subconsciously dug my nails into my arm.

Like me, Ryder's eyes were fixated on the bottle. "No, there are more fun ways to get the results I want. Using the enhancement makes it quick and boring."

Maddox slid his hand over mine, untangling my tight grip on my forearm. "It's been a long time for me since there hasn't been the need for it. I never tried using the full dose. Small doses just make the target extremely susceptible to suggestions. It's only when you go in hard that you gain complete control over someone."

And that bottle held a full dose. "What's this got to do with Alex? It's concerning that he likes using it so much?"

The two men's faces immediately darkened.

Maddox swore under his breath. "No."

"Alex made it one of his permanent enhancements." Ryder placed the bottle back and shut the briefcase with a loud snap. His gaze on me was unreadable. "And fairly recently. You struggle to control your new permanent enhancements well, so people around you feel the effects."

I swallowed, remembering the overwhelming emotions I felt from Alex. Was it all because of his enhancement?

No, it can't be. I felt the same way towards Maddox and Alex, right? But everything felt so much more intense with Alex...

All my conflicting emotions were sending me into a tailspin, and I felt like the room was collapsing on me. The only thing that kept me grounded was Maddox's thumb running over the back of my hand, and Ryder's steady gaze.

"So you two have been affected too?"

They shook their heads.

"We're immune," Maddox said. "When it was being developed, we needed to make sure it wouldn't be used against us."

Still, I had that lingering hope inside me. "Although I can be influenced, everything I've felt around Alex could've been

real, right?" I hated that my emotions could've been played with, intentional or not. I needed their reassurance. "*Right?*"

Maddox nodded slowly, and he leaned his shoulder against mine. "Yes, Saige, but that's the thing. We can't know for sure."

MADDOX

Saige was adamant about going on her scheduled date with Alex. We couldn't persuade her out of it, and frustration gnawed away at me.

She believed that Alex wouldn't use the enhancement on her intentionally.

"Keep an eye on her." Ryder shoved his hands into his pockets.

I drew in a deep breath of the evening air. "You don't need to tell me. And it's not like you won't be following both of them on their date."

We were on the terrace at Ryder's mansion. I didn't know exactly why I chose to follow Ryder back here after Saige went to bed. This wasn't my favourite place to be. I felt like I was made for city life.

All the green forests and mountains reminded me of the wildness of mother nature. A part of me enjoyed the thought of the more barbaric side of humanity when peace and civil society hadn't taken over yet. I liked to embrace my physicality and get my hands dirty.

Ryder wasn't that different, but he also had a sadistic streak that ran deep into his psyche.

"You couldn't do much to me with Saige in the room," he remarked dryly. "Well, here I am. Here's your chance."

I pushed away from the ledge and narrowed my eyes. "I thought you'd beat yourself up over it, not wait for me to do

the dirty work.”

My fingers twitched as I imagined completely knocking him out. I missed the feeling. I hadn't been able to use my fists as much lately, because the rumours of mutiny amongst my immortals had required harsher displays of aggression.

But today wouldn't be the day I indulged myself. Mostly because I knew how their evening went down, and Saige didn't lie about how she felt.

I had to see the night through her eyes, so I secretly used enhancements on her. The first to make sure she was really alright, and the second to make her forget I did anything to her.

From the tracker under her skin to this? If she ever found out, she may want to get rid of me for good.

That shit isn't happening.

“I never understood the depths of your attachment to Kaylee,” I told him. “It baffled me.”

At the mention of his sister, Ryder stilled. “Don't start, Maddox.”

I held my hand up. “Let me speak.”

He bristled but stayed silent. He fixated his gaze on a point in the distance, pointedly refusing to look at me.

No immortals around us had clung to their past relatives as Ryder had. They got used to the loss and moved on, and nowadays, most stuck to forming lasting relationships with fellow immortals.

Kaylee's death captured Ryder the way past enemies of Pendulum obsessed over revenge.

“Feelings fade in time. That's just how it works. Yet you held on like she died yesterday. It's been *centuries*, Ryder.” I exhaled and looked up at the sky. “I thought time would give you another perspective and you'd let it go. But then I've been watching you waste away on all types of shit every fucking year.”

Ryder dropped his head and hung his forearms over the railing.

This conversation wasn't new. But I had a feeling that it was different this time.

All because of her.

"Now I have Saige." I smiled ruefully, imagining her upturned face in my mind. It wasn't anything sexual, yet my cock stirred to life. "And I get it."

"What exactly do you get?" Ryder was expressionless, but his jaw tightened like he was gritting his teeth.

"Caring about someone so much you die inside thinking about them gone." I sounded like a lovesick fool, and I awaited his condescending remark.

Instead, he exhaled, and his shoulders slumped. "Sounds about right. When I haven't seen her for a couple of days, I dream about her scent and her voice. It seeps into my daydreams too."

"That's..." I tried to pinpoint a word. "Intense." And codependent. Through my informants, I knew he stalked her, teleporting out of Oregon almost daily. It seemed to be a burning need to see her rather than a simple check of her safety like I'd previously thought.

He stretched his fingers apart and studied the palm of his hand. "Intense, but I like it."

Message, My Liege.

Pierce's voice rang through my mind. We were now both so used to speaking telepathically that sometimes we didn't bother talking out loud in the same room. *Any updates?*

We've captured Hannah and two of her men. Ready for you to deal with when you get back.

Finally.

I'd held off on killing Hannah until we could round up all the others who were under her thumb. Her choice to blatantly

flaunt Pendulum's name as an excuse for her murderous revenge was stupid.

There was no point in keeping her alive.

Heat leaked into my blood as adrenaline rushed through me. The reputation of Pendulum mattered to me, of course, and making sure I controlled my immortals did too.

I couldn't wait to get my hands on her.

"Need any help?" Ryder asked casually, his eyes glinting with a savage craving.

I tilted my head at him, noting his faint smirk. A flicker appeared near his hand as his sharp knife appeared and disappeared out of existence.

He was riled up, and he promised to use Saige as an outlet now. Even though I accepted Ryder's place in her life, I wasn't going to encourage it.

I jerked my head towards the door. "Let's go."

SAIGE

T*his art film is beyond boring.*

It was soul-suckingly and miserably tedious. I could think of so many adjectives to describe it because the plot didn't make any sense and my mind was wandering.

Perhaps I just wasn't sophisticated enough to understand the symbolism behind the seemingly random images and flashing shades of grey.

I glanced around the theatre, noticing how engrossed the surrounding people were. In the corner of my eye, I could see that Alex was studying the screen intently, just like most of the others in the theatre.

I slumped down lower into my seat and shut my eyes. At least there was soft classical music in the background. The sound got quieter as I gradually dozed off.

After some time, I finally got a sense of my bearings again. I felt something brush against my cheek lightly.

"Want to get out of here?" Alex asked.

I sucked in a breath at the huskiness in his voice and the tingling warmth he left in my ear. "Yes."

His soft smile made the edges of his eyes crinkle, and I found myself once again mesmerized by how perfect he was. His proportions were stunning, and he was the prince I'd imagined as a kid.

But the enhancement...

I looked away from him. This was happening a lot today, from the moment he picked me up from Maddox's apartment. After what Maddox and Ryder revealed, I didn't know what to think.

At the very least, he wouldn't hurt me.

Unfortunately, I couldn't control my reactions. A part of me was unsure about him, and I wondered how much I could believe my feelings. He had the power to make me want him, but did he use it?

Even if he says he didn't, could I believe what he said? He could sway me so easily...

My head pounded, and I grabbed onto the armrest of my seat as I stood up to catch my balance. This whole situation was complicated.

Damn these immortals.

Alex slung my purse over his shoulder and took my hand. He led me out of the theatre and out to where our van was waiting.

"Hi Carl," I said to Alex's driver as we sat down. He was a silent man and knowing his job, I wondered what secrets he'd learned just from listening passively.

Carl nodded his head in greeting before turning his attention to the road.

"So, where are we going?" I asked.

"Wait." Alex leaned over me abruptly. "Let me."

I froze in my seat as his body brushed over mine. His side profile was devastatingly handsome, from his sharp nose to the arch of his mouth. He was concentrating on something other than me, and that was a good look on him. My gaze dropped to the hollow of his throat, and I gulped.

He pulled my seatbelt around me and met my eyes when it clicked.

We were so close to each other, and it was like I could see myself reflected in his pools of azure blue.

His lips parted as he breathed out, and the tiny movements of his tongue had me stupefied. It was strangely alluring how even the tiniest movements of his seemed seductive when he wasn't trying.

How many women has he enthralled like this?

Nameless faces of blondes and brunettes floated into my mind, women of all shapes and sizes. They wanted him badly, lusted over him, and were waiting for the moment his eyes strayed from mine.

My anger tore through my veins, and I felt a deep, visceral level of hate. The roaring in my ears made me want to scream, and I was burning up inside.

I couldn't look away from him, couldn't let anyone else have him. There must be a way to lock him to me, and I'd do anything to make it happen.

He can only be mine, mine, mine, mi—

Alex drew himself away from me, and his jaw clenched. He grabbed onto the headrest in front of him, and the spongy material gave way to his clawed fingers. His rigid muscles vibrated with tension, and he angled his body away from mine.

I blinked, and suddenly I felt exhausted. I slumped into the leather car seat, wanting it to absorb all my fatigue. Lately, I haven't been sleeping well.

Alex had his phone in his hand. "Sorry, Saige. I have to reply to an email. Is that okay?"

I nodded. "Go right ahead."

Time ticked by, and I embraced the silence.

"To the restaurant, Your Grace?" Carl asked as the traffic picked up.

"Yes."

I stared out the window for a minute longer until the words registered. "Wait, so soon? It's still early." I noted the time from my phone. "Dinner is two hours away." Maybe he knew

someone and we could get a table early. Admittedly, I wasn't feeling hungry yet.

He looked over at me. "We can try the appetizers and taste test the wine menu. I know the chef."

I nodded and tried to hide my yawn. Hopefully, I could stay alert and not look rude in front of the chef. I wasn't looking forward to pleasantries, but that was my awkward side that I wanted to shake off.

"Stop here, Carl," Alex murmured.

After we got out of the van, I frowned. "Where are we?" We were standing in front of a grey nondescript building with a set of stairs leading down to a black door. It sure didn't look like a restaurant.

Wordlessly, Alex led me into the building. The inside was the opposite of the exterior. There were plush red carpets and soft tinkering music. Everything was clean and classy, but it was also empty. All I could see was a hallway with doors on either side and several employees stationed around.

"Mr. Moreau," the man at the counter bowed at us. He was wearing a uniform that reminded me of a flight attendant, complete with a bow around his neck. "Wendy will take you to your room."

Wendy, a short blonde woman, took us to a door down the hallway. "Please let me know if you need any assistance."

When we got inside, I glanced around. It looked like a furnished apartment, complete with a kitchen, living room, and a giant bed. A large desk with a laptop took over the side wall. "I thought we were going to dinner."

"Occasionally, I stay here when I want a quiet space in the city. How about you rest your eyes for a bit before we head to the restaurant?" He nudged me over to the bed. "Sleep."

I slid under the covers and felt myself sink into the soft mattress. "Thank you, this is a good idea."

"Anything for you." He slid a palm over my forehead, brushing away my stray hairs. "I'll wake you up when it's time

to go.”

When I opened my eyes again, the clock on the opposite wall showed me that only twenty minutes had passed. That was a standard length of time for a nap, right? “Alex?”

He glanced over at me from the couch. He had the computer on his lap.

The fact that I was in bed while he was sitting there innocuously was messing with my head. “I can’t sleep.”

“Do you want a glass of milk?” He reached for his phone.

“No.” I drew the covers higher, covering my chin. “Can you come over here?”

His eyebrows furrowed, but he complied. When he got to the side of the bed, I slipped my hand out, and he took it.

I bit my lip and yanked as hard as I could.

He didn’t move.

“Umm.” I thought the element of surprise would allow me to pull him on top of me. “Join me?”

Alex swallowed as he shifted in closer. “Are you sure?” His inquiring eyes asked me, *You know what this means, right?*

He didn’t move until I nodded, and slowly, he interlaced our fingers together.

“Let me inside of you,” Alex whispered. His other hand slid over my body. His touch was slow and worshipping, lingering on my hips. “Can I have you, mon amour?”

His French endearment always made my stomach flutter with warmth. “Yes, please, Alex.”

I rolled onto my stomach to watch him undress. His muscles rippled as he stretched to take his shirt off. He wasn’t exactly a bulky man, but his shoulders were wide and he had faint abs that looked perfect on him.

When he saw me watching, he flashed me a soft smile. “I’ll get to you.”

Huh?

Alex sat on the bed, drew the covers off of me, and ran a hand up my bare leg. He gently slid my dress up my body and over my head. I sat up and he carefully undid my bra. He dipped his head to kiss me as he slid the straps down my arms.

Our tongues danced, and I sucked on his bottom lip. We separated for barely a breath before our mouths pressed together again.

“Thanks for all that.” It felt awkward to thank him for taking my clothes off, but I felt compelled to do so anyway. I could see my dress folded up at the foot of the bed. These immortals had strange and useful abilities.

He grazed his lips along my cheekbone. When he drew back, his gaze was intense and serious. “My pleasure.”

My panties were still on, and he ran his finger over the waistband. His thumb brushed over my tattoo, and I waited for him to comment on it. A scrutinizing expression flashed over his face.

“Everything okay?” I murmured.

Alex responded by tenderly peeling my panties down my legs. The scrap of material disappeared into his fist, and he stared straight at me as he tossed it to the side.

I didn’t know what it was about him that made simple actions like that so damn attractive. My lips still tingled from the ghost of his kiss.

We were both lying on our sides, facing each other. He wrapped his leg around me and pressed his cock to my entrance.

My hands curled around his broad shoulders.

I want to always look at him like this.

He sucked in a sharp inhale when he filled me up completely, and through hooded eyes, I drank in the pleasure that captured his beautiful features.

His startlingly blue eyes flashed as he held still. “You embody my every fantasy.”

“Alex,” I whispered, a little breathless from the sensations he made me feel as he rolled his hips. The slight changes in angle made me moan. “Oh...”

“You like that?” he murmured, moving slower and more deliberately.

When Alex dragged his cock out of me, it was like I could feel every bump and vein. The slow pace made everything so intense and my pussy grew wetter. My oversensitive nipples brushed over his chest as we moved together, and my heightened sensitivity sparked shivers all over me.

I wanted to say something, but the sounds that came out were only whines and whimpers. I hooked my arms around his neck, tugging him in, and I ran my teeth over his neck. It was so much, and I was nearing my peak. “Can you move faster?”

His arm circled my waist, securing me against him. “I thought you wouldn’t ask.” With a low groan, he drove into me with renewed energy.

It only took a couple of thrusts before I cried out, my orgasm tearing through me in sweet agony. I surrendered to the addictive rush of emotions.

“My turn,” Alex said softly. With a grunt, he urged his cock into my pussy as far as he could go. My trembling pussy gave way with little effort, and his satisfying groan reverberated in my ears.

I smoothed my palms over the expanse of his back until he lifted his head to meet my eyes. His cum dripped out of my pussy as he ran his fingers through my tangled hair.

“You’re my gift.” His gaze shone with emotion. “I’m so lucky to have you, Saige.”

My heart warmed at the dazed tone of his voice. It was so unlike the composed man I knew. “I feel the same way about you.”

Alex placed a hand on my lower back and gently nudged me to his left, so he walked closer to the curb.

We were walking to the restaurant. I was reluctant to tear myself away from the bed and that room, but we needed to get going for our dinner plans.

As we continued down the sidewalk, I noticed a lone man across the street staring at me. His attention made me walk closer to Alex. There was something about his expression that sounded alarm bells in my mind.

“Hello little lady,” the man jeered. “You think you can handle this?” He made an obscene gesture towards his crotch.

I ducked my head and tried to ignore him. If my friends were in my position, some of them would yell something back, but I didn’t want to risk escalation.

“Your ass is too damn nice. Come sit on my face!”

I flushed. It was silly how someone else’s crude actions made me feel so freaking embarrassed. Since I wasn’t paying attention, I ran into Alex, who’d stopped in his tracks.

He slowly turned to look at the man, and I noticed his body’s slight quiver only because I was near him.

“Shut the hell up.” Alex’s eyes flashed, and the low timbre of his voice reflected his silent fury. “Learn some respect.”

The man started to reply, but he abruptly crumpled to the ground, his hands clawing at his neck. His mouth opened in agony and a horrifying choking sound escaped his lips. He kicked at the concrete sidewalk as he struggled for breath.

Alex grabbed my hand and tugged me to his side. He started walking off in long strides, and I had no choice but to follow.

I looked back. The man had collapsed entirely and now lay unconscious on the ground. Two men in navy suits appeared next to him, heaved his arms around their shoulders, and dragged him away.

Those were probably Alex's men.

I followed Alex into a fancy-looking restaurant. We stopped at the reception area, and he turned around to face me.

Alex gazed down at me, and the muscles in his neck tensed. His tight grip was making my hand numb. Finally, he sighed and pulled me into his arms.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked him, letting myself drown in his warmth. I pressed my cheek to his chest, relaxing at the calming steadiness of his heartbeat.

"Death."

I stilled, wrapping my hand around his arm and peering up at him. "Is there something wrong with you?"

He smiled, tracing my lips with his finger. "It's about you. What would happen after you die."

I tried not to retreat, not to pull away from him. I was a human, and death was inevitable for me. One day I'd be gone and he would continue on. Same with Ryder and Maddox.

They'll find someone new.

That idea tasted so bitter that I wanted to curse and spit it out.

My selfishness knew no bounds around these men.

SAIGE

I spun the linguini around my fork. I wasn't sure about trying shrimp scampi, but it sure tasted lovely.

Alex ordered a creamy ravioli and allowed me to steal several bites from his plate.

That definitely made me like him more.

"Your Grace," I said, testing the words on my tongue. Whenever I remembered his title, I felt like I was living in a historical romance novel.

When I looked back at Alex, his eyes had darkened. "My title sounds especially nice when you say it, my lady," he murmured.

His gaze caused tingles on my bare skin and butterflies to erupt in my stomach. I had to look away, and I focused on carefully buttering my roll.

"Do you eat a lot of pasta?" I asked lamely.

"Certainly. It's one of the easier meals to make. What about you?"

"No, but I probably should stock up my pantry with it," I admitted. "My parents loved making lasagna though. They're superb cooks."

"A good team even in the kitchen," Alex mused, sipping his wine. He studied the red liquid like there was a hidden message, the delicate stem of the glass suspended between his two slender fingers.

I took the time to stare abashedly at him. The flickering candlelight cast shadows on his sharp features. Alex seemed so put together, refined and restrained. I twisted my napkin between my fingers, imagining what he'd look like just a little more... wild.

I got a taste earlier, but it wasn't enough.

"Hey, look who it is!"

The boisterous, cheery voice made me swivel in my seat. But I didn't need to. The grey-haired, tall man in a clean-cut suit came right up to our table, and Alex stood to shake hands with him.

"Nice to see you, Phil." Alex smiled. "How have you been?"

Phil patted his shoulder in a friendly gesture and gestured for Alex to take a seat again. "Good, good. I was wondering whether I should disturb your evening."

"It's not an issue," Alex immediately said.

"And who is this?" Phil offered his hand to me too. "You're looking beautiful tonight."

His compliment felt genuine and not sleazy at all. But before I could reply, Alex cut in smoothly.

"This is Saige, my girlfriend."

My head jerked towards him. *Girlfriend?* Despite liking him and, well, sleeping with him, there were so many questions between us still. He was still a mystery, and we didn't really discuss our relationship.

Alex dipped his voice lower and stared resolutely at Phil. "She's human."

"Oh!" Phil threw his head back and laughed, and the ringing sound was loud enough for patrons at other tables to look over. Once they saw who was laughing, they looked away. "Finally, Moreau. We've been waiting to see your next steps. This would squash the rumours, but only if you sell it well."

What are they talking about?

The server placed my order of tiramisu in front of me. I thanked him absentmindedly as I attempted to understand the conversation happening before me.

“They’ve been having me followed by investigators,” Alex murmured. “I’ve done my part. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

Phil wiped the smile off his face in favour of a calculated look. “Good.” He turned to leave but hesitated, a hand coming up to caress his chin. “We’re having a dinner meeting in the first private room on the left. If your lady is so inclined, you two can join us.”

Alex nodded, not looking over at me. “Sounds good.”

I bristled and tried not to show my displeasure that he didn’t ask for my opinion. The tiramisu fell over onto its side when I stabbed my fork into it.

A major problem with my last ex was that he changed when he was around other people. Often he disregarded my thoughts to appear cool and “alpha.”

“Go on ahead,” Alex told him. “We’ll finish up dessert first.”

Phil gave us a two-finger salute before leaving.

I focused my attention on tearing apart my dessert, and I could feel Alex’s gaze on me.

“You’re upset.”

I dropped my fork, and it clattered on the plate. “Wow, how can you tell?” When he continued to study me, evidently waiting for me to elaborate, I let out a heavy sigh. “This is our first official date, Alex. Now we’re going to a dinner meeting? You should’ve asked me first.”

He nodded slowly. “I apologize.”

“Whatever.” I sighed, not feeling like eating the dessert. I stood and tossed the napkin onto the table. “Are you done? Let’s not leave them waiting.”

I may be overreacting, but I couldn't control my emotions. And I didn't want to.

When we approached the room Phil mentioned, Alex drew me to a side.

Was he going to explain himself?

“Saige, don't say anything, okay? If they ask you anything, let me talk.”

I stared at him. “Why?”

“Those people aren't my friends. Since they work closely with the government, they're potential partnerships of the Quorum.” He paused. “You know about the issues we're facing. We agreed to a new plan, and it starts here. You might hear things that make you uncomfortable.”

Maddox was a lot busier lately, and I knew the root of it came from the issues with the human government. He hid his stress from me and redirected all our conversations away from work.

If this would resolve any issues, I wouldn't be the one to mess it up. “Okay. I get it.”

The door opened, and a woman popped her head out. “I thought I heard you, Alex. Come in.”

He held the door for me, and we entered the room.

There was a long dinner table in the middle of the round room, with six people sitting at it. Two chairs side-by-side at the end of the table were empty, and we took our seats. The others stood and came around to Alex to shake his hand.

I scanned the strangers and jolted when I spotted someone I recognized. And he was smiling at me.

Chester Winsler. The creep I met at Cinders.

If he was representative of the rest of them at the table, it was going to be a long night.

“It was surprising to hear that you were here tonight,” the black-haired woman who was sitting at the far end of the table

said. “You know the schedule of our meetings, and you still didn’t come to say hello.”

“Lucinda.” Chester rolled his eyes. “He has his lady love here, of course he’d forget about us.”

Lucinda’s hawk-like eyes settled on me. “Of course,” she echoed.

I offered her a polite smile and nothing else.

The door opened and a server came in with two mugs. Everyone in the room had wine to pair with their meals.

“I know you already finished dinner, but how about a coffee?” Phil gestured to us, and the server set the drinks in front of me and Alex. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” I said, wrapping my hand around the mug.

The others at the table were talking amongst themselves, and Alex tapped his fingers on the table as he listened in.

“They don’t have plans to stop going after the immortals,” a man in a navy suit said. “There are rumours they’ll ramp up the attacks and capture more for research.”

Phil sipped from his glass of wine. “Naturally, we can’t let that happen.”

My mind flashed to war crimes I’d learned about in school, where innocent civilians were experimented on without consent. My stomach churned at the idea, at the inhumanity of it all.

“I still have reservations about Moreau’s motivation to work with us,” Lucinda announced. Her stare focused on Alex. “And I don’t know what you’re trying to do with your little girlfriend.”

“She’s none of your concern,” Alex replied abruptly. He clasped his hands together and looked at each person in turn. “My desire to cooperate with you has never wavered. Things have changed recently, and now the Quorum is in agreement too.”

Many of them shared glances at this revelation.

“What changes?” a woman in a frilly white blouse asked, and her gaze darted at me for a second. “Is it—”

“Either you want to move forward with our plans or you don’t.” Alex narrowed his eyes, and the woman shrunk back. “If you help us eliminate the threat, we will fulfill our end of the bargain.”

“Will you, though?” Chester cut in, his friendly demeanour disappearing. “You all haven’t turned anyone in a century.”

Turn?

Alex reached for my hand and held our clasped hands on top of the maroon tablecloth. “I’m not so averse to the idea anymore. Whatever to stay alive and keep the people around me safe.”

“Ah.” Lucinda noticeably relaxed, although her smile appeared a tad bit too tight.

I stared at our joint hands, my mouth dry. As I tried to pull back, his grip didn’t loosen. When I glanced at his face, he was looking at the others.

This showmanship made me feel... used. I thought back to all our moments in the past weeks, and somehow those memories felt tainted. Especially knowing about his new enhancement.

“They say they want equality at the same time they codify the term ‘anomaly’ into the law.” Chester scoffed. “Hypocritical bastards, all of them.”

The man sitting near the head of the table slapped his hand on the table. “Most humans can’t see the big picture. They’re too small-minded, too emotional. Our country is run by stupid idiots who deserve everything they’re about to get.”

Phil finished chewing his bite of salmon. “I just had a meeting with the Head of Anomaly Affairs, as they call it. You’re not wrong. We could wipe them all out and there would be no loss.”

The others at the table tittered.

“Cheers to that.” Glasses clinked.

Alex smiled and followed suit.

What the hell am I hearing? And what are these reactions?

I was gaping at them now. Desperately hoping I was having a nightmare, I pinched my leg.

They were depicting a casual hatred towards humans. Throwing it out there like it was nothing. And from what I could garner, everyone here was human except for Alex. They saw themselves as better because they sided with immortals.

What a sickening idea.

“You sure your girlfriend isn’t one of *them*?” Lucinda sneered.

“Careful.” Alex stared her down. “You’re human, too.”

“Not for long.” Lucinda squared her shoulders. “Or are you reneging on our deal?”

“I’d do much worse if you disrespect Saige.” Alex’s voice was low and steely. “Don’t you forget it.”

She swallowed, her face reddening.

“Oh, Lucinda.” Chester chortled. “Not every human outside our circle would work against us. Don’t let your bias show just because your husband is a government mouthpiece.”

Phil laughed as well, all while leaning back in his chair and staring at me.

Alex stood and walked over to the far end of the table. He caught the attention of the few people who haven’t spoken up yet, and they became engrossed in a conversation.

He didn’t look at me once for the next hour.

As I continued to sit there throughout the night, I felt like everything around me was blurry. I tried to tune out their cackling voices. Occasionally I’d hear Alex speak. Sometimes he’d snap at them.

He stayed level-headed during the most contentious debates, but when I was mentioned, he lost his cool.

They revealed nothing about their supposed plans to “take down” the government, but they showed me just how much they hated humans.

Or, at least, the humans who weren't *them*. Them being humans who were well acquainted with immortals and wanted to be them.

I felt like I was at a dinner party celebrating ignorant hatred. The whole atmosphere of sneering and dirty looks felt disgusting, and I was losing respect for Alex the longer I breathed the air in the room.

But this couldn't be him, right? Before tonight, he was more than polite to anyone I'd seen him around.

I watched him closely as time passed, memorizing the minuscule changes in his expressions. Either he was an impeccable actor or I was seeing his true self.

Yes, he defended me, but he wouldn't defend humans in general. And I certainly didn't fall in the same category as the humans in this room.

Who was Alexander Moreau? Someone who found my nature despicable? He warned me about what I would hear at the dinner, but I didn't think it would be this bad.

I could barely register us getting up and heading to the door. There could have been a farewell exchange, but probably not directed towards me.

This feeling of invisibility made all the emotions of the evening want to burst out of my chest.

It was late, and the streets were quiet. We stood on the curb as we waited for the car to show up.

I hugged myself, rubbing my palms over my bare forearms. I only brought a shawl because I wanted my outfit to look nice. Given the night I had, it was a mistake.

Alex started to take off his jacket, but I shook my head sharply.

“Who even were those people?” I asked stiffly. “How will they help the Quorum? They’re human.” I had a vague idea, but I wanted to hear his explanation.

Are the people influencing my government really so ignorant?

“The less you know, the safer you’ll be.”

I choked on a dry laugh. “A little too late, isn’t it? I sat through all that crap.”

He had his hands shoved into his fancy pant pockets, but now he stepped toward me, a hand reaching out.

“Alex.” I moved back. I was still hearing the echoes of all the hate I’d listened to over the past few hours. “You spouted all that bullshit I heard from them. Do you hate humans so much?” I remembered how he called me his girlfriend and how they reacted to me. “Are you using me to make some sort of point?”

He looked behind us quickly, like he was worried someone was listening in. “I needed to do it.”

“Why?”

“You think this is easy?” Alex shook his head and started to agitatedly pace back and forth in front of me. His sombre eyes clung to my face. “I don’t want to hurt you. But we need their cooperation to help us infiltrate the government and solve their animosity against immortals for good. It would take too many enhancements to control them for a long time.”

I understood that. However, the tone of the dinner was so dehumanizing, making the whole charade seem much more than just a way to help immortals.

“I’m human, Alex. Okay, there is a greater good, some greater purpose. Fantastic. But seeing you there, saying all that stupid ignorance, made me want to vomit. You play the part so convincingly. In fact, you all do. You’re making enemies out of people who don’t know any better. People like me.”

Alex stared at me, his jaw working. “Are you saying us immortals shouldn’t protect ourselves?”

“No.” I knew the position they were in and how there was violence on both sides. The result was going to be bloody, I could feel it. “I just—I wish you can achieve your goals without being so fucking demeaning.”

A drop of rain fell on the tip of my nose, and I booked a car with my phone. Tonight was so exhausting, and I felt so out of place the entire night.

I didn't want to face Alex anymore.

He wasn't saying anything back, merely standing there with all his secrets hidden behind a deadpan look.

I wanted him to show some emotion, and I wanted everything to go back to what we were before today.

“Ryder told us about your new permanent enhancement, and I didn't want to believe you would manipulate me. But after tonight”—I shook my head, my mouth twisting grimly—“it's not so far-fetched.”

My hands shook as I forced my question through my lips. I needed to know the truth, but I desperately ached for a certain answer. “Did you make me feel this way about you?” I asked in a low voice. “Did you use whatever crummy enhancement to force me to want you?”

He immediately stopped, his face shutting down. His exhale shuddered through his frame, and his shoulders hunched over. “You didn't just say that,” he whispered chillingly.

“So you hadn't lied to me at all since we'd met?” I shot back at him. “How much can I believe?”

Alex adjusted the collar of his shirt. “This isn't the place to talk about this.”

That's an admission of guilt if I'd ever heard one.

My vision grew hazy, and I barely noticed the car I'd called for pull up to the curb.

I hated him at that moment because he did something awful. He made me doubt my ability to read someone. He took

my trust in him, my belief that he was a good person, and broke it.

Maybe I wasn't that capable of judging someone's character after all. He had decades to perfect the craft of lying, after all.

It was frightening how easy it was for him to fit in at the dinner table. Or was the man I knew the facade? Did I know him at all?

After getting out of the cab, I stumbled back to Maddox's apartment. I slammed the door shut, and even though there was no way I was strong enough to impact the walls, I felt like the room was shaking. I crumbled right there, my legs folding out underneath me.

I wasn't a crier. I wouldn't cry. Not for him.

Right?

In my daze, I didn't notice the footsteps that stopped right outside my periphery. Maddox gingerly picked me up, and I rested my head against the curve of his neck.

He ran me a hot bath with lavender scents which soothed my aching muscles. His large hands patted my body down with a towel before he gently dried my hair with a blow dryer.

We lay in bed, our bodies curled up against each other.

"I'm sad," I said.

"You don't have to tell me what happened."

I sighed. "You'll find out anyway."

He didn't deny that.

"I'm confused and losing trust in Alex." That was all I felt like sharing. "He's too secretive and too good at pretending."

Maddox had a pensive look on his face.

"You mentioned he loves power, and that he might want it more than he cares about me. I see it now." I wrapped my arm around his waist, relishing the feeling of his muscular torso. Slowly but surely, I'd been learning to depend on him.

“What you’ll never get from Alex that I can promise from me is honesty.” Maddox ran a finger down my jaw, “You can call me immoral, a murderer, but a liar I’m not. This is who I am, and this is who I’m offering you. No pretences.”

I felt myself relax from his words. “Then tell me this. Do you need help from a group of humans to solve your problems with the government? I thought you were, uh, serial killing.”

“Alex suggested a more diplomatic approach, so we’re switching things up now. He’s been forming good relationships with powerful people who can influence the government.” Maddox shifted in closer to me. “They want change too, so it’ll be mutually beneficial.”

I thought back to the people I’d met tonight, and my mood soured even further. “They were assholes, talking badly about humans all night.”

“Is that what’s affecting your mood?”

I exhaled loudly, staring up at the ceiling. “Humans don’t deserve harm, even if the government is close-minded.” I smiled ruefully. “I understand the fear. Faced with you immortals, we humans are lesser. It’s obvious why, because we were your baseline and you built upon it.”

Suddenly Maddox was on top of me, his face hovering over mine. “Don’t you say that again, Saige. You’re not less than anyone. Alex let others make you feel like crap. Don’t let a shitty person bring you down.”

The truth smacked me in the face as he continued speaking.

“How you treat others who society deems lesser says something about you. When you can get away with it without repercussions, how will you act? Classist bullshit is rife in Alex’s immortals, so it’s not surprising he’s used to it.”

But did he also subscribe to that way of thinking too? Thinking about it too much made my head hurt. I was caught between the depths of my feelings and what I’d seen from him just hours ago.

I snuggled into Maddox, pressing my cheek to the pillow and gazing up at him. “I always thought I’d have a normal life with an ordinary romance. Nothing great. Nothing deserving of a fantastic love story. Just me and him making a life together.”

He merely studied me with those unnerving eyes.

“Ordinary and sweet,” I whispered. “Everything I ever wanted.”

The heat from Maddox’s breath washed over my skin as he leaned into me. We were so close, and this moment felt so intimate. “Do you regret me?” he asked with a barely noticeable edge to it. “Or Ryder?”

It may be early with those two, but I’d never felt such a deep connection with anyone. And I believed in their devotion to me.

“No.” I wanted him to see my sincerity. “Not at all.”

His thumb brushed over my lips, and my eyes drifted to his mouth. In an awkward move, I lurched upwards in an attempt to kiss him.

Maddox caught me with a low chuckle.

“Baby girl,” he murmured. “I got you.”

The low rumble of his voice made my body shiver, the term of endearment delighting me dearly. “Say that more. I want to believe it.”

For the rest of the night, until the sun came up, he did just that.

ALEX

I set down my pen after finishing my signature. “I thought it’d be Maddox, not you.”

Ryder materialized. His mouth pinched as he straightened his clothes. “I was just outside. How did you know?”

I nodded at my phone. “There’s a camera with a sensor at the door. Technology is quite something, huh?”

He scowled at me and sauntered over to my bookcase. He barely skimmed over the spines before he turned to me.

I raised an eyebrow. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

We were at my apartment in Washington. Specifically, my master bedroom turned home office. I had paperwork to look through, and a stack of documents still sat on the corner of my desk. It was early morning, and I’d cleared out my schedule for *this*.

After Saige left me, I knew I was going to have to face the wrath of Maddox, Ryder, or both. But since Ryder always stayed away from me during this time of year, I’d expected Maddox.

“You know what you did.” The immortal folded his arms across his chest.

While Ryder liked to avoid immortal affairs, he had eyes and ears everywhere.

“Did you leave her crying in Maddox’s arms?” I shut down my laptop and rubbed the back of my neck. “You’re fine with

that?”

Ryder rolled his eyes, his foot tapping impatiently. “Irrelevant. I’ll spend time with her later. All we have is time.” Then his gaze sharpened on me. “Maddox and I never met your connections. Based on what we heard from Saige, maybe we should have.”

This was a sign that things were changing between the three of us, especially since he brought up my connections voluntarily. Despite the failure to solve our problems with violence, they both still wanted to deal with immortal issues in-house.

“We want to get these people on our side. Intimidation doesn’t work as well as imitation,” I said. “Eventually, we’ll replace them with loyal humans or even immortals.”

“You also promised to turn them when we’re successful.” He exhaled. “Can’t say we’re excited about that.”

That was the centrepiece of our discussions. They wanted immortality, as many humans did. Ryder’s informants were good, which was a delightful surprise.

“We can’t do it if they’re dead,” I murmured. It wasn’t something I was thrilled about, but I knew it was a viable option.

“Woah.” Ryder jerked his head back. But he smiled slowly and slid his tongue over his straight white teeth. “Where’s your honour, Your Grace?”

I dipped my head. “It’s what needs to be done.”

He gazed off into the distance. “Let me know when it’s time.”

“Naturally.”

“Even so, be careful with Saige.” Ryder plucked a pen from my desk, and his feet shifted restlessly. “She was upset about all the talk against humans.”

It said something about my lack of experience dealing with personal relationships that I didn’t consider her feelings.

“I needed her there,” I said. “You know about alliances through marriages and partners. They have to believe that we would change someone, and they’ve seen how much I value her.”

I’d been making sure I didn’t slip up in public. All my free time went to watching or following Saige like the obsessed, smitten man I was. All the investigators they sent were easily noticeable because of my enhanced senses.

But although this was enough to do the job, I wanted to push it further. I never said I wasn’t a selfish man. And I knew Maddox and Ryder also wanted to lock her by their sides.

I want her, and I’ll get her.

Screw the consequences, I’d do anything. Her hesitancy was something I could work around for now. But eventually, she’d see us the way I did.

“That’s it?” Ryder asked. “That’s easy to explain. She can understand the need to put on a show.”

My fingers curled into a fist underneath the desk as I met his eyes. “That’s it.”

SAIGE

I did my best to keep busy. I focused on my job, spent more time with my coworkers outside of work, and continued to half-heartedly look for a rental to move to.

But I enjoyed living at Maddox's fancy apartment, and the man was pretty nice to look at, too. He'd been suggesting I move in permanently, and I was more than a little tempted. I didn't expect the decision to be difficult, yet here I was.

I sighed and stirred my latte. Squinting up at the late afternoon sun, I let myself bask in the warmth.

I was sitting outside a small café with a coffee and a club sandwich. Devin let me off work early because we didn't have much work to do.

"Go enjoy some time off." Devin made a shooing motion. "You look exhausted."

"Do I?" Suddenly, I was very self-conscious. My hand rose to my face, and I was ready to escape to the bathroom to look in the mirror. "Is it super noticeable?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

That wasn't reassuring, but I continued packing my bag. "I've just had a lot to think about." Even trying not to think was enough to keep me up at night. So instead of sleeping, I read books or listened to soothing music.

Lying there all starry-eyed wouldn't be so bad if Maddox was around to tire me out. But he was off on another business trip.

“Hey.” Devin caught my attention again. “Let me know if you need a break, alright? Personal issues and work can be a lot to handle.”

I mustered up a smile and clasped his forearm. “Thanks, Devin.”

I flipped through my work notes, doing my best to decipher my ugly handwriting. It was a mixture of cursive and plain scribbles. But I liked keeping a notebook rather than typing on my phone or computer.

“Kitten.”

I looked up and almost choked on my sandwich. “You’re back! How did you know I was here?”

Maddox stalked towards me. Strangely enough, he wore casual athletic wear instead of his typical suit. “Why didn’t you pick up my call?”

“Huh?” I dug my phone out of my bag and frowned at the three missed calls. “Sorry, it’s on silent. I forgot to turn it off after leaving work.”

He took the seat across from mine but angled his body outwards like he was ready to leave. “I’m finished dealing with Hannah.”

As I wracked my brain, I pulled my earlobe absentmindedly. “Who’s Hannah?”

“The serial killer. I can hand her over to Ali Hayes’ men now.”

“Why would you do that?” When I peered over his shoulder, I noticed Preston standing there against the wall like a guard. He was scanning the streets and studying every person walking down the sidewalk with scrutinizing eyes.

“She has suffered as much as she can in our hands without dying.” Maddox stroked his beard and took a sip of my drink. “Hannah meeting her end at the hands of revenge seekers is rather poetic. But Ryder wants to kill her himself, and that can certainly be arranged.”

It made sense that Ali's men would want resolution. "Send her to them."

"Hmm." Maddox smirked. "And what will you give me to make that happen?"

I stiffened. "I need to barter with you on this?" *To help my friend?* "Aren't we dating?"

"Nothing comes for free, baby girl."

"I'm living in your apartment for free," I snapped back.

His smirk didn't waver. "One of Ali's boyfriends ended up in the hospital because he was protecting her. Wouldn't they want to deal with Hannah themselves?"

Crap. Yeah, this was personal for them.

This was a battle I wouldn't win, I could feel it. But that didn't mean I was going to be real easygoing about it. "What do you want?"

"Break your lease," Maddox murmured with a ferociously possessive glint in his eyes. "You're staying with me."

I shivered, my hand coming up to rest against my throat. "You can't ask that of me."

"Can't I?" His tongue slid over his lips, and my mouth parted as I watched him with a laser focus.

Goodness, his arrogance was so attractive, even when it peeves me.

"So what do you say?" he asked.

"Let's talk about this." I didn't want to admit that I was thinking about it already, but this forcing of my hand felt uncomfortable.

Maddox jerked his head to a side, his eyes rapidly darkening. "Absolutely not." Then a sly smile slid over his face. "I could always tell her men that the serial killer is still loose."

"Don't you dare." Ali would have to live in fear. I knew about her anxiety from living in the limelight. Despite the

support she had now, I didn't want her to suffer. "I'll talk to my landlord."

His satisfaction gleamed. "Good." Maddox stilled for a moment, tilting his head to the side like he was listening to something. Then he stood up, a frown on his face. "Shit. I don't want to leave, but I have to head to work."

"Is it your immortals?" I asked.

"No, just standard meetings for Pendulum."

I could see his concentration slipping as his attention turned to his work at his security company. "Get going. See you later." Right when I was reaching for my cup of coffee, he tugged me out of my seat and into his embrace.

"You think you can get away without me touching you, kitten?" he purred, brushing his nose over mine.

He set his mouth on me, and as always, I melted at his kiss. Despite his overbearing, asshole-ish ways, I couldn't help myself around him.

When we pulled away, his softened expression explored my face. "Beautiful," he breathed. Then his gaze sharpened back to the powerfully imposing Maddox Nicoli so many knew. "I can get Pierce to give Theo a call. Or do you want to contact your friend? I'll text you the address where Hannah's held."

I should muster up my courage and call Ali. "I'll do it."

After a quick peck on my lips, Maddox gestured for Preston and they both disappeared around the corner down an alleyway.

I debated whether to wait until I got back to the apartment before calling. However, since there were no other patrons at the café, there was enough privacy.

Nobody picked up my call, not her or her assistant, Ryan.

When fifteen minutes had passed and I'd finished my food, my phone finally lit up again.

“Saige. I don’t know what’s happening, but let’s meet up somewhere,” Ali said immediately. “Where are you?”

I should’ve expected her questions since I hadn’t been answering her calls or texts. It was my fault for wanting to live in my microcosm of work and immortals. I hadn’t even told my parents anything.

“I’m not in the country,” I lied.

Her confusion was apparent. “Aren’t you working in New York? Did they send you out for an assignment?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Then explain it to me!” Ali exclaimed. “What the hell is going on with you? I know we’re not as close as we were before, but I still care about you. Are you in trouble?”

I exhaled loudly, feeling guilty. I didn’t want this confrontation, I just wanted to tell her about Hannah. “Ali, I know you care. But I can’t explain anything to you. I just can’t. Can you trust me?”

Her voice rose higher. “How can I trust you when you won’t tell me anything?”

This was going nowhere, and there was now more traffic around the café. Given the rising possibility of being overheard, I wasn’t explaining anything to her here. “Look. I talked to Maddox, and he’s going to give you Hannah. That’s what I was calling about.”

There was silence on the line, and I had to make sure the call was still connected. Finally, she asked, “What do you mean, *give her to me*?”

I grabbed my bag and started walking back to the apartment. As I passed others on the street, I lowered my voice. “She’s secured at this address outside New York City, I’ll send it to you. You can deal with her however you want. Maddox won’t interfere.”

Her disbelief made her catch her breath. “How did you get him to listen to you? The guys tried everything.”

“I have my ways.” I had to end the call because she was going to ask a million questions that I didn’t want to answer. “Look, Ali, I just want to help you. I heard what happened, you didn’t deserve it. Sorry, I have to go.”

I ended the call and opened our chat thread. Scrolling through the messages I’d ignored made the shame sit heavily in my stomach. The most recent one was from a few days ago.

ALI

Saige? I’m worried about you. Can we talk? I need to know that you’re okay

Maddox sent me an address as he promised, and I copied the text.

ME

1902 Harrold Street

After the indicator lit up to show that she read the message, I put my phone back into my bag.

SAIGE

I was rounding the corner at Granier when I saw him.

The man had his back turned, and he was wearing a deep emerald green suit with gold buttons and a matching shiny tie chain. It made him look regal and sharp. I followed the lines of his body, admiring his fit physique. He wasn't overly muscular or big and had a nice butt.

My fingers dug into the plastic cover of my blue binder that held my next assignment. My breath escaped my lips in a low hiss. I needed to get laid... again. Two boyfriends somehow hadn't been enough to satisfy my libido.

When he turned around, I almost dropped my binder.

It was the Duke of Vale, who was also the immortal I was overly attracted to and very much pissed at.

As Alex adjusted his cufflinks, his gaze landed on me.

I looked away from him and started heading down the hallway. It was where we first met all those days ago. While those memories resurfaced, I remembered how Devin wasn't sure why he was there.

I frowned. My suspicions were arising after what Alex did. I didn't think too much about it back then, but...

Since Alex interviewed me, I'd assumed he worked here in some capacity. However, wouldn't Devin know if he was an employee or owner?

He also lied about a welcome party, which wasn't that big of a deal, but made me warier of him now.

“Saige.”

Now he was standing before me. He gestured for me to walk further down the hallway. We were still in full view of the entire office.

After we were appropriately hidden, I held my tongue until I couldn't any longer. “How much have you lied to me?” I squared my shoulders and stared at him straight on. “Lay it all out.”

His jaw worked. “I didn't come here to argue with you.”

Well, tough luck. “I want you to explain yourself.”

“That night, I was only playing a part,” Alex revealed. “I don't think about humans enough to hate them.”

“Oh my god.” I gaped at him. “You're such an ass!”

“I want to be honest with you.”

“I thought you had some tact,” I muttered. “Then how about this? Why were you the one to interview me?”

Alex stilled as if I surprised him with my question. His resounding silence made me grind my teeth.

“If you won't say anything, then I'm going to get back to work.” I whirled around, ready to storm off. Perhaps I should walk off all dignified with my head held high, but he had me too riled up to care.

“I was the first to notice you.”

I slowly turned to face him.

He snapped his fingers, and suddenly I couldn't hear the surroundings around us. “I sought you out after hearing from your parents. The first time I saw you was on campus in Oregon when you were still a student. The second I spotted you, I knew you were the one.”

Love at first sight? “Okay. That's actually pretty sweet. Why didn't you tell me?”

“You misunderstand.” Alex shook his head. “I knew you would be the one who would bring the Quorum back together again.” Then he stared me directly in the eyes. “So I made it happen.”

Made it happen?

His expression remained unreadable, but I felt a chill run down my spine. “I ensured Granier would hire you. I needed you in New York so the others could meet you and win you over.”

If he was telling the truth, I didn’t get my job because of my own merit. I worked so hard, and in the end, it was all handed to me. And this man I was falling for had manipulated my life choices.

My mouth slackened as I scrambled to register all of this. “That makes no sense. How could you be so sure I would bring you all together?”

“Intuition.” Alex’s smile was grim. “It was a risk. But I was right, wasn’t I?”

I felt silly like I voluntarily fell into his schemes and my life wasn’t mine. “So I was just part of the plan to solve your biggest problem.” Saying it out loud made me feel even worse, and I could barely choke the words out. I used to be uneasy about his unnervingly intense stare, but now I just hated it.

“Don’t get me wrong, Saige. I have feelings for you too. You’re not just the solution.”

Maddox warned me about him earlier, and stupidly, I hadn’t kept his words to heart.

I’m not saying he can’t love, but I think he’s so used to using people that you can always see things both ways. Yes, he may want you because he loves you. But he could also want you because it will solidify his standing amongst the rest of us. Do you see what I mean?

I stared down at my hands.

“It was suggested that I try to make the humans trust me more,” Alex continued plainly. “We promised immortality to

those who would help us. Everyone sitting at the meeting that night. They didn't see why I would gift immortality to someone after so long." In a blink of an eye, he was so close to me and his fingertips grazed my chin. "But love can make you abandon even your hardest stances."

I stumbled a step back out of his grasp. "Oh my god," I whispered. "You brought me to dinner at that restaurant to run into those people, right? And they're why you asked me to marry you?" He mentioned marriage that first day, too. The puzzle pieces were clicking into place.

"I like you," Alex growled, finally showing his frustration. "I don't want you just because of the Quorum."

I didn't fucking care what he was saying because evidently, I missed a ton of red flags. He lied this whole time, with him having an agenda and manipulating the trajectory of my career. I moved to New York because of his meddling, and I was dating immortals because of him...

My blood cooled and my chest ached with stinging pain. "Do Maddox and Ryder know about this?"

"No. It would be suspicious if it didn't all happen organically."

He sounded like a sleek movie villain, so clinical and resigned.

I laughed lowly, and I slumped against the wall as my legs grew unsteady. "So it's all you. The mastermind of all this crap."

Having an ulterior motive made everything about Alex seem fake to me. And he had his enhancement, giving him the ability to mess with my mind and make me feel things. He could make me want him desperately.

I didn't want to go there. I wouldn't believe his denial anyway.

His jaw clenched. "Saige."

But that was enough.

And I've had enough.

“I wish I could believe anything you say,” I whispered, blinking away the tears that glazed over my eyes. “But everything screams that you’re unfeeling, insensitive, and you lack respect for me.” The words tore out of my throat.

My feelings felt so real, and even though we didn’t spend a ton of time together, our moments were so electric. Our connection came so naturally.

I swallowed my sobs, and my voice came out steely. Good. I didn’t want to seem so weak around him. “Listen, I’m done with you. I don’t want to be your poker chip. I want someone who actually cares about me.”

When I rushed to move around him, Alex grabbed my arm.

“Teach me.” There was a hint of desperation in his voice I never heard before. He was such an impenetrable man, I’d never thought I could ever hear it. “Teach me how to be that man for you.”

But I struggled to see how he could change or why he would want to. Alex was a calculated, shrewd man. My turning him away was messing up his grand plan. This was all a power trip for him, and I was finally seeing his true colours.

“You just told me you manipulated everything,” I hissed, trying to jerk my arm away. “Leave me alone.”

He tugged even harder, and I landed against his chest with his arms trapping me like a prison. His cologne hit my senses, that heavy smothering scent that I now only associated with the feelings of betrayal I was feeling. It was like he poured ice water over my head, and suddenly I couldn’t ask for more distance between us.

I tore myself away from him and, surprisingly, he let me go. My breath escaped me as I ran down the hallway. I could feel my coworkers’ eyes on me as I tore past the cubicles.

Where is my dignity? Must I let him dictate my every move?

I halted, my hand resting against one of the empty desks until my pulse stopped thundering in my ears. My blouse was

slightly crumpled, especially the sleeve where he grasped me, and I ran a hand down the fabric to smooth it out.

Without knocking, I threw open the door to Devin's office.

He half-stood, and his chair rolled back at his sudden movement. "Saige, what happened?"

I shook my head, feeling dazed. "Sorry, Devin. I'm not feeling well."

"Okay, okay." Devin glanced at the calendar on his desk. "There aren't any close deadlines. Go home."

"Thank you." I hated how Alex was affecting me so much. Maddox and Ryder both helped me work through my feelings once. I didn't want to be an emotional mess again. "I'll finish my work for tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it. Just come back stronger."

I went back to my desk to grab my belongings, and I froze at the sight of my binder. I'd forgotten about it entirely, and I vaguely recalled setting it down when confronting Alex. After shoving it into my bag, I made my way back to Maddox's apartment.

I cut through an alleyway to take the quicker route home. It wasn't as scary as it was in the evening, since there was still a lot of light.

"The alley? Don't live your life so dangerously, darling."

Hearing his voice made a bit of the tension leave my body. "Ryder."

My immortal stepped to my side. He swung his arm around my shoulders and we started walking together.

"Want to get some ice cream?"

"What?" I almost laughed. He was smiling down at me with an expectant and deceptively innocent look on his face. I needed this distraction. "You have a sweet tooth?"

"I read that it's a common date idea," he said. "We can even share a cone."

“One cone isn’t enough for two people.”

As we were about to enter the street, Ryder stopped. “Why is your voice like that?”

“Huh?” I blinked up at him.

His large hands cupped my cheeks, and he moved my head from left to right. “Something’s wrong.”

His hazel eyes were so clear, and something about them made me want to spill everything. Instead, I said, “I think I got greedy, imagining having all three of you. It was never going to happen.”

Ryder’s eyes widened with a hint of panic. “Saige, be greedy. There’s nothing wrong with that. Or you can just have me.”

Perhaps it was because of how little I knew about Alex, but I never pictured losing him or his attention. People always said the future is unexpected, but maybe I was too blind and too caught up in the others to recognize the signs.

How could I trust him now? He did so much to screw with my life and inadvertently brought immortals into my life. And with his enhancement... There was so much I didn’t know. Ryder and Maddox never asked me to become entangled in immortal affairs, and I lived my life the way I always did.

I tilted my head back to look into the blue sky.

And I used to think my previous relationships were hard. Getting ghosted by my boyfriend wasn’t that bad in retrospect. All of my current boyfriends came from a whole agenda, all of it planned.

I wanted to laugh hysterically or curse the world for making this happen to me. There was no in-between.

“Saige?” Ryder probed. “What are you thinking about?”

“Simpler times, when I wasn’t caught up in immortals and enhancements and manipulation. All the lying and fake feelings.” I waved my hands around. “It sucks to feel like I’ve been controlled by someone else. Why do you immortals have

to hold so much power, huh? It's so imbalanced, I hate it. *I really, really hate it!*"

By the time I stopped talking, I was out of breath, and my vitriol leaked out into the way I spat the last words out.

"Fuck!" I heard Ryder mutter, "This can't be happening. Fucking hell."

I wanted to crumble into a ball and let it all out, but before I could, his arms came around me. He became the support I clung to.

"Shh." Ryder's lips pressed to my hair. "It's going to be okay."

RYDER

I *might be spiralling again.*

After Saige's outburst in the alleyway, I teleported us back to Maddox's place. After taking a shower, she shooed me away so she could finish translating a document. I didn't get why she wanted to work after leaving early, but I didn't argue since I had my preoccupations.

I could still see the look on her face in that alleyway.

"Why do you immortals have to hold so much power, huh? It's so imbalanced, I hate it. I really, really hate it!" Saige cried out.

I ducked my head to hide my expression.

Hell, was she having second thoughts about immortals? She was distraught, still caught up in Alex, but I was quickly realizing how much I feared losing her. It was a visceral, paralyzing feeling that shook my limbs.

It took me a long time to accept my immortality after Kaylee's death. Many people who knew about us, however, would give anything to live forever. And once achieving it, their biggest fear became losing it.

Our latest high-profile betrayer was the best example of this. When we stripped Hannah of her immortality, I got to bask in her complete meltdown and echoing screams. Her sobs of having to be a "useless" human were more than laughable.

It was silly of her to believe she would be alive to live as a human again.

I wouldn't have let Maddox hand her over to Ali Hayes and her men if I hadn't discovered Finn Alton's bloodthirsty nature. Out of all her men, that tech CEO was easily my favourite.

Seeing Hannah like that made me imagine myself as a human with an expiration date. Even now, I believed the longevity of forever took away an essence of humanity that could never be replaced.

If Saige realized this, smart as she was, she may want to distance herself from me. She had her value system and her way of living that she stuck to.

I admired someone who held their ground. Throughout the years, I'd met my fair share of hypocrites and slanderers, people who made exceptions so often they may as well have no rulebook.

I swept my hand over my forehead, wanting to tear my hair out of my scalp. Pacing around the room, my line of thought drew me to the extremes.

If I had the choice to abandon all my responsibilities, both within the Quorum and to my immortals, all to stay by her side, a part of me lurched to agree. Too much of her couldn't be a bad thing. Everything about her screamed my name.

She can't slip through my fingers. I couldn't let it happen. I was already addicted. She was a breath of fresh air. More than that, she was the very air I breathed.

As I walked past the kitchen counter, I accidentally knocked over Saige's bag. Earlier, she only grabbed her binder, leaving her other belongings behind. It took barely a second to clean everything up, but my hand hovered over a packet of pills.

Birth control pills.

Now that we were having sex, filling her womb with my cum was always in the back of my mind. It certainly didn't help that her pussy clenched tighter around my cock whenever I whispered my dirty thoughts to her.

It was all a fantasy, but it could be our reality.

My thumb slid over the sharp edge of the pack of pills. I held my other hand out, and a pack of sugar pills appeared in my hand.

I'd need to access her future birth control to make sure I maximized the chances of knocking her up. Immortals struggled with fertility, so pregnancy was unlikely.

But still, I could see Saige waddling towards me with a bright grin on her face, her stomach round with my baby. Our child would be a visible, irrevocable tie between the two of us.

She'd be mad at me, of course she would. But it was a risk I had to take. I'd grovel for her forgiveness, but I needed this to soothe my worries that she'd leave me.

The pack of pills nearly crumbled in my grip, and I made the swap quickly before I did any further damage. I set Saige's bag back where it was and hurried to sit on the couch.

What I just did had the potential to change the relationship between us and also the other two. I gripped my thigh as I questioned myself. I still had the chance to switch the pills back.

"You know, I was just thinking." Saige walked into the room and perched on my lap.

"What is it?" I studied the arch of her throat, imagining her exaggerated pulse beating under her skin. I slid my hands around the back of her neck, and she closed her eyes. Taking the cue, I started massaging her.

Hearing her slight gasps made me dig into the knots in her shoulders too. If I pressed hard enough, could I imprint my fingertips on her skin? When she wore tank tops, everyone would see it.

And more importantly, my eyes would feast upon it at every opportunity.

"I don't want to think about you two with other women after I die," she said. "That's messed up, isn't it? I'm so selfish. I should want you to move on." When she saw my dark look, she rolled her eyes. "It's just a thought. I'm not dead."

But she could be in an hour. Tomorrow. Next week.

Humans were so fragile and unpredictable. We had to change her while she was still safe and sound. But with the way she talked about dying, she never considered being an immortal.

I can't watch her die.

How could she bear dying if she had a baby with me? Or possibly with Alex or Maddox?

Her birth control pills were burning a hole in my pocket, but now I was more certain that I was making the right choice for us.

I mentally skipped through dates on my calendar, marking the days where the pills she'd already taken would lose effectiveness. I had to fill her up with my seed as soon as those days were up.

Neither of the others knew about my plan yet, and if I was going to do this, I might as well go all the way.

If I could have my way, her first baby was going to be mine.

SAIGE

I grabbed a bag of barbecue chips and tossed it into my shopping cart. “Marshmallows are better than chocolate.”

“You’re actually crazy.” Helen’s voice was garbled by the handful of pretzels she threw in her mouth. “What happened to you? No normal person thinks that way.” She moved out of frame for a moment before her face reappeared again. “I want to fix you.”

I laughed. “I’m going to bring you over to the dark side.”

“Impossible.”

We didn’t video call that often, but it was a nice change from our texts back and forth. Although we lived in different cities, it didn’t feel that way when we chatted. Not seeing each other in person hadn’t weakened our friendship.

“It’s a texture thing,” I said as I investigated a new brand of granola bars. As long as it had cranberries, I knew I’d like it. “Chewy and fun.”

She shook her head. “At least make s’mores.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “You just want the chocolate part.”

“Hey, gotta go. A trashy reality show is calling my name.”

I waved at her. “Talk soon!” After the call ended, I shoved my phone back into my purse. I felt lighter after talking to Helen. We always had the silliest banter, barely bringing up things that were going on in our lives.

Some people would think that meant we didn't care, but I preferred it. I just wanted to reconnect with a friend, and our chats were always a great way to make me forget my stress.

My cart was full of snacks, from assorted chips and popcorn to crackers. Maddox had the housekeeper stock the fridge full of groceries, so I only needed to buy enough to soothe my midnight cravings.

I continued down the aisles, enjoying the leisurely grocery trip. Avoiding the rush of shoppers after work was the key perk of late evening shopping. As I maneuvered around several shoppers in the freezer aisle, it was clear I wasn't the only one who thought that way.

After grabbing a bag of frozen mangoes, I headed to the cash register and paid. On the way out, I stopped to admire the potted flowers.

Just as I leaned in to look at the name of a particularly bright yellow blossom, a gloved hand clapped around my mouth. My head lurched back, and I could see that my attacker had on a slate grey ski mask. His eyes narrowed as I kicked my legs, and he dragged me away from the display of flowers before I could shatter one of the clay pots.

He was acting so brazenly. Someone must be seeing this. However, I couldn't hear any pounding footsteps or shouting to help me.

I had to do something, but it was too late. My head started spinning, and my whole body slackened. The last thing I registered was the spinning lights on the ceiling as my mind slipped away.

My hearing came back first, and every little sound rang loud in my sensitive ears.

“Why the *fuck* did they knock her out?”

I could recognize that voice anywhere, and my blood boiled at Alex's audacity to kidnap me. Maddox did a similar

thing when we first met, but his men didn't end up laying their hands on me.

Gradually, I felt my limbs again. My hands pressed down on the comfy mattress I was lying on. Although I could move, I could barely push myself up to a sitting position. I felt so heavy that it was too hard to hold myself up. I leaned against the headboard of the tiny bed and took in deep breaths, both from my exertion and my rising anger.

Where am I?

This was a ballroom decked out with delicate lilac flowers and checkered tiles. All the decorations were plated with gold and columns lined both sides of the large space. The ceiling was painted in a Renaissance-style fresco, depicting robed muscular figures with arching wings.

I was sitting on a twin-sized mattress with no bedframe. What I thought was a headboard was merely the wall. A wooden desk sat ten feet away with papers on top of it.

As time ticked by, I started feeling normal again, with only a slight hint of fatigue. I strained my ears to hear more, but there was nothing.

Silence.

I frowned. But I definitely heard Alex when I was still lying down.

Shifting my gaze to the wall, I noticed a vent that was level with where my head was on the pillow. I stretched out on my side, leaning against my elbows, and pressed my ear against the vent.

“You didn't specify the method,” a gruff man's voice said monotonously. “I completed my task.”

Footsteps followed his words, and leather soles squeaked against the shiny floors. “Well, that's too bad then.”

“Wha—”

“This is over.” The thud of something hitting the ground followed Alex's low hiss.

I squinted through the slits in the vent, wishing my vision was better. But all I could see was...

I gasped in horror as a pool of red spread over the floor. There was no sign of a body, not from the little I could see.

I pushed away from the vent and landed on my tailbone heavily. I bit my tongue to stop myself from cursing at the stinging pain, and I could taste the metallic blood in my mouth.

From what I can tell, that man got killed because of me.

The door clicked open, and Alex stepped into view.

When he saw I was awake, he was standing before me in a second. "Saige, how are you feeling?"

The caring tone of his voice made my mouth drop open. I struggled onto my feet, one arm out to ward him off when he tried to help me. When I straightened up, I jabbed my finger at his chest. "How dare you ask me that when you got someone to knock me out?!"

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

My chest was heaving. "That guy chloroformed me!"

"Not chloroform, but he used fucking propofol." Alex's nostril flared and his expression grew tight. "He's an immortal hired hand. You won't see him again. He's dead."

"Great. That makes me feel better." My biting sarcasm didn't seem to affect him, and I crossed my arms. "Now why am I here? You went into the trouble of making me hate you even more."

His gaze moved over my face like he was memorizing my features. "It'll be quick." He pulled out a piece of black fabric from his pocket and held it out. "Put it on her."

My eyebrows furrowed. "Huh?"

From behind me, a hand shot out to grab the fabric. In the blink of an eye, they twisted my arms behind my back and secured the fabric over my eyes like a blindfold.

Some time while I was confronting Alex, his lackeys must have teleported behind me. Now I was very sick of this immortal crap.

“Alex!” I shouted as they moved me to my left. “Why are you doing this? Let me go!” I knew my shouts were futile, but I had to do something.

But suddenly, my hand jerked down to slap against a flat surface. I must be standing at the wooden desk I saw earlier.

Before I could swipe my arms and try to find a weapon, phone or anything to get myself out of this predicament, my hand started moving of its own accord.

“What’s happening to me?” I whispered in horror.

I lost control of my arm, but I could feel everything I was doing. And because they blindfolded me, my senses were amplified. My skin was clammy and my chin trembled.

Did the propofol do something to me?

My hand picked up a pen and pressed it down. From the motions of the pen, I was signing my name. My stomach churned.

I could be signing away my life and I wouldn’t know it. The feeling of not having control over my body sent an icy chill throughout me.

They led me away again, and the pen slipped from my fingers and clattered onto the floor. I could swear I heard the sound echo in the vast ballroom. A hand pushed my lower back, and I fell forward, expecting to faceplant onto the floor. Instead, I was caught, and the blindfold slipped off of my face.

Of course, it was Alex who clutched me to his chest, and he didn’t let me pull away.

“That was the only time I’ll ever use that enhancement on you,” Alex whispered, his blue eyes unfathomably dark.

My eyes widened, and I felt like there was roaring in my ears. “Y-You messed with my mind?” I didn’t care why he did it. It was the fact that he did it so casually, coupled with how crippling it felt for me to lose control.

Suddenly, the double doors slammed open. A redheaded woman with a phone in a sparkly phone case sauntered in.

“The Duchess of Vale,” she exclaimed, looking me up and down. “Let’s get you fitted for tonight.”

My blood ran cold.

I slowly turned my head to look at her. “What did you just call me?”

She smacked her gum before her gaze flitted to Alex. “Umm...”

Alex waved his hand, and she hurried out of the ballroom.

“So?” My heart was beating out of my chest as I awaited his explanation. We stood there, pressed together, and I knew he wouldn’t let me go.

His face stayed solemn, but his eyes were blazing with furious fire. His possessive grip on me didn’t falter.

“What the hell is she talking about?” I repeated, my anger seeping into my voice.

“What do you think?” He tipped his head to the side and brushed his knuckles over my cheek. “We’re married. I’m your husband.”

That’s what I signed? A marriage license?

I reared my hand back and slapped him across the face.

AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Reeling*!

I wanted to write something that feels contemporary with a tiny immortal twist. So the Quorum Duet is not set in an outright paranormal/fantasy world.

If you have time, please leave a review! As an indie author, I really appreciate your effort.

Are you wondering how Saige's story will end? The second/last book *The Yearning* is now up for pre-order! The release date will definitely be moved up.

[Pre-order The Yearning, the last book in the Quorum Duet here](#)

[Also, you can add the book to your Goodreads!](#)

After the Quorum Duet is finished, my next project will be a contemporary standalone, and I'm super excited to share more about it with you when the time comes.

Release date changes, teasers, and hints of my other upcoming contemporary and paranormal works will be exclusively found in my Facebook Group. Join and come say hello!

[Join L. Miles Reader Group](#)

I recommend signing up for my newsletter to get timely info on my newest ideas, preorders, and releases. That's mainly what it's for, I won't blow up your inbox, I promise.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L. Miles is an absolute weirdo who sometimes forgets how to write entirely. She lives in a world of romantic comedies, yearning for something more in life.

To get info on new preorders and releases, subscribe to her newsletter here: [http://
lmilesauthor.substack.com](http://lmilesauthor.substack.com)

To report typos or if you have questions/comments, shoot her an email: lmilesauthor@gmail.com



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Exception Duet

Exception (Book 1)

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