



JENNIFER ROSE

THE
Scars
WITHIN

FATED VENGEANCE BOOK ONE

The Scars Within

Jennifer Rose

Copyright © 2022 by Jennifer Rose

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Sarah Kil Creative Studio

Content Warning

The Fated Vengeance is a continuation duet following the same couple, William and Everleigh, in their struggles to be together, despite everything that stands between them. This duet consists of two, full-length novels that can NOT be read as standalone. *The Scars Within* ends on a cliffhanger, while *The Flames Within* ends with a HEA.

The Fated Vengeance duet is a spin-off from the Fractured series. While this duet may be read without reading the Fractured series, many of the characters from that series appear in this one.

Content Warning

The following triggers may be detailed or alluded to in this novel: abuse (including child abuse), blood, bullying, cancer, car accident, death of a parent and/or guardian, fire, gore, murder, kidnapping/captivity, detailed sexually explicit scenes, stalking, and torture.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[1. William](#)

[2. William](#)

[3. Everleigh](#)

[4. William](#)

[5. William](#)

[6. Everleigh](#)

[7. William](#)

[8. Everleigh](#)

[9. Everleigh](#)

[10. William](#)

[11. William](#)

[12. Everleigh](#)

[13. William](#)

[14. Everleigh](#)

[15. Everleigh](#)

[16. William](#)

[17. William](#)

[18. Everleigh](#)

[19. William](#)

[20. William](#)

[21. Everleigh](#)

[To Be Continued](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also By Jennifer Rose](#)

[About Author](#)

Prologue

“Let’s talk about your past, William. At our last session together, we discussed the first time you fell in love. There was a sense that you experienced trauma at an early age that affected the relationship you had with...” She pauses, looking at her notes. “... Everleigh Morrison.”

Shifting on the plush chair inside my therapist’s office, my chest caves in the second she mentions Everleigh’s name. My eyes flit around the room, unsure where to look, as utter devastation rolls through my body, like the tremors of an earthquake, shaking my world.

My eyes immediately fill with tears.

Blinking several times to keep them from falling, I curl my fingers, digging my nails into my palms until I can only focus on the pain of my flesh being split like paper cuts. It’s far better than dwelling on the incapacitating despair of Everleigh’s disappearance.

My heart aches and the tingling in my chest and stomach signal the dread that washes over me like the tide chipping away at the coastline.

I hate reliving my past, but Irelynn has told me again and again that I have to face it and deal with it, or it will continue to haunt me. That it's the only way to move forward, according to her.

I'm clinging to her words like a drowning person clutching a life raft in the churning ocean waters.

Releasing a long breath, I straighten my fingers, and run my hands over my jean-clad legs. I spot the faintest tinge of red from the cuts my nails left on my skin, and I hope that Dr. Olivia Hayburn doesn't notice.

But of course, she does. It's evident in her narrowed gaze pinned to my pants and the frown turning her lips down.

Clearing my throat, I lean forward, my elbows on my knees. "What, specifically, do you want to talk about? Regarding my um... past." My voice is low and shaky, and I run my hand through my hair, mussing it up.

Don't unravel. Keep your shit together.

Dr. Hayburn shifts, crossing her legs, her sky-blue dress pants and white and blue pinstripe blouse meant to make me feel calm and relaxed. Her face has a serene expression on it, and everything about her office is orderly and meant to project peace and sincerity.

She's going to need a hell of a lot more blue than what is currently surrounding me in order to make me feel tranquil, especially when talking about my horrific past.

She stares at me for a few beats, as though she's reading me.
“How about we discuss your father?”

My spine snaps straight and my breathing automatically increases. I swallow hard, my mouth as dry as the desert.

Dr. Hayburn immediately stands and heads to her mini refrigerator to grab a bottle of water. She brings it to me, analyzing my every micro expression.

Taking the bottle from her outstretched hand, I nod my thanks. My shaky hands twist the cap off and I take huge gulps. The water temporarily moistens my arid throat.

She returns to her chair, crossing her legs with her notepad on her lap, silently observing me.

“What about him?” My muscles are tense and my eyes dart toward the door, my mind on thoughts of escape before we even get started.

I close my eyes, wishing I could run away from this.

Not having to deal, like I've always done.

I waver, not opening my eyes and not yet speaking.

Like a desert mirage, Everleigh's beautiful face shimmers in front of me, her chocolate eyes shining with support and pride.

Opening my eyes, I heave out a long breath and begin.

“When I was eight years old, I adored all things Christmas and so did my mom. The day after Thanksgiving, we'd put up enormous Christmas trees all over the house, decorating them with different themes. The largest one was in the main living

area and that was the one I was most excited to decorate. Mom turned on Christmas music and we baked cookies, and then ate some while decorating the tree.” My voice is whimsical as I’m lost in the memories of how good things started that year... then ended so badly.

My expression darkens with my thoughts. Staring at my hands, my tone of voice becomes flat. “My dad was supposed to be away on a business trip but returned early. Mom and I weren’t aware he’d returned because we’d been having so much fun. I was dancing around with an ornament in my hand and my mom was hysterically laughing at me.” I smile, picturing my mother’s face. But it quickly disappears when I think about what occurred next.

“Suddenly, my father’s voice boomed through the room. ‘What the hell is going on here?’ It startled both of us. I whipped around and, in the process, dropped the ornament. It shattered into pieces on the floor... just like my heart would later.” My voice comes out as a whisper when I say that last sentence.

Movement draws my attention to Dr. Hayburn, who leans forward in her chair, intently observing and listening.

“What happened next?” Her voice is soft and coaxing.

“The servants and my mom rushed to clean it up, but my father’s face was nearly purple from his rage. His hands went to the belt around his waist. My mom ran in front of me, shoving my small body behind hers, pleading with him not to use it on me.” I swallow hard, rage making my hands ball into

fists. “He struck her and knocked her down. But she refused to stay down, jumping to her feet, trying to protect me.” My teeth grind together as the terrible images of that day flood my mind, threatening to drown me. “He beat the hell out of her. The servants fled, all except one. Emma. She grabbed me and tried to pull me from the room, but he saw her. He ran after us, grabbing her by the hair, forcing her to release me. My father slapped Emma so hard it echoed around the room, then shoved her to the floor. And then... he beat me, over and over and over. He yanked my shirt off, the leather from his belt welting my skin. When I fought back, his fists pummeled my face.” Tears spill over my cheeks from reliving the trauma. “He locked me in the closet when he was finished beating me.”

Dr. Hayburn’s face is pale, and her big green eyes are wide with horror, her normal, professional mask completely slipping from her face. “All because of a broken ornament?”

“Yes... but also because my mom and I were having fun. Our conduct was ‘unbecoming’ according to my bastard of a father.”

She swallows, making some notes. “Was that the worst beating you’d ever endured?”

“No.” I down the rest of the bottle of water, the plastic crinkling in my hands as I squeeze it. “I once broke a vase that belonged to his mother. It was an accident. I was hurrying through the foyer in my socks, running to get my baseball glove so I could play ball. The floor was slick from the recent cleaning, and it was like a skating rink. I slid and flailed my

arms to keep from falling backward. I hit the table in the foyer and watched in horror as the vase teetered back and forth before falling and bursting into tiny pieces.”

“Was your father home when it happened?”

“Unfortunately, he’d been coming down the stairs to leave for a business trip. I fell, landing on one knee, the vase shattering around me. A few pieces cut my skin, but he didn’t care. My mom came running... and dad immediately ran to her, backhanding her so hard she fell to the floor. Then he screamed, his eyes bulging, spittle hitting me in the face as he cursed me for being fucking clumsy and stupid. With his purple face, the veins popping out in his forehead and neck, he looked like a monster. Which is exactly what he was.” Pausing, I lower my head, my hands covering my face.

The tears won’t fucking stop.

“You are doing great, William. You are here in this room with me, safe from your father.” Dr. Hayburn’s calm voice wraps around me like a giant hug, trying to soothe the wretched emotional pain I’m experiencing.

I don’t know which is worse—reliving the physical abuse that included hitting me with his belt, the pounding of his fists on my flesh, the kicks to my stomach and back, or the emotional pain that permeates my mind, unrelenting in its grip, trapping me in a proverbial hell.

“As my father beat the hell out of me, all my ten-year-old self could think was that my father hates me and wants me to die. I felt worthless and unwanted. Unloved.”

Dr. Hayburn stands in front of me, a box of tissues in her hands, her eyes brimming with sympathy. I take a few and wipe my face.

“William, I’m going to break a few professional rules I have here if you don’t mind?”

I stare questioningly at her, before finally nodding.

Her hand moves to my shoulder, squeezing gently. “You didn’t deserve any of that. Your father was a callus, abusive bastard, who got off on cruelty to make himself feel more powerful.” She stares deep into my eyes, her voice strong and laced with conviction. “*You* were never the problem, William. *He* was.”

Sitting there, I digest her words, saying nothing.

She squeezes my shoulder again. “What happened after that?”

I duck my head. “He took me to a dungeon-type closet beneath the mansion and locked me in there. He tied my mom to the bed after beating her. When he left two days later, the servants were finally able to untie my mom, and she was the one who found me. Emma’s husband, Robert, carried me to the car and took us to the hospital. Emma gave me water and tried cleaning me up on the way.” I hesitate, misery overwhelming me. “I suffered nine broken ribs, a broken wrist, and multiple bruises and lacerations from his beating. I was severely dehydrated. My mom had ten broken ribs, bruises, and a concussion. Also... my dad... *fuck*.” I squeeze my eyes closed, a loud sob escaping my lips.

I stuff my fist in my mouth, rocking back and forth. “My dad raped my mom, then beat her unconscious.”

Dr. Hayburn looks horrified, tears welling in her eyes, as she completely drops her professional façade. Finally, she says, “There’s a part of me that senses you hold a very negative opinion of yourself. Why is that, William?”

I can’t look at her.

Shame fills me as I sit there, clenching my fists. My protective instincts stir defensively, ready to go to war to keep the scars within hidden. The ones that cut so deep they damaged my psyche, stunted my growth, and created the grotesque villain designed to keep people from getting close to me.

Finally, I swallow hard and lock my gaze with hers.

“I’m a *monster*, Dr. Hayburn. Just like my father and my half-brother, Damian.”

Chapter 1

William

Noise from the television fills my darkened living room. It's meant to distract me from my thoughts, but it's doing a piss-poor job.

I can't get my mind out of the past.

Curling my fingers into the arms of the plush chair I'm sitting in, I take a deep breath, then release it, trying in vain to employ the techniques my therapist gave me, hoping it will provide some relief.

But it's futile. Nothing can dull the pain that slices through me like a sharp blade, twisting and turning inside my chest.

My heart broken into a thousand pieces when she left, the shards cutting my insides, leaving me to bleed out. Since the day Everleigh vanished from the restaurant, I've been a broken shell of a man.

Despite my wealth and resources, I haven't been able to locate her, though I've been searching frantically for over a year.

I refuse to give up. My heart tells me she's out there, terrified and alone. Running from the psychopathic monster who is determined to destroy her life, before finally ending her.

Everleigh always believed I had a target on my back because I fell in love with her. I know damn well she vanished to protect me.

For twelve years, I hid who I really was behind a veil of arrogance, manipulating people like pawns on a chessboard. It was the only way to survive in the cruel, elite world I had lived in. I had everything *except* the one thing I wanted the most.

Love.

It wasn't always that way. I was the center of my mother's world. Until the moment she was brutally murdered twelve years ago. In the blink of an eye, all the love I'd ever known disappeared.

Until I met Everleigh.

For the first time since I'd been a child, I dropped my guard and let someone in. Rather than show her the monster, I revealed the hurt boy hiding inside the insecure man.

I'd met someone as broken as me. Someone who understood the darkness because she'd experienced it. As damaged as Everleigh was, she was also the strongest, most badass woman I'd ever met.

One life altering moment would bind us together, changing us in ways we never could have imagined or predicted.

I flashback to that fateful day when I first met Everleigh... the day that changed my life. Forever.



The loud crack of thunder draws my gaze to the darkened sky, ominous thick gray clouds roll overhead as I hurry across the parking lot, heading to my black BMW parked in the far corner of the lot. Coach Adams worked me hard in practice tonight and my muscles are tight, lactic acid already setting in, making them sore. He's pushing me harder than ever since we have a huge track meet next weekend, and my team stands a good chance of winning if I can perform the way I did at the last one.

But the soreness settling into my legs makes it hard to do anything fast, including showering. And I desperately needed one after that grueling practice.

A bolt of lightning zigzags across the sky, temporarily brightening the darkened skies. Opening the door of my beamer, I slide behind the steering wheel, my legs screaming in protest.

As I start my car, the first couple of fat raindrops land on my windshield. Within minutes, it's a heavy downpour, pelting off my windshield and pounding on the roof. A loud curse flies past my lips as my fingers grip the steering wheel, annoyance

drawing my brows inward as the pouring rain drenches the parking lot.

Leaning forward, my eyes peer through my windshield.

I can't see shit, so my growling stomach will just have to wait a little longer.

Five minutes later, the rain finally slows enough that I can see. Shifting my car into drive, I head out of the lot, exhaustion seeping into my bones.

Traffic slowly creeps along the business stretch of the highway, fraying my nerves like a knotted rope about to break. Downshifting, I hit my turn signal quickly, ignoring the loud blaring of the horns around me as I squeeze into the lane beside me. Stomping my foot on the accelerator, I take the road on the right that leads through the hills and valleys of California overlooking the turquoise blue ocean. It's a longer route home, but I'm not in the mood to deal with traffic.

I'm in the mood to drive fast as I crank up the volume of my music so loud it shakes the windows.

Grabbing my cell phone, I scan my heavy metal playlist, smiling when I see "Deify" by Disturbed. Cranking the volume, I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, the driving beat of the song reviving my tired body.

The rain stops as I race up the steep hill, my eyes alert for any rocks rolling down the side of the surrounding cliffs onto the road. My head moves to the beat as I sing along, releasing all my negative emotions.

As I crest the top of the hill and start downhill, I spot a gray SUV ahead of me, driving as fast as I am.

Thank God it isn't some slow asshole. I'm not in the mood. I'd have to pass them.

I crack my windows, replaying the song when it ends. I downshift to slow my speed as I near the stop sign at the bottom of the hill. The SUV is still sitting there, which seems odd, considering they were quite a distance ahead of me.

Maybe they are answering a text?

I shrug as I slow my beamer, knowing this car as well as I know myself. One of the reasons I chose the M5 Competition model is the fact that it can go from zero to sixty in three-point-one seconds. When something is bothering me, I'll stretch her legs by choosing rural, hilly roads and shift through the gears, satisfying my rush for fast, intense speed.

Something I can control in the uncontrollable world I've spent much of my life in.

A red sports car cruises down the road, heading toward the stop sign where the SUV sits.

Without warning, smoke rolls from the tires of the SUV in front of me as the driver slams on the gas, swerving into the path of the sports car.

It seems like time slows down as the red car tries to swerve out of the path of the SUV, but it's too late. The deafening crunch of metal rings in my ears, temporarily drowning out my music.

My eyes widen in horror as I watch the red car roll onto its roof, closing my eyes for a brief second as glass shatters and breaks, raining in all directions as it scatters across the road.

Did that SUV deliberately hit that car?

My hand grips my steering wheel as I stare in astonishment as the SUV whips around the red sports car and speeds off.

My heart pounds inside my chest like a drum as I throw my car in park, push my driver's side door open, and hop out of my car. As I run toward the red car, my shaking hands grip my cell phone, trying to dial nine-one-one. After two attempts, I finally press the right buttons, putting it on speakerphone.

Gory images of what I may find when I reach the scene spin faster than the tires of the SUV that hit this car. My feet crunch over the shattered glass laying all over the road, and I carefully dodge pieces of the car wreckage around me.

A calm voice comes through the line. "Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

Heaving out a relieved breath, I squat down beside the car, trying to prepare for the carnage ahead. Opening my mouth to speak, I'm stunned into silence as my eyes land on a brunette woman hanging upside down, sobs wracking her body as she fumbles in vain with her seatbelt. I'm not sure how she's still conscious, but she's clearly hysterical from what just transpired.

The robotic voice of the emergency dispatcher comes through the line again. Before I can utter a word, the young

woman's panicky chocolate eyes lock with mine, widening in horror.

"Hang up. Please, hang up the phone right now!"

Blinking slowly, I shake my head. "Miss, you've been in an accident. You clearly need medical—"

"Hang up the phone!" Her voice comes out as a hysterical shriek, her head vehemently shaking back and forth as her fingers continue fumbling, trying to release the latch on her seatbelt. Tears course down her face, silently pleading with me. "Please," she implores again.

I don't know why I listen to her, but there's something in her wide, terrified eyes and harried, wild appearance that tugs at my heartstrings. The terror and desperation cling to her sweaty skin like the nefarious odor of skunk spray.

Ending the call, I lean closer to her, trying to remain calm despite the panic that sets my body on edge, my muscles tightening and clenching beneath my clothing. We are the only two people on this stretch of the road.

My phone rings, the emergency dispatcher calling back. My gaze flits from my phone to the woman in the car. Her pleading orbs beg me, as do her lips when she slowly shakes her head and whispers, "Please, don't answer."

I don't know what compels me to listen to her, but I do. Pressing the button on the side, I silence my ringing phone.

The look of relief on her face puzzles me. Desperation is carved onto her face, her fear making her skin ashen and

causing her lips to quiver.

Or maybe her paleness and shaking are from injuries she sustained in the crash.

Whatever the case, she dashed my hopes of emergency assistance coming to help when she asked me to hang up the phone.

The weight of the world is on my shoulders right now.

Reaching inside her badly mangled car, I cover her shaking hand with my own. "I'm going to release your seatbelt and get you the fuck outta here."

As I speak, I'm already unfastening it, my arms gripping her to keep her from falling as I pull it from across her body. Shards of glass cut through my jeans as I drop to my knees, gripping her in my arms as best as I can.

She whimpers, the sound cutting my insides worse than the glass digging into my knees.

"I'm sorry about this." Giving a quick, violent pull, I tug her from the wreckage, hoping like hell I'm not injuring her worse.

Falling back onto the road from the momentum I used to yank her out, adrenaline flows hot beneath my skin. She's on top of me, still sobbing and blubbing incoherently.

Pushing myself into a sitting position, I cradle her in my arms, my gaze roving over her lean body, trying to assess the extent of her injuries. There's blood running from her head,

arms, and legs, and she won't stop shaking or muttering long enough to answer any of my questions.

"Are you okay?" I ask again, sweating profusely as my eyes rove over her body, fearing I'm doing her more harm than good.

She numbly nods her head, her eyes darting around. Her tongue swipes over her split lip, but she doesn't seem to recognize the metallic tang of blood.

Putting both hands on her cheeks, I turn her head towards mine. "You're safe now. I've pulled you from the car. Where does it hurt?" I'm struggling to maintain my composure, panic lancing through my spine and making me tremble as I fear she could end up dying because of my incompetence.

Her big brown eyes are wide with terror, but beneath that, she looks... haunted. She struggles against me, petite hands pushing against me as though she's ready to flee. "You need to let me go. I'm putting you in incredible danger. You'll die too if you stay around me much longer."

What the hell is she talking about?

"What's your name?" I keep my voice calm, trying to soothe her frazzled nerves. She looks like a deer caught in a trap and terrified that death is only minutes away.

"E-E-Everleigh." Her lips and chin quiver, her body quaking harder.

Shit. Is she going into shock?

“Everleigh, I need you to focus on me, okay? Can you do that?” My hands still cup her face, holding it so I can observe her. Though her head is still, her eyes continuously dart around.

She gives a slow nod, sucking in a deep breath, then slowly exhales. “Yes. But we shouldn’t be sitting out in the open. We are completely exposed. She could try to come back and—”

“Who, Everleigh? The SUV that hit you?”

She nods, her face growing so pale it’s nearly translucent, her veins showing like a roadmap beneath her skin.

“Are you in danger?”

“Y-y-yes. She... she’s found me. She’ll kill me if she gets the chance.”

I’ve never met this woman before, but there is something in her terrified, chocolate eyes, the way her body trembles in my arms, and the rasping breaths that heave from her lungs that make me believe her.

Concern for her fuels me, rushing through my body like a torrent of floodwater. Blood pumps hotly through my veins, strengthening my senses. There’s an urgency as I lean forward with her in my arms, my knee hitting the asphalt, making me wince from the glass that cut my knees when I pulled her from the wreckage moments ago. My quad muscles, which had been screaming from practice earlier, don’t bother me at all right now. I don’t have time to worry about my pain or injuries.

I rise to a standing position with her in my arms and begin moving toward my car.

“What are you doing?” Her arm hooks around the back of my neck as I carry her across the road, making sure no traffic is coming.

I’ve yet to see another vehicle since this horrific accident occurred, which is rare for this part of California, even though the road we are on is relatively remote.

“I’m putting you in my car and taking you to the hospital.”

Her arm tightens around my neck, her nails digging into my skin. “No! You can’t!” Her pitch rises so high it reminds me of a wounded animal screaming in pain.

My brows furrow as I look at her. “You need to get checked out.”

Her muscles are tense against me, as though she’s ready to spring out of my arms. “She’ll find me there. Hospitals aren’t safe. It’s the first place she’ll look.”

Who the hell is this “she” that Everleigh keeps referencing?

Fumbling with the door as I hold her against me, I pull it open while my mind processes the fear that permeates her words and coils her body up tightly against mine.

Lowering her thin body into the passenger seat, Everleigh immediately protests. “Oh my God. I’m all bloody. I’ll get it all over your seat—”

I press my finger against her lips, silencing her. “I’m not concerned about that, sweetheart. Seats and cars can be cleaned. I’m far more perturbed by your injuries, and that you won’t let me take you to a hospital. Can I take you to a doctor —”

“No!” Her scream pierces the silent air around us, her veins beating a visible pulse beneath her ivory skin.

I kneel beside her, gently taking her cold, clammy hand in mine. My fingers automatically stroke hers, trying to calm her.

Jesus. Her hands are freezing. I’m really getting scared for her. What if she has some type of internal injury I can’t see, and her panic is masking it?

“I’m sorry.” Her head lowers and she stares at my hands that now cover hers, rubbing them between my own, trying to warm them. Tears slip down her cheeks, mixing with the blood on her face, forming a zigzag of red streams that steadily flow to her chin, then drip onto her chest. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. You’ve been so wonderful, helping me. I appreciate it... umm...”

“William.”

She flashes me a quick smile. “William.”

The way my name rolls off her tongue is like a silk caress trailing across my skin. The sound is low and seductive, though I know she doesn’t intentionally mean it to sound that way. Despite the cuts on her face and her bloodshot eyes from crying, her beauty shines through. When she flashes her

straight white teeth at me, my stomach flutters, and my heart skips a beat.

What the fuck was that? I've never felt anything like that before.

I rub a hand over my chest. It's probably from hunger and adrenaline mixing, causing my body to react in unusual ways.

"No need to apologize. It's been a harrowing night." I flash her a smile, then reach over and open my glove compartment, taking out some napkins I keep in there. Closing it, I gently press one against her face, wiping the tears and blood from her chin and cheeks. My eyes study every contour and curve of her face, trailing upward to the nasty gash at her hairline. "This may sting a bit."

As gently as I can, I press the napkin against the wound, her wince causing my heart to skip a beat again. She closes her eyes, her long lashes resting against her cheek.

"Is this okay?" My voice comes out as a whisper, my face close to hers as I continue applying gentle pressure, trying to stop the bleeding.

She opens her eyes, and I feel like I'm drowning as I stare into them. It's as though I'm sinking into a huge pot of melted chocolate. And I love chocolate. It should be its own food group, as far as I'm concerned.

"Yes." There is a softness to her face as her gaze locks onto mine, drawing me in, rendering me speechless. She takes in a

deep breath, her chest rising, then falling as she slowly exhales.

This woman is fucking injured and traumatized, yet I'm staring at the cleavage revealed by the turquoise tank top she's wearing.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"I just... I can't go where she can easily find me." Her words draw my gaze back to her face, and I'm discouraged by what I see there.

She's deathly pale and clearly in a lot of pain.

I gently pull the napkin from her wound, relieved to see that the bleeding has stopped. I toss the soiled napkins into the backseat.

As I stand, her brows furrow as she takes in my determined posture. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking you to my apartment and calling my doctor so he can stop by and check you out." Not giving her a chance to respond, I close her door, hurrying around my car and sliding into the driver's seat before she can try to jump out.

The last thing she needs is to run down the road in her condition.

Gunning the engine, I make sure it's clear before I race across the road, heading for home. Turning down the radio, I figure the heavy metal music that's blaring from my speakers will increase her panic. I'm surprised when her hand covers mine, halting my movements.

“This is Disturbed, right?” Her smile is faint, but the look on her face makes me pause. It’s as though she needs something to distract her from her pain and injuries... and whatever other horrors she’s been privately enduring.

I’m able to read that look because I’ve been through it.

Music, running, and any other distraction I can find rule my life most days.

Anything to prevent me from thinking about my horrible past and my shitty father.

“Yup. Do you like them?”

She nods. “I used to run to this song. ‘Deify’ was, and still is, my song of choice when I just want to run and forget everything else.”

My smile grows and I nod appreciatively, the tension draining from my body at her admission. She’s a kindred spirit.

“Same. I was running to it earlier at track practice.” I flash her a grin as I remove my hand from the volume control, causing her to pull her hand from mine. I’m surprised at how much my pulse races from her touch, but now, I’m bereft that it’s gone.

She shifts in the seat, the smile vanishing from her face. Her teeth clench as she expels a pained hiss. Her left hand rests on her thigh, fingers digging into the material of the shorts she’s wearing.

Slowing down, I gently put my hand on her thigh, my fingers winding around her, unlatching her fingers from her shorts.

“Are you okay?”

Her breaths saw in and out of her lungs as she leans against the seat. She gives a curt nod, but I’m not at all convinced.

Grabbing my cell phone, I swipe through my contacts. Putting the phone to my ear, I wait impatiently for Bryan to answer. He is so much more than a business partner and confidant. Bryan is my go-to guy, the one who has been unquestionably loyal and level-headed, no matter what has come our way.

“Bryan. Call Dr. Jackson and have him meet me at my apartment. I should be there in about ten minutes. I’ll explain later.” Hanging up the phone, my eyes cut to her beautiful face. Her eyes are closed, causing my throat to constrict from worry.

My hand raises to her wrist, feeling for her pulse. It’s there, beating fainter than it should be.

“Hold on, Everleigh,” I whisper, as I slam my foot on the clutch and shift, accelerating quickly. I’m grateful for this car as I surge ahead, my speedometer reading sixty miles per hour.

My muscles are taut as I steer my car through traffic, passing cars like they are sitting still. One jackass leans his head out the window and yells at me. I hold up my middle finger, my lips curving into a smug grin.

Let that fucker try to catch me.

The ride from the stop sign where I witnessed Everleigh’s accident to my apartment would normally take about fifteen

minutes.

But not today.

As I pull up to the driveway leading to my apartment, I quickly enter the code. As the gates swing open, I glance at the time.

Eight minutes. Not bad at all.

As I drive forward, the gates swing closed behind me. I glance over at Everleigh, who is slumping further into the seat, her eyes still closed.

Pressing the button on my remote, the garage door opens. Quickly driving inside, I hit the button to close the door behind me. Shutting my car off, I throw my door open, pocketing my keys as I stand. My sneakers tap rapidly across the concrete floor as I hurry around to the passenger side.

Opening the door, I slide one arm beneath her legs, the other behind her back, and lift her from the car as gently, yet quickly, as I can. Using my foot, I kick it closed, heading for the private elevator that will lead to my penthouse apartment.

As the elevator carries us to the top floor, my head turns to hers, studying her beautiful face. Her porcelain skin reminds me of my mom's favorite China collection. Her long black lashes are closed, resting against her pale cheeks. She's still breathing, but clearly unconscious. I'm certain she's fainted from the stress, or her injuries, or both.

Whispering a prayer, my eyes lock on Dr. Jackson, who stands there waiting as the elevator door opens.

His eyes move from mine to the beautiful brunette in my arms. "Put her on the cot I have set up and turn her head to the side."

I set her on it, fear making my body break into a cold sweat, my limbs shaky. Stepping back, my hand runs through my hair as I watch him work.

Please let her be okay.

I only know her name, but not who or what she's running from.

Everything else about her is a complete mystery.

Even so, I vow right then and there to do anything to heal her and secure her safety.

I must be out of my goddamned mind.



Leaning forward, my head lowers to my hands as the despair washes over me. Tears fall down my cheeks as I shake my head, feverishly hoping that Everleigh is safe.

My thoughts are bleak, repeating like a broken record inside my head.

She's gone and I'm all alone.

I can't do this without her.

As I begin mentally shutting down, her voice echoes around my living room, causing me to look up, my eyes darting

around, searching desperately for her.

But she's not there.

Depression overwhelms me, slithering over me, like a python wrapping around its prey, squeezing all the air from my lungs.

The loud ringing of my cell phone startles me, making me jerk. I straighten my leg out in front of me and pull it from my pocket. Looking at the screen, an involuntary smile curves my lips up. Though I really want to be alone, I'll always answer her calls.

"Hey, Irelynn."

"Will. Are you okay?"

I pause, debating how to answer that question. After a couple beats, I clear my throat. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Liar." Her voice blends with Max's, and I can't help but chuckle. Irelynn obviously has me on speakerphone.

"Fine, I'm lying. I'm pretty depressed right now."

"That's what I thought. Well, we are here to cheer you up, so open your gate."

My phone chimes, indicating someone has pressed the button to be let in. Moving my phone away from my ear, I look at the screen showing Max and Irelynn in his Jeep, waiting to be let in.

Shaking my head, I press the button to open the gates, then switch to speakerphone.

“Why are you here?” My tone is slightly harsher than I meant it to be, and instantly I feel remorse. But it doesn’t bother Irelynn, who sounds as cheery as ever.

She hesitates for a few beats. Her words are laced with sympathy when she speaks. “I know today is the anniversary of Everleigh’s disappearance. I didn’t want you to be alone. So I asked Max if we could come over.” Irelynn pauses, a smile pulling up her lips. “I foresee a game of *Mario Kart* in our future. I’m ready to kick both of your asses tonight.”

I know her humor is a deliberate attempt to distract me from my misery. And it’s working. A slight smile curves up my lips when Irelynn says she’s going to beat Max and me playing *Mario Kart*.

She always loses.

I hear Max saying, “Good luck with that, babe.”

With a chuckle, I shake my head. “Irelynn, you know you can’t beat us. I don’t know why you try.”

She huffs, then laughs. “One of these days, neither of you will be laughing when I’m the winner.”

Max and I laugh harder at her.

When I finally get myself under control, I say, “Today is not that day. Bring it, blondie.”

“Oh, it’s on!” She declares. “Max just parked his Jeep. Prepare yourself.”

“Prepare to what? Laugh my ass off when you lose?” I can’t resist teasing her, knowing I’m ruffling her feathers. Max laughs harder, so I know her hands are clenched into fists as her eyes flash.

“What’s so funny, husband?” Irelynn scolds him, but I hear the smile in her voice.

“You, beautiful. Sorry, love, but I’m with Will on this one. You know you can’t beat us.”

“We’ll see about that.” Her voice is filled with determination.

Standing, I turn on some lights, illuminating my dark living room. I head over to the elevator, pressing the button to let them in.

A few minutes later, the doors slide open, revealing Irelynn and Max’s smiling faces.

“Hi, Will. We thought you could use some friends and fun.” Irelynn holds up a container of donuts with one hand, her other interlaced with Max’s fingers.

“Hey, Will. We also brought you a coffee.” Max gives me an easy grin, his calm presence easing some of my tension.

“A girly coffee,” Irelynn says before I have a chance to say anything.

I shoot her a glare, then wink at Max. “Tickle her, please.” I grab the donuts and coffee from him.

“No, please, don’t.” She holds up a hand in mock surrender. “I take it back.”

Max laughs. “You’re lucky. You conceded just in time.” He kisses her forehead, then tugs on her hand, leading her to the couch in my living room.

As I busy myself setting up the game, I throw a look over my shoulder, my face serious. “Thanks for stopping over, guys.” I swallow hard, the misery threatening to overwhelm me. “It means a lot to me.”

Max squeezes Irelynn’s hand. “She had a feeling you were having a rough night.”

I smile at Max, then my face softens at Irelynn. “I was having a bad night.” I let out a sigh, Everleigh’s porcelain face appearing in my mind, her chocolate eyes sparkling at me. My heart squeezes inside my chest, and I turn away from them. My hand raises, lightly rubbing the outside of my shirt covering my aching heart. Focusing on my breathing, I force the image of Everleigh from my mind. Turning back to them, a grateful smile curls up my lips. “But my friends are here with caffeine and sugary goodness. And a certain petite blonde is about to get her butt kicked in *Mario Kart*. My mood has improved already.”

Irelynn crumples her straw wrapper and throws it at me. “Dream on, Will. You’re going down.”

I exchange a grin with Max, who shakes his head, glancing over at his wife affectionately. She isn’t paying attention to

him as she stares at the huge television screen on my wall, her shoulders pushed back in determination.

I hand Max a controller, then hand one to Irelynn when she turns her attention to me. She takes it but her chocolate eyes bore into mine, then roam over my face, assessing me. Her hand raises, briefly squeezing mine, before lowering to the controller in her opposite hand.

My mood has already improved, thanks to my two best friends. I'm grateful they are here for me, knowing that I needed them.

I relish the lighthearted glow that surrounds me when Max and Irelynn are present, knowing it won't last.

Once they leave, the darkness will find me again.

It always does.

Everleigh continues to haunt me every night in my dreams.

Chapter 2

William

Sweat runs down my chest in rivets as my eyes snap open, the harsh, early morning rays of the sun blinding my eyes, making me squint. My heart beats like a drum at a Metallica concert as my hand automatically slides across the sheets beside me, reaching for her.

Not finding her, my shoulders slump in disappointment, even though the darkest recesses of my brain knew she would not be there.

There isn't one damned night that I'm not haunted by Everleigh's disappearance. For over two years, all I've done is ached and longed for her. Even as anger flows through my veins like viscous lava, burning me from the inside, my palm automatically slides to my heart, rubbing over it as though it's a damn genie lamp that will somehow make her magically appear.

My head drops to my chin as hot tears slowly slide down my cheeks, the ache inside my chest expanding out from the pieces of my fractured heart. Like the flicker of a match, the flame sparks, latching onto one section of my cleaved heart,

spreading like wildfire beneath my skin. My lungs constrict, as though filled with the smoke from the fire consuming me, as a loud sob rips from me, agonizing pain coursing through my body.

Fuck!

As angry as I am that she abandoned me, that she didn't have faith I could keep her safe, I'm even more devastated at the thought something terrible could have happened to her.

What if she's... I *can't*.

The sheer thought that Everleigh's heart is no longer beating destroys me.

I sit up in my enormously cold and lonely bed, my palm absently rubs over my chest again, as if I can somehow remove the pain that's ever-present in my heart. My stomach hardens as my thoughts spin wildly, turning over every piece of my past with her, examining it for any possible clue I may have missed to indicate where she might have gone.

I've done this so many times since she vanished without a trace, yet I always come up empty.

I need to talk to someone. I'm going fucking insane.

Grabbing my phone from my nightstand, my voice is impatient as I bark into my phone, "Siri, call Irelynn Devlin." Holding my phone in my hand, I listen to it ring twice, then her breathless voice comes over the line.

"Hey, Will. What's up?"

Warmth fills my body as I picture the woman who has become one of my closest friends, her smile bright enough to thaw the chill that permeates deep inside my bones.

“I need to talk to you. Do you have any free time today?”

“I’m interning at the community clinic today. If you’ll pick me up and drive me there, we can chat.” I hear her feet moving down the steps, then her muffled, “Hey, love,” and the sound of her kissing Max.

“Tell Max I said hi.”

“I’m putting you on speakerphone so you can tell him yourself.”

“Hey, Max. What’s up?”

“Hey, Will. Apparently, you are, bright and early this morning. Everything okay?”

I pause for a few seconds, my head pounding from lack of sleep.

Nothing some coffee won’t fix.

Pulling up my text messages, I shoot off a request to Emma, my housekeeper/cook/surrogate mother, requesting that she bring me an iced caramel latte with two shots of espresso. An irritated grunt comes from my mouth as I refocus on answering Max. “Fucking nightmares of Everleigh’s accident keep haunting me. I’m hoping if I talk about it, it will help get my head straightened out a little, so maybe I can sleep.”

“Ah, I understand. Sorry to hear that, man.” His voice is gentle. I know nightmares from what happened with his family and brother plague Max. And of course, when Irelynn was... gone. I grimace, my stomach turning to acid when I think about what I did.

No, don't think about that right now.

I hear the rattling of pots and pans as he begins his typical morning routine that includes making breakfast. I hear the clammer of him setting them on the stove, then his calm, low voice comes through the phone. “My wife is easy to talk to. Best listener ever.” His voice is muffled as he says something to Irelynn before his voice comes through the line. “I’m making chocolate chip pancakes and bacon. Wanna come over?”

“Sure. You are speaking my language when you mention anything with chocolate in it. I’ll be over as soon as Emma brings me my coffee.”

Irelynn chuckles. “Don’t let Darin hear you mentioning her. He spent an hour texting me last night, begging me to talk to you about sharing Emma with you. Not sexually.” She pauses and I picture her flushed cheeks as she expels a nervous laugh. She still gets embarrassed easily, despite being married to Max and being best friends with Vanessa and Darin, three people who are comfortable saying pretty much anything and are rarely humiliated over anything. I tune back into the conversation as she says, “Apparently, Darin wants to hire Emma as his personal chef.”

Laughing, I scrub one hand through my hair, getting out of bed and heading toward the bathroom. “Tell him I’m not sharing her and then tell him to text me instead of you. I enjoy making him whine and beg for Emma’s food.”

Irelynn laughs. “I’ll tell him, but then I better shut my phone, and Max’s, off, because you know he’ll blow them up. When we don’t answer, he takes pictures of his ass and sends them to us.”

I snort as I grab my toothbrush and toothpaste. “I’ve seen enough pictures of his ass to last me a lifetime.”

She laughs. “Same. So not to change the subject, but my supervisor canceled the 8:30 a.m. staff meeting. That will give us more time to chat.”

“Perfect. That works for me.”

Max’s voice comes through her phone. “That works great for me, too. I can get to Darin’s shop earlier. He’s swamped right now with motorcycles since bike week is coming up. And I can’t stay late. I have classes this afternoon.” Bacon sizzles in the pan as he cooks. “I’ll pick her up and we can meet you for lunch, if you want?”

“Sounds like a plan. Emma just arrived. I’m gonna shower, then I’ll head over. See ya in about fifteen minutes.”

“Bye, Will,” they say in unison.

I shake my head, a wry smile on my face. Those two are so in sync that they complete each other’s sentences.

But I don’t say anything, simply ending the call.

Twisting around, I turn my shower on, my heart squeezing inside my chest as an image of Everleigh's face appears in my mind.

Fuck, it hurts.

My palm rubs over my chest as I close my eyes, taking deep breaths. Intense longing fills every facet of my body.

As I step beneath the warm spray, I bow my head beneath the water, letting it run over my aching head, and pound on my tense, corded muscles. It's as though someone dropped a bowling ball on my chest, frustration causing my hands to curl into fists at my side. I've spent every single day fantasizing or daydreaming about Everleigh, the image of her gorgeous face and body filling my senses, temporarily bringing them to life before everything dulls again, and I return to a shell of the man I once was when I was with her.

Two years ago, she literally crashed into my life from the accident that happened right in front of me. After nine glorious months together, she vanished from my life, leaving me to self-destruct in the worst possible ways.

I grimace, biting my lip, as wave after wave of guilt tightens my chest. Images of me kidnapping Irelynn, then holding her captive in what used to be my grandparent's house, worsen my headache. Every part of me wishes I could go back to that moment when I first saw her on campus again, fear widening her eyes, her face pale, as though she'd seen a ghost.

When she closed her eyes, her body trembling, it felt as though she wished she had never met me.

Like a knife being twisted into my heart, driving deeper and deeper, the pain was excruciating as disappointment curdled inside my stomach like sour milk.

I'd stepped into the shadows, out of her field of vision, still watching her. The relief that spread across her face when her eyes opened and she no longer saw me standing there cut me deeper, splintering pieces of my heart. In that instant, I knew she still believed the lie that I had violated her in high school, and I despised her for thinking I could ever do something like that.

Especially to her. The first girl I'd ever loved.

I've never been a squeaky-clean guy. Not even close. But dammit, I tried so hard to talk to her after that fateful night. She and her brother, Mike, my fucking best friend, looked right through me, shutting me out of their lives.

As though I was a heartless bastard who was capable of raping his sister, who was a virgin.

Mike's betrayal hurt the most. He knew how much I fucking cared for Irelynn.

I knew she was a virgin. Hell, I'm not proud of it now, but in high school, I ruined every date she tried to go on, not just because I was head-over-heels for her, but because most of the guys knew she was a virgin and wanted to "pop her cherry."

Despite Irelynn throwing herself at me that night at my party, I shut it down. Sure, she and I kissed and ground our fully clothed bodies together. Well, Irelynn managed to get my

shirt around my neck but was too sloppy drunk to get it over my head, so I took it off.

But, short of us kissing and her hands roaming over my chest and abs, that's all that happened.

When her fingers went to the button of my jeans, alarm bells rang through my head. I wanted to be her first in the worst way, but I couldn't take her virginity in the condition she was in. She was too damn drunk.

There's no fucking way I could have lived with myself if I did.

Instead, I stopped it and told her I was taking her home. She passed out on my bed, and I carried her through my home, sneaking her down the hallway to the servants' quarters and out to my car, sparing her the humiliation of all the students from Anderson Academy seeing her drunk.

Although I prevented them from bullying her, I'd have to kick some serious ass to stop the rumors that were sure to spread like wildfire if they saw me carrying her to my car. I'd already heard them bitch about Irelynn's goody two shoes reputation, and I knew they would circle her like sharks smelling blood in the water if they saw me carrying her unconscious body to my car. The rumors would be so cruel and vicious that Irelynn would hate coming to school every day, just like she did her sophomore year when they relentlessly bullied her.

Irelynn briefly regained consciousness as I was driving her home, telling me she was going to get sick. Pulling off the side

of the road, I held her hair back as she shoved the door open and vomited on the shoulder of the road. When she was finished, I cleaned her up with some napkins.

She passed out again, and I continued driving her home.

Before I left my house, I texted Mike and told him I was bringing Irelynn home. Once we arrived at her house, I texted him to come outside and meet us, not wanting Irelynn to get in trouble with her parents.

Instead, Mike ambushed me, accusing me of violating his sister.

The memory of that incident haunted me for the rest of my days at Anderson Academy.



Mike's face was scarlet from his anger, his chest heaving. "What the hell, William?" He pulls Irelynn from my arms. "I trusted you. How the hell could you do this to her?"

"It's not what you think, Mike. Let me explain."

"No! I've heard enough of your explanations! I've warned you about your possessiveness toward her. And seeing her now, like this, her clothes askew... How could you violate her, William?"

"Violate her?" I roar, not caring if I wake the entire neighborhood. "I did no such thing!"

"Oh, come on, William..."

Interrupting, I get in his face, seething with rage, my hands shaking. "I didn't fuck her, Mike. I could have, but I didn't."

"Seriously, William. I know how you are with women. And you expect me to believe that?" He shakes his head, moving back slightly, disgust all over his face.

"I damned well expect you to believe me! You fucking know me better than that." I step forward, my eyes flashing with fury. Looming beneath my anger is a sharp pain in my chest, my vision blurring as heat fills my body. I blink back the tears that threaten to fall, betrayal heavy like a rock in my stomach.

My tone is low as I carefully enunciate every word that comes from my mouth. "I could have fucked your sister, considering how she was throwing herself at me tonight. But I didn't because she was drunk."

Letting out a laugh, he shakes his head. "You're pathetic, William. Really unbelievable. Irelynn tried to tell me not to trust you! And I didn't listen." He takes a couple of steps back, still facing me. "You are not to have any contact with her whatsoever. Do you understand me?"

My face goes pale as all the blood drains out of it. "Are you kidding me, Mike? I did nothing wrong! I did not fuck your sister! Hell, I didn't do anything other than kiss her, then bring her home."

"Just leave, William. Don't show your face around here again. Stay the hell away from us!" Whirling around, he storms off, carrying Irelynn inside the house, who remained passed out during the entire confrontation between us.

Tears flow down my face as I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans, the cold December air permeating the thin, long-sleeved shirt I wore. I didn't even bother putting on a jacket before I brought Irelynn home.

Shivering, my head tilts up to the darkened night skies, the moon and stars hidden behind the heavy clouds that swirl ominously across the sky.

Dark. Like me.

The sinister voice comes from inside me, trying to make me believe I'm no different from my father.

But another voice rises from within, reminding me of my mom's lilting, cheerful voice.

Just give Mike time. He'll come around.

Only he didn't. He remained convinced I violated his sister and refused to hear me out. He also made good on his promise, cutting me from his life.

Obviously, he told Irelynn his version of events because she looked at me with a combination of fear, hatred, and disgust when I saw her in school. She refused to listen to me, terror and humiliation in her eyes every time she even glanced at me.

It gutted me. Destroyed me.

I didn't just lose my best friend and the only girl I'd ever cared about. I lost her entire family, who had always treated me better than my own miserable failure of a father.

I lost everything.



Shaking my head, I turn my body beneath the spray of warm water, letting it pound against my back, breathing life into my aching, taut muscles.

I can't change the past. I need to continue moving forward.

Realizing I've been lost in my thoughts for too long, I hurriedly wash, then rinse the soap from my body.

Stepping onto the fluffy mat outside my shower, I quickly dry off, grabbing my cell phone as I move from the bathroom back to my bedroom. As I set it on my dresser beside my car keys, I release a long sigh, running my fingers through my hair.

Stepping inside my closet, I pull out a pair of jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt, then grab a pair of Brooks running shoes. Grabbing my watch from the top of my dresser, I put it on, then swipe my car keys and cell phone and open my bedroom door, taking a deep breath.

As I'm heading down the stairs, Emma greets me, a huge smile lighting up her face.

Kissing her cheek, I pluck the caffeine-infused goodness from her hands, the aroma of the rich espresso filling my senses, breathing life into me. "Good morning, Emma. How are you feeling today?"

"Really good, um... W-Will." She stutters over my nickname, still not used to calling me anything other than

William.

That persona still lives inside me but is full of darkness, confusion, and anger. The softer side of me, Will, which was first unleashed when I met Everleigh, came out again because of Irelynn. It has been far more prevalent lately, as Max, Darin, and Vanessa have also started calling me Will.

My father always despised the shortened version of my name, and forbade anyone from using it, including my mom, but I always preferred it.

It makes me feel less like a monster.

“I’m glad to hear that.” My hand grips her shoulder as I study her intently, ensuring she’s being truthful. She battled cancer recently, and while her doctors have said she’s in remission, I pay her a bit more attention these days. Emma likes to downplay her health issues, not wanting to be a bother. But I don’t see anything that causes me to be concerned, so I give her a relaxed smile. “I’m heading over to Max and Irelynn’s for breakfast, then I have some appointments before classes. I’ll be back later tonight. If something changes, I’ll let you know.”

She squeezes my cheek. “Okay, dear. Have fun and be safe.”

I wink at her, kissing her cheek once more. “Always, Emma.”

She gives me a huge grin before I continue running down the stairs, heading to my private elevator. Pressing the code,

the doors open, and I step inside, my mind already on Max and Irelynn.

I love spending time with them, but the bond and extraordinary love the two of them share makes my heart ache.

Memories of Everleigh crash through me like waves, threatening to drag me under and drown me every time I'm around them.

But they've become such good friends to me I endure it. I've been a loner for far too long, living within the shadows. Most of it was my own doing, as I hid my true self behind arrogance, narcissism, and entitlement, fearing I'd get hurt again if I let anyone inside.

Fuck being alone. I'm tired of it.

When the elevator stops, the doors slide open, and I hurry into my garage, unlocking my car doors and sliding behind the steering wheel.

As I start the ignition, I pull up my playlist. The first song is "Deify" by Disturbed. The song I was listening to when I met Everleigh.

Pressing play, I crank the volume, then back out of the garage, shifting gears. Closing my garage door, then entering the code to open the gates, I make sure there isn't any traffic coming before I fly out on the road, music blaring.

I know it will remind me of Everleigh, but what the fuck doesn't?

Chapter 3

Everleigh

Standing in front of the sliding glass doors wearing only a long t-shirt and my panties, I stare at the lush green foliage stretching in front of me. Maple and oak trees surround the quaint cabin, becoming thicker and denser the further my eyes travel.

A long, mournful sigh falls out of my lips, my shoulders sagging as agony makes my lungs constrict. Lifting the coffee cup to my lips, I take a long sip of the piping hot java, the burning sensation convincing me I'm still alive.

Since the day I was forced to walk out on William Anderson, I've been despondent.

I had no other choice, though. I'd do anything to protect him from that bitch.

Which is why I'm currently hiding out in a cabin, deep within the woods, living like a hermit.

When William and I fell in love, that made him a target, and he wasn't aware of it. Or, if he had some inclination, he wasn't concerned.

And he should be.

Ainsley is a murderous bitch who would torture, maim, and kill him, just to hurt me.

Tears of frustration fill my eyes as I pace in front of the glass doors. Setting my coffee cup on a nearby table, I run my hands through my tangled brown hair, then lower my hands to my sides, my fists clenched.

It's so unfair that I've been running for so long.

It's even crueler that I can't be with the man I love.

There's a tightness in my chest, like a taut string about to snap, that makes it hard for me to breathe. It's like I'm standing in the middle of the desert during a windstorm, my eyes burning and gritty from holding back tears, choking on a sandstorm of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me.

My mind drifts to the moment I first met William. A life-changing moment in every respect.



I'd just been in a car accident, and I knew damn well it was Ainsley who was driving the SUV that hit me. I recognized the psycho bitch's eyes just seconds before her vehicle collided with mine, rolling my Miata onto its roof before speeding off.

As I'm trying to unhook my seatbelt, fully prepared to run despite whatever injuries I sustained from the accident, a gorgeous man knelt beside me, calling nine-one-one. I pleaded

with him to hang up. Despite not knowing me at all, his light blue eyes locked with mine, and he listened to me.

For the first time in my life, something went through me while I was hanging upside down in my seat, our gazes locked together. All my troubles faded away—the accident, Ainsley, my parents' deaths, being on the run for years. All of it.

He looked like a damn model, kneeling beside my mangled car. Despite the horrible circumstances I found myself in, when I looked into his eyes, I practically melted. The man radiated pure sex appeal, all lean, sinewy muscles rippling beneath his jeans. His t-shirt clung to his muscular chest and torso, exposing his biceps as he pulled me from the wreckage.

His arms held me against his warm body, suffusing me with a feeling of safety. It was exhilarating and scary. I'm used to taking care of myself and not relying on anyone for help. His woodsy, spicy scent surrounded me, and I inhaled deeply, breathing him in, collecting his essence beneath my skin.

His words brought me back to reality the second he mentioned taking me to a hospital. I'd be a sitting duck in there. Ainsley would probably kill a nurse or doctor and masquerade as them, just to get her damned claws on me. There was no way in hell I was going to allow her easy access to me, despite whatever injuries I sustained. We argued about hospitals and doctors until he lifted me in his arms, carrying me to his BMW.

The tangy metallic scent of my blood was pungent as it drifted and mixed with the salty ocean breeze as he carried me

to his car. I didn't want to get blood on his seat, so I protested when he opened the passenger door. For the first time since I'd met him, he ignored my pleas. If I wouldn't have been injured in the accident, I would have jumped out of his car and ran far away from him.

But the wooziness set in, and I stopped protesting, taking advantage of his kindness by letting him ease my suffering. Like an injured bird unable to fly, I succumbed to my affliction and accepted a stranger's generosity.

Of course, passing out in his seat likely played a huge role in that.



My thoughts return to my present state, standing barefoot in an isolated cabin, my lonely existence a bitter pill to swallow. Taking another drink of the steaming coffee, I pace across the floor, stopping in front of the sliding glass doors again.

I was restless last night, barely able to sleep. Tossing and turning like a small boat in rough seawater, my mind didn't want to shut off.

Whenever I succumbed to sleep, I either dreamed of the man I loved but couldn't have, or had nightmares about Ainsley, stalking and torturing me, until she ended my life.

Not a fun way to exist.

I stare enviously at a squirrel, watching as the tiny creature jumps from limb to limb, its movements swift and sure

without the weight of the world on its shoulders. I hardly remember a time in the past twelve years when I didn't feel like I was buckling from the pressure.

Except for one brief period two years ago when I met William. It took me only nine months to fall head-over-heels for him, sharing my life—and burdens—with him.

My eyes lift to the brilliant blue sky, reminding me of William's eyes. Immediately, my thoughts spiral to waking up in his apartment after the accident, his light blue eyes tinged with worry and concern, his chiseled jawline looking like it was carved from marble.



My eyes pop open, fear making my heart race inside my chest as I scan the unfamiliar ceiling and lighting above me.

William leans over me, his eyes reminding me of the nest of robin's eggs that I once found on my back porch. Those tiny eggs captivated me, but my dad insisted I refrain from touching them. I checked on them obsessively when the mother wasn't around, anxious for the day they finally hatched. And when they did, I was mesmerized by the tiny babies. Wanting to protect them and ensure their safety, I watched over the four baby birds until they all flew away.

Everything and everyone in my life seems to fly away from me, willingly or unwillingly.

My fear overwhelms me, filling my body. My brain screams at me to flee and hide away at the first opportunity.

But everything changes when he tilts his head, making strong eye contact with me, his demeanor calm and full of concern.

“How’re you feeling?” William’s voice is low and deep, filling me with serenity. Reaching for my hand, he wraps his large fingers around mine, the warmth of his palm making my insides glow like the lights on the Christmas trees I used to love as a child.

My breath hitches as I stare into his handsome face and my blood pumps furiously through me, causing me to come alive like new buds blossoming on a tree during the spring.

Despite my body humming to life, peacefulness washes over me, as if I’m standing in a meadow filled with red, purple, and white wildflowers, the sun washing the field in a prism of color. I have a vision of me wearing a sundress, my arms spread out, a hat on my head, as I twirl around, dancing with the flowers that sway in the breeze.

He’s standing so close to where I’m laying that the aroma of spice and woods surrounds me. I automatically inhale him as he leans closer, waiting for me to say something. His lips quirk up at the corners, aware that I’m smelling him. His scent compliments my wildflower field at the edge of the woods perfectly.

I bet he’d think I was crazy if he knew what I was thinking.

I'm back in the field at the edge of the woods, but this time, as I turn, strong hands grip my waist. My arms lower to my sides as I spin around, facing him. Happiness surges through me, making me feel like I'm floating. As his perfect smile beams down on me, warmth surges beneath my skin, starting from my heart and spreading outward. His flaxen hair glints like the colors of the sand on the beach beneath the bright rays of the sun. His pale skin is radiant from his exuberance as he lifts me in the air, and I spread my arms wide again, the breeze flowing over me, pushing my brunette locks away from my face. I feel completely... free.

He lowers me, my body sliding against his. I'm standing on his feet, safe and secure in his embrace, as he begins dancing with me. His blue eyes sparkle like the bluish-violet sky above us as we dance to the rhythm of our heartbeats.

His hand gently squeezes mine and the daydream fades away. My face heats and I know I must be blushing to the roots of my hair. Clearing my throat, I blink and turn away from those piercing, observant eyes.

Why the hell is this guy affecting me so much?

The silence stretches between us. Trying to rein in my emotions, I finally squeak out, "I'm fine." The pitch of my voice is higher than normal, and my tone is breathy.

Yeah, there's no way he won't notice that.

Instead of a smug expression that I expect to see when I turn my head back to his, I'm surprised that his eyes and face are full of softness. He really is very handsome, with a chiseled

jawline, and a light blond stubble that just begs for my fingers to run over it. His flaxen blond hair is short at the sides, but longer on the top. When he smiles, his lip quirks higher on one side, displaying perfect white teeth.

My gaze lingers on his mouth, mesmerized by the curves of his soft pink lips. My tongue darts out, licking my bottom lip, wondering what they would feel like pressed against mine.

My eyes lazily trace over his face, back to his brilliant blue eyes. My breath hitches when I see him staring at my bottom lip, watching my tongue running over it. When his gaze lazily returns to mine, his eyes have darkened from the heat that blazes from them, warming my entire body. A delicious shiver of pleasure races through my spine, making all my nerve endings come to life. They stir and tingle, swaying and dancing like the wildflowers in my daydream.

A flame flickers beneath my skin, starting at my head, then traveling down my neck, across my breasts, and down to my stomach. Then lower, to the center of my thighs, and further down my legs until it finally hits the tips of my toes. And God, I shouldn't be imagining sitting up from this bed I'm laying on, wrapping my arms around his neck as my lips meet his, pulling him on top of my body.

And yet, that's exactly what I do. Images of our mouths colliding, frantic and passionate, his warm, muscular mass pressing me into the mattress fill my mind. My body is nearly desperate for his touch, my breaths coming faster as my eyes

lazily caress him. The realization that his breathing matches mine washes over me, making me light-headed.

His lips part as the warm puffs of his breath tickle my skin, raising goosebumps on my arms that travel through my entire body.

As if someone splashed his face with ice water, he suddenly jerks back, his hand running through his hair, disheveling it. His gaze travels along one wall, as though he's trying to get himself under control.

Damned if he doesn't look even more attractive.

My fingers itch to run my hands through his soft blond hair as I press my lips against his.

Gah! What the hell is wrong with me?

I've just been in a car accident, and I've been on the run from a psychopathic bitch for years, yet I'm turning into a pile of marshmallows over a hot guy? I mean, sure, he's the sexiest, hottest guy I've ever laid eyes on.

But still. This isn't me.

I'm strong and self-sufficient.

I don't want or need a man.

I sure as hell don't need to be taken care of by anyone.

And yet... he's making me react in ways I never have before. Making me desire things I have no business dreaming of.

Things I never thought I wanted because they were too far out of reach.

Maybe it's the effects of the accident. I mean, I was flipped upside down inside a car. It probably jumbled my brain, and this is nothing but a temporary short-circuiting of my faculties. Once I return to normal, I'll laugh over this incident that made me temporarily think crazy thoughts.

Although, a roll in the sheets with this hot guy before I run could be in the realm of possibilities. It's been quite a while since I had sex, and there's something about the way he moves that gives me the impression this man knows how to please a woman.

But when he turns back to me, I see fear in his eyes. As my gaze lingers on him, observing his every movement, I watch them close off, creating a distance between us. His eyes turn colder, his face tightens, and his body goes taut.

What's more surprising is my reaction. My body instantly turns cold, as though a frigid wind just blew across me, as he releases my hand. Crossing my arms over my chest, I wince as I shiver.

The curt and professional tone as he assesses me causes me to focus on him. "Dr. Jackson checked you over. You were very lucky to have only sustained the injuries you did during the crash. Even so, you will need time to recover. I'll let him explain it to you when he returns."

My brows knit in confusion. "The doctor isn't here? How long have I been... asleep?" I can't quite make myself say the word "unconscious."

“Nearly thirty-six hours.” He sticks his hands in the pockets of his... uh oh.

Gray sweatpants.

I swallow hard, my mouth dry.

Don’t look, don’t look.

But, of course, I do.

And wow! The outline of his cock in those pants... it’s huge!

I keep telling myself to look away, but like a bad accident, I can’t tear my gaze away. It doesn’t help that his entire body is turned toward me, making me grow feverish from the heat circulating through me. My heart bangs like a drum inside my chest and Jesus! I can’t stop the shiver of desire that goes through me.

William swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and my eyes trace over his clenched jaw, and then up to his strip you bare eyes. They heat with desire as he stares at me, and I’m lost to images of our naked bodies entwined together.

Then reality washes over me.

What the fuck am I thinking?

He doesn’t know me and I sure as hell don’t know him. William is just being a nice guy who came across me after the accident... wait a minute.

“Did you see the car accident?” My pitch is high, my fingers automatically reaching up and fumbling with the necklace my dad had given my mom. It’s one of my most prized

possessions, and one of the few things I retained after Ainsley took everything from me.

Wiggling to a sitting position, desperate for his answer, I wince as pain floods my body.

Instantly, William's hands grip my upper arms, gently pushing me back against the pillows propped behind my head. "Take it easy, sweetheart."

His words, and in particular, the tone of his husky voice, make me melt. His touch is so gentle as he helps position my body so I'm not in pain, then leans over me to ensure I don't make any sudden moves again.

"Yes, I did." There's a warning look that flashes through his eyes like he's about to tell me something I don't want to hear. "I was coming down the other side of the mountain and saw the SUV in front of me. I only paid attention because the vehicle was speeding, just like I was, and I was glad I didn't have some old grandpa in front of me. Then I thought it was odd that as far behind them as I was, they were just sitting at the stop sign. I assumed they were texting..." He swallows hard, his chin dipping to his chest as he averts his eyes. "Then your car came closer and... then they suddenly surged forward, slamming into you. I watched your car flip and then... they sped off."

My hand reaches for his, winding my fingers around his hand. I hate the guilt that I see. "William, it's not your fault. You didn't know what was going to happen." I grip his hand harder, my gaze locked with his as he stares at me, surprise on

his face from the passion and awe in my voice. “You saved my life. If you hadn’t been there...”

A flush creeps over his face, endearing him to me even more.

He winces, dropping his gaze. “I just happened to see it and was able to get in contact with Dr. Jackson. You were lucky your injuries weren’t more severe—”

“I’m not talking about my injuries.” Waving my other hand dismissively, I squeeze his hand gently. “Because you stopped and helped me, you likely prevented her from returning to finish the job.”

His brow furrows as he leans closer, his warm breaths hitting my face. “Is someone trying to harm you, Everleigh?” There’s a pained look in his eyes, as though he’s worried about me.

Hurt, maim, torture, and eventually kill me.

But I can’t say that to him. He’s already done so much for me. Involving him anymore would be disastrous for us both. And I need to leave soon.

I’m putting him in too much danger right now, simply by being here.

“When is Dr. Jackson coming back?” Turning my head away from him, I throw up the walls designed to keep everyone out. It’s the only way to spare other people from being hurt... or worse.

Sure, it's lonely as fuck and a hell of a way to live, but I've done it since my dad...

No. I can't think about him. Not right now.

William's fingers slide beneath my chin, turning my face toward his. His lips are so close to mine as his low voice flows out, reverberating through my body. "Tell me, Everleigh. I want the truth. Is someone trying to hurt you?"

His tone is commanding. There's a genuineness in his eyes, as though he desperately wants the truth from me. That he can handle whatever I throw his way.

And though I don't know him, I believe him. He seems like a guy who can handle a lot of shit.

"Yes. Her name is Ainsley Hunter. She's someone from my past."

He nods encouragingly, so I continue.

"We have a complicated history together. I saw something I shouldn't have. Over the years, I've learned too much. She wants her secrets to remain hidden, and she'll destroy anyone who threatens to expose the truth."

A glimmer of anger shines in his eyes. It's like the flick of a lighter that extinguishes quickly, but when it catches, the flame grows and swells, burning hotter and brighter. So hot the red turns to blue.

His hands slide to my face, cupping it gently, yet possessively. His gaze is so intense as they bore into mine,

unblinking, tension in the clenching of his jaw. "I won't fucking let that bitch hurt you. You're safe with me."

My hands wrap around his forearms, feeling the cords of veins and muscles in them. A lightness flows through my chest as a foreign feeling shoots through me.

He's genuinely worried about me. It's been so long since anyone has given two shits about me. Not since Mrs. Johnston, my former neighbor turned guardian, who spent my teenage years moving me from place to place, trying to protect me.

But in the end, she failed.

And I was left with only myself.

I can't forget that.

I'm all I've got.

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I'm shocked when I focus on William. The way he's looking at me, it's as though he knows my thoughts.

Like he'd take on the world to protect me.

But even scarier, his eyes bore into mine as though he understands the darkness and wants to pull me from it. Or hold my hand and enter it with me.

As though he knows what it's like to be alone, unable to rely on anyone, too scared to burden others with your demons.

I swallow hard, unable to speak.

I'm not sure I can trust him. I'm not sure I can trust anyone ever again.

The mattress dips as he lowers onto the bed, sitting beside me. He still cradles my face in his hands and never once has he broken eye contact.

“I’ll fucking kill anyone who tries to hurt you.”

Why do I want to believe him?

Chapter 4

William

Irelynn pulls the front door open, a bright smile on her face. Her skin glows from happiness. Married life definitely suits her.

“Hey, Will. Perfect timing. Max just finished cooking breakfast.” She steps back, gesturing for me to come in.

I step inside, feeling calmer just being around her. “Hey. Thanks for the invite. And for agreeing to talk with me this morning.”

“Of course.” She turns around, heading down the hallway. I follow behind, noticing Max setting the table.

“Hey, Max.” I give him a small smile as I step into their dining room.

“Hey, Will. Glad you could join us.” He gestures to a chair. “Have a seat.”

I slide into the chair across from Irelynn, raising my brows when I see Irelynn’s grin. Following her gaze, I can’t help but chuckle. “No, it’s not a ‘girly’ coffee. This is an iced caramel latte. Two shots of espresso.”

She's the picture of innocence as she says, "I didn't say anything." She grabs her fork as Max sets a plate of food in front of her, leaning over to kiss her as he does.

"Yeah, but she was thinking it." Max slides a plate of food in front of me, his eyes twinkling. "You know how she is."

I grunt. "Yes, I do. She's always busting my balls over the coffees I drink."

"Did someone say balls?" Darin's voice comes from behind me. "I'm down for any conversation involving that topic."

"Hey, Darin." I give him a grin, then grab the syrup, pouring it over my pancakes. "Maybe you really are gay, since you enjoy talking about balls."

Irelynn chokes on her bite of pancake. She takes a drink, her sparkling brown eyes meeting Darin's. "Are you just using my best friend as a cover to hide that you are gay, or are you bisexual?"

"Neither." Darin grabs his fork and taps it on the table, his eyes on Max as he heads to the kitchen to get more food. "Hey, wife. Where's my breakfast?" He winks at us, knowing Max is going to give him shit about that remark.

"Asshole, I'm not your wife. And since you called me that, I'm not serving you any food."

"Awe, dammit. I didn't mean it, Max." Darin flutters his eyelashes, looking completely ridiculous. He grins at me, acting normal for five seconds, then returns to his antics. "You know I love you, Max."

I shake my head, used to the crazy banter between Darin and Max. They are the best distractions from my usual melancholy and loneliness.

Irelynn catches my eye and mouths, “He’s so dramatic,” nodding her head toward Darin.

Max comes back, serving Darin a plate of food. “Here, jackass. Now shut up and eat.”

Darin grins. “Yes, sir.” He salutes Max, who scowls at him, his brows drawn together. I don’t know how the hell he can keep a straight face around Darin, let alone that annoyed expression he’s perfected.

As Max slides into his seat beside Irelynn, his expression changes as he smiles at his wife. “We need to move farther away so Darin isn’t over here every day, mooching for food.”

“Hey. I resent, and resemble, that remark.” His smile is wide. “And if Will would share Emma with me, I’d leave you guys alone.”

Max snorts. “Unlikely. You’d still stop by, mooching for more free food. And probably twenty pounds heavier than you are now.”

I laugh, regarding him with a twinkle in my eye. “Do you really think I’d give Emma up that easily?” I take a drink of my coffee, hiding the smile that threatens to curl up my lips.

“You wouldn’t be giving her up. It’s called sharing.” Darin winks at me, not easily discouraged.

“Or you could get off your lazy ass and learn to cook for yourself.” Max throws out with a grin, then takes a bite of bacon. “Stop trying to mooch off of Will, too.” He shakes his head, grumbling loud enough that we can hear him as he says, “Lazy fucker.”

We laugh as I privately marvel that this group of incredible people is my friends now. After everything that’s happened...

As if Max senses where my thoughts go, he bumps his leg into mine, his voice low. “What happened is in the past. Focus on the present. Everyone makes mistakes and you’ve suffered long enough for yours.”

I nod appreciatively, my voice hoarse as I say, “Thanks, Max.”

He grins. “I know the pain and suffering well. I did it for far too long, harboring guilt until it nearly destroyed me.”

“Yeah, it’s not good. But far easier holding on than letting go.”

“Oh I know, Will.” He grabs Irelynn’s hand, squeezing it. “She’s helped, tremendously, as have the rest of you. Lean on us when you need to. That’s what we’re here for.”

“Here, here.” Irelynn and Darin hold their glasses up in a toast. Max and I do the same, all of us clinking our water glasses together.

“You know what helps ease guilt? Sharing Emma with me.” Darin winks, taking a huge bite of food.

Laughing, I shake my head. “You are incorrigible.”

He shrugs. “I’ve been told that before. Quite a lot, actually.”

We laugh and continue eating and joking. My shoulders relax and my body feels lighter as the weight lifts from my shoulders, the burdens I carry inside me not so heavy. Because of the amazing people that surround me.

My friends.



Max holds Irelynn’s hand as the three of us head toward my beamer. I can’t help the pang that runs through me, my palm rubbing over my aching heart beneath my t-shirt. They are completely enamored with one another, a permanent, happy glow surrounding them. They move in unison, complete each other sentences, and share a bond that defies logic.

They are the epitome of love and happiness. A couple destined to be together for eternity.

I once had something like that. For nine blissful months, I was on top of the world when I held Everleigh in my arms.

She was broken, yet so fucking strong. I’ve never met a more badass woman in my life than her. Insanely beautiful, yet fiercely independent. She knew what she wanted and went after it.

And I was the luckiest man in the world that she wanted me.

But now... she’s gone. Along with all the light in my life. When she left, I became cloaked in darkness. Reveling in it.

My pain grips me so hard it makes my shoulders droop and sucks the breath from my lungs. Wincing, I fight to breathe through the ache.

“Are you okay, Will?” Irelynn’s hand reaches out, gripping my forearm, her brows furrowed with worry. Max’s face matches hers as his worried gaze meets mine.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. The two of you... you remind me of my past. Of Everleigh and me.”

Irelynn’s head turns to Max, then back to mine. “I’m sorry. Should we not be as affectionate—”

I’m already shaking my head before she can finish. “No, don’t change who you guys are. It’s just something I deal with on a regular basis. You guys see it more since I’ve lowered my guard around you.” Giving them a reassuring smile, I stand tall, forcing thoughts of Everleigh from my mind. “See, I’m fine.”

Irelynn still doesn’t look convinced as she bites down on her lip. She’s so empathetic that she feels people’s pain deeply. Max’s hand strokes her arm gently, trying to relax her taut muscles.

“Really, Irelynn, I’m fine.” I give her a smile, trying hard to hide the pain that squeezes my heart in an iron grip.

“Okay.” She shoots me a smile, squeezing Max’s hand tightly. He squeezes her hand back, leaning in and kissing her cheek, and I watch as she physically transforms, all the tension draining from her.

I unlock my car, sliding inside as Max holds the passenger door for Irelynn. As she slides into the seat beside me, I put the windows down.

“Drive carefully, Will.” Max leans in the passenger side window, worry drawing his brows in. I know how much he cares for his wife and wants to keep her safe.

Still, I can’t resist the urge to tease him. “Oh damn. And here I thought I’d take your wife drag racing. Shit. You just spoiled that plan.” Giving him a teasing grin, I start my ignition as he chuckles, shaking his head.

He leans into my vehicle and kisses Irelynn, then slowly pulls back, his hands finally leaving her face. “Wanna meet at the café on campus for lunch?” His eyes flick from Irelynn to mine.

I nod at him. “Sure. I’ll meet you guys there.”

“Great. Well, enjoy your morning. I’m heading back inside to drag the lazy asshole away from the food and to work.” He winks at us, pulling himself from the window, drawing himself to his full height.

Irelynn hangs her head out the window as I back up. “Bye, baby. I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you, beautiful. See you soon,” Max calls to her, shoving his hands in his pockets as he watches us leave.

As I shift and start forward, I wave at him, grinning as he blows a kiss to Irelynn, then turns and heads inside.

“So, married life is good, huh?” Turning my head, I smile at her, genuinely happy that she and Max have such a great relationship.

Her warm smile reveals her white teeth, her chocolate eyes sparkling at me. “It’s the best. I love it.” She puts her hand on mine as I rest it on my gearshift. “I really hope we can figure out what happened to Everleigh and get her back to you, Will.”

My smile falters as the pain washes over me. “Me, too.”

Seeing my discomfort, she changes the subject, removing her hand. “Did I tell you Max is trying to buy me a new car?” She rolls her eyes, shaking her head. “There’s nothing wrong with the one I have now.”

My eyes move from the road to hers as I marvel at her uniqueness. “Irelynn, most women would love for a man to spend money on them. It makes us happy when we can shower you with gifts.” My voice lowers. “Why does it bother you so much?”

She bites her lip, worrying it between her teeth, pausing for a few beats. “It’s just... he can give me so much more than I can ever give him. It’s an unequal balance.”

I stare at her for a moment before my eyes flit back to the road. As we come to a stop sign, I grab her hand. “Irelynn, listen to me. All Max wants is your love and happiness. He could give a shit less about anything material you can buy him. And anything you buy him, no matter how small you think it is, he’s going to love it because you were thinking of

him and bought him something.” Releasing her hand, I shift and drive forward. “So just let him buy you a car. He has plenty of money.”

She laughs, the tension disappearing from her body. “Wise words, Will. You’ve made me feel a lot better.”

I cock a brow at her. “Does this mean you’re going to let him buy you a new car?”

She grins. “Yeah, I’ll let him buy me a car.” She pauses, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I’ve never asked him about money. I know he has it, but…”

My gaze cuts to her. “He’d talk to you about it if you asked. I’ve given him some advice. He was doing quite well with what he was investing in. But he moved some over into more lucrative investments. You don’t need to worry about money.”

She nods. “I’ve just… always been so middle class. And after my experience at Anderson Academy… Well, I formed a negative impression about wealth.”

“I didn’t help that.” My shoulders are tense. “But I promise, not all wealthy people are assholes. Max has far more money than you’d think, Irelynn. It hasn’t changed him a bit. He’s still the man you love. And even if he triples his wealth, he’ll always be Max.” I slip my sunglasses on as the sun pops through the clouds.

“True.” Leaning forward, she pulls a pair of sunglasses from her backpack and slips them on. “Thanks for all the helpful advice, Will. Hopefully, I can return the favor.”

I grin. “You’re welcome. Just listening helps. It’s nice to get things off my chest.”

“Of course. That’s what I’m here for.”

Stopping at a red light, I turn to her. “What kind of car is Max thinking of getting you?”

She shakes her head, sighing softly. “Max says it’s my choice. He just wants me to get something relatively safe.” She rolls her eyes. “Personally, I’d like a sports car that he can drive, too. Like a Mazda Miata.”

Her words roll over my body like ominous storm clouds. Pain engulfs my chest as images of the SUV slamming into Everleigh in her red Mazda Miata swirl through my head, causing me to spiral back to that moment. Glass splintering through the air, raining down in shards, covering the road as the deafening crunch filled the air. Horror filled my body as I watched her car rolling onto its roof. Pure instinct took over as I jumped out of my car, running across the road to the red sports car, fear coiling my spine at what I may find inside.

I never expected to meet the woman who would capture my heart, holding it hostage. And as happy as we were, I sure as hell didn’t expect her to vanish like smoke.

“Will,” Irelynn’s sharp, concerned pitch crashes through my reverie, bringing me back to the present. Her hand curls around my arm. “What’s wrong?”

As I look into her chocolate eyes, the same color as Everleigh’s, my heart cracks, like the earth’s crust splitting

apart during an earthquake. “Sorry, I... I was remembering how I met Everleigh.” Hearing the horns blaring behind me, my gaze finally turns to the green light, and I shift, surging forward. “I’m not sure a Mazda Miata is the best choice as far as safety is concerned.” I’m trying not to let the past impact the advice I’m giving her, but I’m really struggling. “Did you mention it to Max?”

Her face is pale as she studies me.

Shit. I forgot how much she feels other people’s emotions.

I put a reassuring hand on her arm. “I’m fine. We’ll talk about this in a few minutes. We are almost there.”

She nods, but I can almost see the wheels turning in her head as she struggles with her words. “Sure. And yeah, Max went quiet and just stared at me with that frown on his face.” Her face brightens. “You know the look.”

Laughing, I put my turn signal on, turning into the parking lot of a coffee shop on the right. “The one he gives Darin all the time. And occasionally, Vanessa.”

Irelynn laughs, a confused look crossing her face as her gaze rakes over the coffee shop. “Do you need another coffee?”

“No, but Max has warned me you function much better when you have one of those frozen mochas in you. Since it’s only 7:45 a.m., I figured I’d better stop and get you one.”

She looks excited, then it turns to annoyance as she says, “And like Max, you aren’t going to let me pay, right?”

“You’re exactly right.” I pull up, place her order, then grab my phone from my pocket to open the app to pay. “And don’t start your shit. We are friends and this isn’t a quid pro quo relationship, so you owe me nothing.” Holding my phone out, the cashier scans it. “Seeing my friend happy is payment enough.”

“Best friend, right after my hubby.” She grins, squeezing my hand. “You and Darin are like big brothers to me. And of course, Vanessa is like a sister to me.”

My heart warms from her words. “I promise not to tell Darin or Vanessa. Vanessa would hit me with one of her high-heeled shoes and Darin would just screech like a little bitch, crying that he would be a better bestie than me.”

She throws her head back, laughing. “Oh my gosh, he was so crazy before the wedding. He texted Max daily, saying shit like, ‘I’m the bestest best man ever, right?’ or ‘I better still be your best man, asshole.’ Max threatened to block him if he didn’t stop.”

I shake my head, grabbing her drink from the cashier with a smile and nod, then handing it to her. “He’s such a diva. Pretty sure he texted me daily, too, saying shit like, ‘You aren’t trying to take over my best man spot, right?’ I knew he was joking and busting my balls. After the third time, I started telling him that’s exactly what I planned to do and texted him my diabolical plans.”

Irelynn nearly chokes on her coffee as she laughs. “Did he call you up, screaming like a little girl about it?”

“Hell yes. I kept it going, too. One night, he had me on the phone for two hours. I had my phone on speakerphone, letting him yell while I did work on my laptop.” Putting my turn signal on, I turn my car into the clinic’s parking lot, finding a spot close to the door.

“Why didn’t you hang up on him? Max does that. It really drives Darin nuts.”

“I did. But then he sends me pictures of his ass with texts that say, ‘Why did you hang up on me, asshole?’ When I don’t respond, he threatens to send me pictures of his balls.” Shaking my head, I laugh at the absurdity that is Darin. Cutting the engine, I pull out my keys, grab the door handle and step of my car.

Irelynn opens the passenger door, stepping out of my car. Coming around to her side, I grab the backpack from her hands, slinging it over my shoulder.

“The first time Darin threatened to send me a pic of his balls, I swear to God Max nearly had a stroke! He called him up, swearing at him.” Irelynn smiles up at me as we walk toward the door of the community clinic, her heels clicking on the sidewalk. “I laughed so hard I couldn’t breathe.”

I hold the door for her, chuckling. “They are certainly entertaining.”

She thanks me as she steps inside, the carpet muffling the sound of her shoes. She pushes her sunglasses on top of her head. “Speaking of entertaining, when we get to my office, I’ll

tell you Vanessa's latest antics." She takes a sip of her coffee, rolling her eyes. "I can't believe she didn't go to jail."

Shrugging, I take off my sunglasses, nodding my head at the receptionist. "At least she doesn't have to worry about bail. If her parents won't help her, Max or I will."

Putting her key in the lock, Irelynn unlocks it, then pushes it open. "True." She gestures for me to step inside, then closes the door, her demeanor changing as soon as she crosses the room, setting her laptop on the desk. Her professional persona takes over as she transitions from friend to counselor. She sits in the chair behind her desk, crossing her legs. "Before we start, I'll tell you about Vanessa." She glances at her cell phone, which she pulls from her purse. "Give me a second. I need to text Max and tell him we made it safely." Her fingers fly over the phone, then she sets it on her desk, leaning back in her chair. "Vanessa was late for class last Wednesday, so of course, she was speeding. She said she was probably doing twenty miles per hour over the posted limit when the cop hit his lights. Slowing down, she pulled over. When she saw the male officer get out of the car, an idea formed in her head."

Setting Irelynn's backpack beside her desk, I move to the chair opposite her, sliding my body into the comfortable chair. Emitting a groan, I lean forward, putting my head in my hands. Peeking through my fingers, I say, "I think I know where this is going."

"I'm sure you do. Low cut top, her cleavage already hanging out before he gets to the car."

“And she just happened to move so that at least one, if not both, of her boobs came out of the shirt.” Removing my hands from my face, I sit back, already laughing.

“Yup. And she wasn’t wearing a bra because ‘It had a built-in bra inside the top’ according to her. But you and I both know that’s not enough to provide her any type of coverage.”

“Jesus. Did he arrest her?”

Irelynn shakes her head, an amused smile on her face. “Nope. He gave her a warning and let her go.”

Snorting, I cross one leg over my knee. “That’s what being hot and having boobs will do if you use them to your advantage.”

She shakes her head. “One of these days, she’s going to get in trouble.”

“Probably. But we’d bail her out so...”

Grabbing a pen from her desk, Irelynn twists it in her fingers. “Now that you’re relaxed, how about we chat about what’s preventing you from sleeping?”

“I knew there was a catch.” I wink at her, leaning back into the chair. Taking a deep breath, my shoulders draw up to my ears. “Where do you want to start?”

“Wherever you feel like. We can talk about anything you want. And you know that anything you tell me remains locked inside these four walls.”

Nodding, I say, “I know, Irelynn. Although some of what I’ll tell you, Max and Darin already know. We talk when we go for runs or shoot some hoops.”

Her head tilts. “I’m glad you guys have become friends. Does Bryan still join you guys?”

“Not always, but usually. He’s been sticking a bit closer to Emma since her cancer diagnosis, and even though the doctors say she’s in remission, he’s trying to ensure she doesn’t overdo it.”

“That’s smart. She is stubborn.”

Releasing a sigh, I nod, but my thoughts change, automatically moving to Everleigh.

I wonder where she is and what she’s doing right now?

Though I know the danger she was in and believed that’s why she left, I firmly believe she’s alive. I refuse to consider the alternative.

“Why don’t we start with where you just went,” Irelynn gently prompts.

My breath hitches. “Okay. I’ll tell you about the tragedy that led me to Everleigh. Then we’ll go from there.”

She smiles encouragingly. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter 5

William

Silence descends over the room as I exhale, sighing dejectedly, my shoulders slumped. I had just finished telling Irelynn about Everleigh's car accident and how she refused medical assistance, so I took her back to my apartment and had Dr. Jackson examine her.

Irelynn's voice jars me from my thoughts. "It's amazing that broken ribs, lacerations, and bruises were the worst of her injuries. Thank God you were there."

My hands go through my hair as I stare at the carpet in her office. "It was the worst, yet the best, day of my life." I'm frozen in time, my thoughts whirling inside my head like a tornado, images of her and I swirl so fast that it's almost dizzying.

A sob chokes me, the bitterness of my heartache rising from my chest, heaving from my mouth. "I fell in love with her, Irelynn, but I... well, I didn't know what love was. I'd never experienced it. The sensations rolling through me, I blamed on hunger and adrenaline. It wasn't until months later that I realized the truth." My fingers tap restlessly on the arm of the

chair as my right leg bounces up and down. “I never got a chance to tell her before she... vanished.”

As soon as those words leave my lips, my gaze snaps to Irelynn’s, seeing her pained expression, her shoulders rounding forward as she curls into herself.

That’s exactly what she and Max experienced when I kidnapped her.

“Irelynn, I’m so fucking sorry.” My eyes plead with her to believe me, shame burning through my cheeks. My breath hitches and I really want to get up and run out the door right now.

“Will, don’t.” Irelynn quickly gets up from her chair, coming around the desk, her hands covering mine. “Don’t run away. You can’t change what happened, and I’m aware that you are sorry as hell and have yet to forgive yourself for what you did.”

Unable to stop the tears, they course down my cheeks like rivers, self-loathing weighing me down like boulders pinning my body to the chair.

My gaze locks with hers. “Do you know I envy what you and Max share? Every single fucking time I’m around the two of you. But then I feel guilty for wanting what you have because I don’t deserve it. Not after all I’ve done.”

Irelynn squats down in front of me, gripping my hands in hers. “Will, you deserve what Max and I have. Remember what Max said at breakfast, as well as I what I’ve repeatedly

told you. You need to let go of your shame and self-loathing. It's in the past. I've witnessed the tremendous growth you've experienced, as have the rest of our friends." Her expression is earnest as she squeezes my hands. "You're a wonderful person, Will. You are more than just a broken, damaged man. You saved us from Damian and your dad in the warehouse. And you saved and protected Everleigh." She pauses, a smile on her face. "You're a fighter. A hero. But even more importantly, you are working through your traumas, Will. Battling back the demons that plague you. That takes a helluva lot of courage."

My tears slow as her words penetrate my broken heart and soul. "Thank you, Irelynn." Leaning forward, I grab her in a hug, clinging to the woman who has become my best friend. Someone kind enough to overlook my flaws and issues and give me another chance.

Pulling back, a weak smile pulls at my lips. "Maybe I need to work through all these issues first to find her. To be able to give her what she deserves."

Irelynn gives a slow shake of her head. "Will, I met Max when we were both damaged and broken. I didn't realize how broken I was until him. We grew and worked through our issues together. We were a safe harbor for one another, completely accepting the other, flaws and all. From what you have revealed thus far, Everleigh felt the same about you." She pauses, turns to her desk, grabs a box of tissues, then hands them to me. She waits patiently as I clean up my face. "Didn't you accept Everleigh for who she was? Broken and flawed?"

Lowering the tissues, my face raises to hers. “Unconditionally.”

“I’m certain she felt the same way about you. And once you find her again, you guys can rekindle where you left off.” She stands, leaning against her desk, crossing one ankle over the other. “If Everleigh was broken when she came back to you, would that change your feelings for her?”

“Hell no.” My voice is full of passion. “I’d be there for her, giving her whatever she needed.”

“And do you honestly think she wouldn’t do the same for you?”

Boy, she is intelligent and so perceptive.

“I firmly believe she would. I’ve never believed she left because she stopped caring. Although there were times I felt betrayed when she vanished without a trace. But then I’d remember the nightmares that plagued her, even early on. And the day she left...”

Irelynn moves back around her desk, giving me a few moments to compose myself. Sitting in her seat, she crosses her legs, leaning back in her chair. “Tell me about that day.”

I lean back in my chair, memories flooding me. “Everleigh was a student at Stanford. Ironically, she wanted to be a therapist.” A smile tugs at my lips. “Like you, she would be great at it. She planned to go on to graduate school once she finished her undergraduate degree, majoring in mental health counseling.”

There's a smile on Irelynn's face. "Lots of opportunities in that field, for sure."

Nodding, the smile fades away as I lean forward, my elbows on my knees. "Everleigh and I both had classes in the morning. I had track practice in the afternoon and needed to attend because I had been skipping a lot of practice. Coach was ready to bench me. Everleigh didn't want that to happen, so she encouraged me to go." I pause, rubbing my palm over my chest, lost in thought. "Practice had ended, and I'd just gotten a shower and was getting dressed when she texted me, asking me to meet her for dinner. That wasn't an unusual request. I told her I'd pick her up, but she said she was 'running errands' and would meet me at the restaurant. A nagging feeling started eating at my gut because she rarely went places alone. She was being intentionally vague."

Irelynn sits in her chair, her expression thoughtful. "Because of the therapist she didn't trust. What's her name again?"

"Ainsley. She's used different last names at times. Williamson was the last name she used at Stanford when she was employed as a therapist there. Once Everleigh disappeared, I realized that Ainsley Williamson was also Ainsley Hunter, the therapist who Everleigh believed slept with her father while her mother was dying from cancer." I clear my throat, anger flowing through me, my hands clenching into fists. "I fucking despise cheating. Especially when someone is married. Ainsley was in Everleigh's father's bed right after her mom died. It about destroyed Everleigh."

She shakes her head, her eyes full of sympathy and sadness. “I can only imagine how that must have felt.”

“I hurried to the restaurant Everleigh asked me to meet her at. It was odd that I didn’t see her car parked anywhere. I had bought her a silver beamer.” Running my hand through my hair, I continue. “She must have been hiding around the corner of the restaurant because as I was rushing toward the door, she flew into my arms, nearly knocking me down.” Closing my eyes, memories assault me, her lean body against mine as I held her, the scent of her Red Door perfume and coconut-infused shampoo causing me to bury my face in her silky brunette locks. When my eyes snap open, Irelynn is staring at me, her head cocked to one side, her eyes and smile soft, lighting up her face.

“You should’ve seen your face, full of serenity, yet completely enthralled.” A dazed expression is in her eyes. “I’ve never seen such tenderness and warmth from you before. The love you feel for her shows. It’s palpable.”

I’m floating on the cloud of bliss Irelynn just painted as Everleigh’s face floats through my mind.

But the bubble pops as I realize all I have are the memories of her. It’s like she was a beautiful mirage that captivated me, then vanished.

But I know she’s real. For nine months, that woman was my entire world.

Sadness floats over Irelynn’s features, pulling her lips into a frown, her stare becoming empty like mine. “What happened

next?”

A mournful sigh escapes me as I lean back in the chair, my eyes on the ceiling. “We went inside to eat. Everleigh was very jumpy, constantly fidgeting with her mom’s necklace that she always wore. Her eyes darted around the room, and she kept drinking a lot of water as if her mouth was dry.” Pausing, I roll every detail of her body language through my mind, twisting and examining each piece, looking for some clue of where she may have gone. “We ordered dinner and after the waiter left, she told me that when she was walking across campus, she was nearly positive she saw Ainsley. She said she had long blonde hair and brown eyes, but it was the way she was staring at Everleigh that drew her attention to her. The crazy, psychotic look in her eyes is what she said bothered her the most.” I pause, picturing the Ainsley I remembered. “As I told you, when I was eighteen, they sent me to see a therapist over my breakdown. I had a teammate who taunted me because my parents never came to a single track meet. One day, I snapped and beat the hell out of him. Dr. Williamson was a licensed therapist working in the counseling center on campus. She had long, straight, black hair and coal-black eyes. She was aloof and mysterious. Her suggestive remarks to me weren’t obvious to me at first, because I was not in a good headspace. But then she made it known what she wanted when she grabbed my cock and kissed me.”

My head lowers and I see Irelynn frowning, blowing out a puff of air. “We are going to talk about the inappropriateness of that later.” She leans forward in her chair. “What did

Everleigh do when she saw... wait... was Ainsley her stepmom?"

"Her very wicked stepmother, yes. Everleigh refused to call her stepmom, mom, or mother, which infuriated Ainsley." I wince, my voice lowering. "She abused Everleigh because of it."

"Shit." Irelynn's hand goes to her throat. Tears fill her eyes. "Everleigh was a kid, right?"

I nod. "Ten years old when her dad married Ainsley. The abuse didn't stop until... the house exploded, killing Everleigh's dad. At first, Ainsley was a suspect because the next-door neighbor saw her go into the house before Everleigh's dad, Mr. Morrison, went inside. But she had disappeared without a trace. Some thought she died in the explosion, though her remains weren't found."

My hands steeple beneath my chin as my thoughts go back to Everleigh, as they always do. "Everleigh reached out to her friend. Someone who was really computer savvy and excellent at hacking. She had asked her to research new employees at Stanford who fit the physical description that Everleigh provided her. And that's when Everleigh disappeared." I frown, my head hanging low. "I promised to protect her. But I failed her."

"Will, that isn't true." The sound of her chair being pushed back infiltrates my ears, but I don't look up. I know Irelynn is beside me when I smell her apple cinnamon scent. Her hands

wrap around mine. “You did everything you could to ensure Everleigh’s safety. You can’t blame yourself for her leaving.”

“But I can, Irelynn. I have money and resources. I didn’t realize how desperate and scared she’d become. I was too in love with her to see the signs staring me in the face.” My hands grip hers as I look at Irelynn. “Everleigh looked over my shoulder and her face drained of all color. I thought she was going to pass out. I reached to grab her hand, but she shoved her chair back and said, ‘Excuse me. I need to use the restroom.’ She hurried off and I sat there, full of confusion. I spun around, my eyes scanning over the patrons in the restaurant and out the window, but I didn’t see anyone who fit the description she gave me.” Shaking my head, I remove my hand from Irelynn’s grip, curling it into a fist. “The waiter came with our food. I texted Everleigh, but she didn’t answer. I got up and barged into the women’s restroom, not giving two shits who was in there. Something in my gut told me there was a problem. But Everleigh wasn’t there.”

Pausing, my head lowers, my hands coming up to my face, loud sobs shaking my body and filling the room. Like a dam bursting, my emotions pour out of me with a vengeance, leaving me feeling raw and broken.

Irelynn wraps her arms around me, holding me tight, rocking me in her arms. But as much as I value my friendship with her, I’m inconsolable.

There’s only one woman I want.

And I have no fucking idea where she is.

I bawl until my body can't produce any more tears. Despair settles in, wrapping itself around me like a barren tree without leaves, left to endure the harshness of a long, brutally cold winter. Slumping in my chair, I take shallow, audible breaths, my swollen eyes gritty and sore from all the tears I've shed.

"Give me one minute, Will." She hurries out the door as I sit in the chair, my head in my hands.

When I hear the door open, I lift my head. Irelynn gives me a sympathetic smile as she leans down beside me, pressing a warm cloth to my cheeks. Closing my eyes, I let her fuss over me like a mother hen, too despondent to do anything, including arguing with her.

When Irelynn finishes, she bites her lip, a thoughtful look on her face. "I have a proposition for you."

Raising an eyebrow, I shrug. "Shoot. I'm all ears."

"You know, Max plans to become a private investigator once he finishes college. He's interning this semester and next at a firm to gain experience." She pauses, studying my reaction before her words tumble out. "Why don't we utilize him to help locate Everleigh?"

Blinking a few times, I process her words, mulling them over. I've hired some of the best investigators that money can buy, and they haven't come up with anything. But Max is a friend and has expressed many times that he would love for me to find Everleigh.

Finally, I run my hand through my hair. “What can it hurt to ask? But do you really think he’d do it?”

Irelynn’s gentle smile grows, and she winks. “Let’s just say I have a way of being very persuasive when it comes to Max.”

A burst of laughter comes from me. “I have no doubt.” The alarm on my phone beeps at the same time Irelynn’s starts going off. “Well, that’s my cue to head out. I’ll meet you and Max at the café for lunch.” Pushing to my feet, Irelynn links her arm through mine, opening her door.

“Let’s ask Max at lunch. I really think he’ll go for it.”

Giving her a small smile, I say, “Strength in numbers, huh? Poor Max. Nothing like being ambushed by his wife and friend.”

We walk down the hallway, past the reception desk and to the door. “He won’t mind. I really think he’ll be happy to help.”

A small nugget of hope blossoms inside my chest, despite the inner voice that warns me I should know better. But I push it down. “Great. Have a good morning and I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Bye, Will. Drive safe.”

As I open the door, I wink and slide my sunglasses over my eyes. “You know me.”

“Yeah, I do. And you have a need for speed at times.” She shakes her head as I simply wave and walk out the door.

Stepping into the warm sunshine, I inhale a deep breath of the balmy September air, then pull out my phone. Unlocking my car, I open the door, sliding into the plush seat as Bryan answers.

“Hey, Will. How did today go?”

I grin. “It was intense. But I survived.”

His chuckle comes through the line. “Did you have any doubts you wouldn’t?”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me. “You know how I get when I talk about Everleigh.” Just saying her name makes my heart squeeze inside my chest.

“Yeah, I know. Damn, I can’t believe we haven’t found anything yet.”

“Me either. Hey, I don’t really feel like working. Are you up for a run?”

“Hell, yes. I need to burn off mom’s chocolate cake. Speaking of, she is on her way to your place now with three cakes. One for you, Max and Irelynn, and Darin and Vanessa. She figured you could deliver the cakes to the gang later.”

Backing out of the parking space, I laugh. “Emma wouldn’t forget to bake a cake for me or my friends.” I shake my head, picturing Darin’s face when he sees that cake. He’ll badger me to let Emma cook for him even more once he takes a bite of her infamous chocolate cake.

“Meet you at your apartment?” Bryan’s voice breaks through my thoughts.

“See you in about fifteen minutes.”

Hanging up the phone, I pull up my Metallica playlist and crank the volume, wanting to drown out any thoughts before they start. I’m emotionally distraught after talking about Everleigh and I just can’t handle any more thoughts of her right now.

She can haunt me in my dreams tonight, as she does every night.

Chapter 6

Everleigh

After pulling my hair into a bun, I slide the wig over my head. Adjusting it to look natural, I grimace as I stare at my long, blonde hair. Savannah told me I should dye my brunette locks blonde, but I have no desire to do that.

Because Will used to run his fingers through my hair, caressing my scalp.

The thought flows, unbidden, through my head, causing my eyes to sting and burn as I blink rapidly, fighting back the tears.

Spinning on my heel, I grab my iPod, then head out, locking the cabin door behind me. I just need to get lost in my run and not think about anything.

Or anyone.

I start with a slow jog, my legs moving faster and faster as Metallica blares through my earbuds. My feet pound the dirt path in time with the driving beat, my arms propelling me faster as the lyrics swirl through me.

But my emotions overwhelm me. I can't hold the tears back that are falling faster and harder, like the first drops of rain that rapidly transform into a downpour.

Barely able to see the trail in front of me, I push myself to go faster, not giving a shit about anything.

I fucking ache for the one man I can't have. I can't risk endangering his life simply by being around him. Loving him.

The selfish part of me rears its head, and so does my heart. There's no one who can compare to William, and I ache for him like the desert yearns for the rain.

As I run, memories of William and me after the car accident infiltrate my thoughts, cleaving my heart in half.



William carries a tray into my bedroom, piled high with enough food to feed an army. I try to sit up, but my ribs throb every time I take a breath.

“Easy, gorgeous. Let me help you.” William quickly sets the tray on the nightstand, grabbing a remote that lies beside my bed and raising me into a sitting position.

“It never occurred to me to do that.” I give him a sheepish grin, my cheeks flushing red.

He winks. “No worries. That’s what I’m here for.” Bending, he lifts the tray of food, putting it over my lap. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I made a variety of food for you.”

My eyes are wide as I stare at all the mouth-watering breakfast dishes in front of me. "You made this?" My gaze flicks up to his face, but not before languidly perusing over his bare, muscular chest. The grin on his face lets me know he caught me checking him out, and my face turns a deeper shade of scarlet.

"Well, the cinnamon rolls were made by Emma, my housekeeper and cook. But everything else I made."

"I sure as hell hope you are going to help me eat this." Smiling at him, I grab a fork.

He comes around to the other side of the bed, sliding in beside me. "As you wish." He picks up his fork, his arm lightly brushing against mine as he does.

I pause, his words bringing a smile to my face. When he brushes against me, I freeze, tingles traveling through my body like the zap of static electricity. The hairs on my arms stand up as goosebumps pebble on my skin. My blood burns through my veins, flowing hotter, and my skin feels like it's on fire where he touched it.

What the hell was that?

He grabs a piece of bacon, eating it as he gazes at the TV on the wall across from my bed. "Scooby-Doo, huh?" His head turns to mine, a soft smile on his face.

I expected him to make fun of me, but he doesn't. He simply gazes at me, patiently waiting for me to say something.

“In my opinion, Scooby-Doo Where Are You? Is a classic. Best cartoon there ever was.” A smile tugs at my lips as a fond memory rolls over me. “Whenever I was sick, my mom would turn it on for me and I’d spend the day in bed, watching it and sleeping. One year, I was sick with the flu for a week, and my mom slept in my room with me, watching Scooby Doo for a solid week until I was well again.”

His eyes soften. “That’s really sweet. And ironic. My mom used to put this cartoon on for me when I was sick. Or sad.” His head lowers, and he disappears somewhere else for a few moments before shaking his head, then raising his face to mine. And oh, that look in his eyes... it leaves me breathless. “It’s my favorite cartoon.” He grabs a glass of water from the tray and hands it to me. Grabbing the other glass, he lifts it, clinking against mine gently. “Cheers to good cartoons.”

Smiling, I giggle, wincing slightly. “Cheers to Scooby-Doo, the best cartoon.”

Studying him over the rim of my glass, I can’t help but marvel at how sweet he is. My heart warms even more when a wide grin splits his face, excitement flushing his cheeks.

“One of my favorite episodes is on.” Leaning forward, he grabs the remote, raising the volume slightly. When he leans back against the pillows, his warm body shifts slightly closer to mine.

I don’t know what the hell kind of body wash he uses, but my God, the faint smell on his skin causes me to inhale deeply, despite the pain in my ribs. The aroma mixes with his body

chemistry so well that I just want to lay my head on his shoulder and do nothing but breathe him in the rest of the day.

“Are you okay?” His piercing blue eyes study me intently, a frown marring his face.

Pulling myself from my daze, I turn my head away slightly, trying to inhale something else to get the scent of him out of my nose. “Yeah, why?”

“You aren’t eating.”

My shoulders relax.

Good. He doesn’t realize I stopped eating because I was awkwardly and inappropriately sniffing him.

“I was just marveling that you are a Scooby-Doo fan.” Cutting a bite of pancake, I stick a large forkful in my mouth, closing my eyes as the chocolate chips melt on my tongue.

When I open them, he stares at me, heat in his gaze. “You have a little bit of chocolate right here.” His hand moves to my face, cupping it gently, his thumb lightly rubbing the edge of my lip.

Damned if I don’t want to stick my tongue out and lick his finger. But I refrain, watching him as his gaze moves from my mouth to my eyes.

He looks distracted, completely lost in this moment, before he seems to snap out of it, a veil being pulled over his face, closing him off. “There. I got it.” He moves his hand away, taking a bite of his food, his eyes moving back to the TV.

But I can't look away from him. I couldn't have imagined that, right? For a minute, I really thought he was going to lean forward just a little bit more, closing the short distance between our lips. Disappointment shrinks my heart, as my breaths hitch inside my chest.

Well, there's one advantage of frustration. My ribs stopped screaming in pain.

Finally pulling my probing gaze away from his profile, I resume eating and watching Scooby-Doo. I lose myself in the cartoon, trying to mask my disappointment.

William turns his head toward mine, studying my face. I watch him from my peripheral vision, pretending not to pay attention for fear he'll turn away. His hungry gaze traces over every inch of my face, like the gentle breeze of the ocean caressing my skin. My breath hitches as his tongue pokes out, licking his bottom lip.

Jesus. How can such a simple move be so damned hot?

My skin heats, my blood turning to molten lava inside my veins, thick and viscous, turning me into an inferno.

The air is charged between us. The tension so thick the atmosphere in the room feels heavier. I can't resist the allure that consumes me, slowly turning my head, my gaze locking with his.

His hand slowly rises, lightly touching my arm, goosebumps covering my skin again. He keeps moving higher until his hand

cradles my face, his thumb gently caressing my cheek. "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?"

Not the way you do.

He doesn't just tell me with the low, rumbly tone in his voice that drops to a near whisper as he speaks. This enigmatic man tells me with the slight parting of his lips, his expression slack and soft. He tells me with his gentle, reverent touch that lights my skin on fire, burning me from the inside out. It's in the slight flush covering his normally fair skin. And it's definitely in those bright, glossy eyes that are nearly the color of the icicles that hung from my porch during the cold, New Jersey winters when I was a child.

"I've been told I'm pretty, but not in the way you just did."

I have no idea what comes over me, but I lift my hand, gently skimming my fingertips along his chiseled jawline, the stubble on his chin prickling my skin, sending a shiver of desire down my spine.

The voice inside my head whispers that I don't do this, that I'm reserved and keep a deliberate distance between myself and others for a reason. I'm poison to any man who takes a drink of me, tasting my lips.

Ainsley is so determined to destroy me that she takes great delight in torturing me any chance she gets.

Maybe it's my injuries or just the delusion I'm harboring from him being my savior the day of the car accident. But this inexplicable pull grips me tightly, and I don't want to stop

touching him, nor do I want to stop staring into those spellbinding light blue eyes.

He clears his throat and reality hits me like a glass of ice water thrown in my face.

What am I doing?

Yanking my hand from his face, I expel a pained hiss as my breaths saw in and out of my lungs. My teeth grind together as I take shuddering breaths, my ribs screaming from the pain.

“Everleigh.” His voice is a calm breeze floating over my skin, and as if I have no control over my body, I turn my head toward his.

Concern draws his eyebrows together as his piercing gaze roves over me, witnessing my pain.

I immediately turn my head toward the opposite wall, hating to show weakness. I’ve grown up in a world where showing vulnerability lead to exploitation of the worst kind, twisting my pain until it nearly broke me.

His fingertips are so gentle beneath my chin as he firmly turns my head toward his, shifting his body to make it easier for me to see him. His face is so close to mine that his breaths heat my skin, warming me from the outside.

For a moment, I am transported to the last summer vacation I had with my parents. A blissful week at the ocean where we frolicked on the beach, the sun kissing our skin while we built sandcastles and ran into the salty water, the waves hitting our bodies, at times nearly knocking us off our feet. But I didn’t

need to worry because I stood between my mom and dad, each of them holding my hand, lifting, and swinging me above the high waves. I felt free and safe, as though I were flying. At eight years old, the feeling was magical.

“Where did you go?” His low, rumbling tone draws my gaze to his, his head tilting slightly as he takes me in, his lips curving upward.

“What?” I’m baffled, completely distracted by him as I struggle to understand the meaning of his words.

“You left me and went somewhere else. Your body was physically here, with me, but your mind wasn’t.” His knuckles rub over my skin lightly, the sensation lighting up all the nerves beneath my skin, making me shiver slightly.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I try not to let him know how much he’s affecting me. And yet, I can’t move past it. He knew my thoughts floated away from here, like a puff of wind that carries debris in its wake.

Clearing my throat, my eyes lock on his. “My mind wandered to the last summer vacation I took with my parents.” I refrain from telling him that his presence makes me feel calm and safe, and I forget everything else.

“Well, it worked. You were in a tremendous amount of pain, but your thoughts took you away from it.”

No, you did that. You provided me with a sense of safety I haven’t felt since I was eight years old and on the beach with my parents.

The last time things in my life were good.

But I can't tell him that. He'll think I'm crazy.

He moves beside me, laying on the bed, turning on his side. His head is propped in his hand as he stretches his lean, muscular body beside me, relaxed and carefree. "Tell me about it. The summer vacation that made your face shine like that." He gestures to the table of food. "But first, let me move this for a moment so you can be comfortable. I'll put it back after your story." He sits up, grabs the large tray that covers my lap, and moves it to the ottoman.

Blinking a few times, I realize I hadn't even noticed that oversized, comfy looking chair, or the ottoman. There's a blanket haphazardly thrown over it.

"Did you sleep there?"

He stops his movements, then straightens, raising his brows, giving me a look over his shoulder. "Yes. I wasn't about to leave you injured and alone in here." His tone is defensive but when he turns around, his face softens. He gives me a small smile, coming to the side of the bed and lifting the covers. He crawls in beside me, turning on his side again, fluffing the pillows before laying his head on them. "You were saying."

I'm unable to pull myself from the thoughts that swirl inside my head, deeply touched that he's been sleeping on that chair, watching over me.

It's a surreal feeling as my hand moves to his face. The stubble beneath my palm feels prickly, the sensations sending

pleasurable chills down my spine. His breath hitches at the contact and his eyes shine, then soften with desire. Watching his reactions emboldens me as my skin flushes. As my face moves toward his, I hesitate for a second, my confidence slipping. But his hand reaches over, feeling slightly clammy as he touches my cheek and shifts his body the slightest bit toward me.

That's all the answer I need.

I practically fall into him, my control slipping as my other hand cups his cheek. When I fall, he catches me, his soft lips meeting mine. His hands cup my face as he turns my head slightly, deepening our kiss.

My skin hums from this kiss, reminding me of the blossoming of spring each year after the long, cold winter. Desire begins flowing through my veins, like the bulbs popping out on a tree gradually opening. Delightful sensations roll through my scalp as his hands slide to the fall of my hair, reminding me of plants and grass bursting through the soil, turning lush and green as they bask in the warmth. My whole body ignites, starting with a single spark, then explodes into a flame that leaps and spreads, engulfing everything. My hands travel from his face to the back of his neck, gripping the silky strands of his hair.

He moans into my mouth, and I swallow the sound, feeling it reverberate through me, like a ping-pong ball bouncing around. Our lips move against each other's, changing from a slow, leisurely kiss to desperate and hungry. His hands tighten

on me, pulling my body closer to his, and I release a half sigh, half moan from the heat coming from his body, surrounding me like a suit of armor. He makes me feel protected and safe as he tangles his fingers into my hair, deepening our kiss. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, his lips moving over mine as though he wants to devour all of me.

My lips part, and he takes advantage, his tongue moving inside my mouth to tangle with mine.

Something magical washes through me. It's as though he wants every touch, every word, and every taste of me.

He kisses me like he wants everything from me.

And for the first time in my life, I want to give myself to someone. A man that can handle all the broken pieces of my fucked-up existence. A man who touches me reverently, as though he's holding the shattered, broken pieces of my heart inside the palm of his hand. He exudes such confidence from his kiss and hands, as though he can hold the pieces without shattering me further.

He presses me against him, being careful not to harm me further. His concern for me takes my breath away, tears prickling my lids. It's been years since I've been embraced.

But I'm not scared. Not in the slightest.

We finally pull away from each other, sucking oxygen into our lungs, our chests heaving in unison. Our lips are mere inches from one another as our gazes lock and hold, a tangible feeling passing between us as our arms still cling to the other.

“Wow. If asking about your summer vacation elicits that kind of kiss, I’m going to keep asking you every couple of minutes. Holy fuck.”

My lips pull up as laughter bursts out of me. “Holy fuck is right. I have no idea what happened there.”

His hand slides, caressing my cheek. “Then let’s keep having no idea together.”

Like two magnets, our lips are drawn together, and I fall into him again, knowing I’ve never felt more alive than I do right now.

And I never want to stop living.



The faint sound of voices pulls me from my reverie. As my thoughts crash back to reality, I realize I have no damned idea where I am.

I’ve been mindlessly running, and though I’ve run these trails many times before, as I look around, there is nothing familiar about this one.

I stop moving as the voices drift closer, the sound of feet striking the dirt path of the trail making my muscles tighten. My gaze darts around and spotting a huge tree nearby, I stealthily move toward it, pressing my skin against the bark, holding my breath. Sweat drips down my skin, falling into my eyes, and I close them quickly before it burns them. I slowly wipe my face, trying not to make a sound.

The voices are close, and I stop breathing, my heartbeat pounding like a drum inside my ears as my pulse races, making me feel slightly dizzy. Grabbing the tree to steady myself, I release the breath I've been holding as the birds chirp happily in the trees surrounding me. Inhaling and exhaling a few times, I slowly peek around the tree.

The blood freezes inside my veins as a sudden cold and heaviness expands from my core. My muscles feel weak as I dig my hands into the bark. My eyes widen, and my heart pounds inside my chest, breathing life back into me.

No. It can't be.

I'm paralyzed as I stare at the beautiful, flaxen-haired man running beside his best friend, recognizing every single muscular curve and plane on the body as he runs past me, less than six feet from where I've hidden. He laughs at something Bryan says, throwing his head back as the sun reflects from his hair, making it shimmer like a halo. He's wearing only a pair of black running shorts and sneakers, sunglasses covering his ice-blue eyes that always saw every truth I'd ever kept buried inside me.

"Seriously, Will, you're fucking killing me. Why the fuck did you choose this trail?" Bryan's voice is hoarse as he pants, running beside him, his fit, muscular body taut as he strains to keep up the grueling pace Will has set.

"Come on, Bry. I'm not running that fast." Will's voice is light and airy, no sign of exertion anywhere within the words he speaks.

Bryan throws him a disgusted glare. “I’m not a superstar track runner like you, asshole.”

Will laughs, pushing his shoulder playfully. “I’m not, either. So step it up, jackass.”

“Yeah, but you used to be. And you clearly haven’t slowed down.”

A smile pulls up my lips at their playful banter. Nothing has changed between them, their friendship intact and as strong as ever.

The pain rolls up inside me, like a storm cloud ready to overflow. My eyes fill with tears as I longingly watch the man I haven’t stopped thinking about. The guy who consumes my thoughts and still has my heart.

My body quakes uncontrollably as my chin quivers, desperately wanting to scream his name and run after him.

But the voicemail I received right before I threw myself into Will’s arms on our last day together at the restaurant haunts me.

He was mine before he was yours. If you don’t vanish right now, I’ll sink my claws into his perfect, muscular skin, destroying every facet of his existence. And then he’ll go boom in a fiery explosion, just like your father.

Those words fucking gut me as the need to run back to the safety of my cabin overwhelms me.

I can’t let her destroy him. I love Will too goddamn much.

I can't resist taking in one last, lingering look at him as he runs further away. My eyes commit every inch of his body, every word and laugh that falls from his lips to my memory.

It will have to be enough, my brain screams at me. You need to move before anyone spots you.

Pressing my fist against my chest, rubbing gently to dislodge the pain radiating from my heart, tears spill from my eyes.

I love you with all of me, Will. You have my heart forever.

And then I spin around, running through the woods like a deer scampering away from hunters, leaping and jumping over rocks and roots along the trail, the muscles in my legs propelling me back toward my hideout.

Back to my place of overwhelming *misery*.

Chapter 7

William

A noise in the woods causes me to stop running and spin around. My eyes rove around the thick foliage until finally landing on a woman. Her long blonde hair is pulled up in a ponytail as she sprints away, leaping and jumping over rocks and roots as she heads further away from Bryan and me.

My eyes narrow behind my sunglasses as I watch her go. There is something oddly familiar about the way she moves.

“Will, what is it?” Bryan pants as he runs back to me, realizing I’m no longer running beside him.

Lifting my hand, I point in her direction. “There’s a familiarity about that woman.”

Bryan looks puzzled. “How is a woman you caught a glimpse of familiar?”

I hear what he’s saying, but there’s a feeling in my gut. My eyes are riveted in the direction the woman ran in, and despite no longer being able to see her, a tingle runs through my body, starting at my spine.

It’s not possible, right? It can’t be...

“You don’t think that girl could be Everleigh, do you?” My gaze finally moves from the woods to Bryan’s.

He sucks in a breath, the teasing smile dying from his face. He lowers his voice. “You know her better than anyone. To avoid being found by Ainsley, it’s quite likely she would change her appearance, either dyeing her hair or wearing a wig.”

“Let’s go.” I immediately run toward the trail where I noticed the woman.

Bryan runs after me, finally catching up. “Are you serious, Will? We’re going after her?”

Turning my head to his, my brows lower. “Bryan, I have to examine every possible lead. You know how much she means to me.” I turn my head to the trail to watch for rocks and roots, but also to hide the tears that spring to my eyes, threatening to roll down my face, beneath my sunglasses.

“Yeah, I do.” His soft voice draws my attention back to him. He shoves his sunglasses on top of his head, his eyes full of concern. “I’ve been watching you spiral out of control since the day she left. I fucking hate it. I think she’s foolish! There’s no way she’s safer on her own than with you.”

Pulling my sunglasses from my face, I heave in a deep breath, then release it. “I’m sorry I’ve been dragging you through hell.”

Shaking his head, Bryan puts a hand on my shoulder and we both stop running. He looks at me, a smile stretching his face.

“Will, you’ve been my best friend for a long time. I’m always here for you, no matter what.”

Clapping his shoulder, I give him a smile. “I know you are. You even put up with my crazy scheme to kidnap Irelynn.” Shaking my head, I roll my eyes to the sky, then back to him. “God, I really did fucking lose my mind.”

“Yeah, you did. When I couldn’t talk you out of it, I had no choice but to help, hoping you’d see the error of your ways.” He lowers his eyes to the ground and is quiet for a few beats before he says, “You eventually did.”

My jaw clenches and so do my hands. I’m still so angry at myself for what I did to Irelynn. I never once considered all the lives I was impacting. I just let the darkness consume me, giving into it.

“Will, stop torturing yourself. Everyone has forgiven you, even Irelynn’s parents.”

Averting my gaze, I stare unseeingly into the distance, my thoughts full of self-loathing. “Maybe they shouldn’t.”

“Why? Because *you* don’t think you deserve it?”

I feel Bryan’s gaze boring into my profile, but I don’t have the balls to look at him. My past is mixing with my present, and the thought that Everleigh could be closer than I think... Releasing a long sigh, I don’t say anything, letting the silence stretch between us.

Finally, I gather my courage and say, “I don’t feel I deserve it. I uprooted their lives and even pushed Irelynn’s dreams

further out of her reach.”

“You are focusing on the negatives, Will. Try focusing on the positives. You and Irelynn were able to resolve your past issues. Yeah, it wasn’t the best way to do it, but look at the two of you now. She’s one of your best friends. Plus, you kept her safe from Damian. And Max is still grateful to you for that.”

“Yeah.” My tone is bitter. “Until Damian lured you and me away from the house, then he hurt your mom and attempted to rape Irelynn.”

“He fooled both of us, Will. But mom is fine now, and you stopped him before he raped Irelynn.” Bryan pauses, running a hand through his hair, his frustration evident that I’m focusing on the negatives. “Look what Damian did to Max, Will. He would have killed him had Darin and Vanessa not gotten there in the nick of time.” He stops, putting his hand on my shoulder and forcing me to face him and the demons of my past. “The way you treated Irelynn at first was wrong. You’ve admitted it to her, Max, and her family and friends. You feel a ton of remorse about the entire situation. Will, you need to let go of your past and continue moving forward. Despite the world you grew up in, you are a helluva guy. Sure, you can be a manipulative, narcissistic asshole.” He gives me a shit-eating grin. “But you are doing the work, becoming a better person every single day. I’m fucking proud of you, man.”

Though I seldom do this, I put my arm around him, pulling him in for a hug. “Thanks, Bry. That means a lot to me.”

Bryan pats my back. "Anytime, Will." Ending the hug, he steps back, raising his brows. "Do me a favor, though. If we find a cabin or anything ahead, do not go barging in there. We need to be stealthy and patient, okay?"

I nod. "I'd need to make sure it's her before I'd do that."

He fist bumps me. "Okay. Let's go."

We resume running, following the winding trail in the woods. We run a few miles before coming to a fork in the path. Stopping to examine it, we debate splitting up, until my eyes spot the tread of a sneaker in the dirt.

Nodding my head, Bryan and I head in that direction, our pace steady as our gazes scan the forest, looking for any signs of the blonde woman.

The woods grow denser and thicker on this path. Bryan and I run silently together, occasionally exchanging meaningful glances. It's quiet in this section, with the occasional chirping of birds or rustling of squirrels as they race up trees, watching us intently.

This seems like a good place to hide.

Finally, we spot a small cabin in the distance. Drawing to a stop, Bryan turns to me, his voice low. "Let's hide over there behind that group of trees and keep watch for a bit, okay?"

I nod and we quietly move through the woods to the trees, staying low, our gazes darting around. Our movements are slow and careful, not wanting to attract the attention of any occupants inside.

Once we are behind the trees, my focus is on the small, rustic cabin. It's strangely quiet, with no signs of life.

Still, I wait, a feeling growing in my gut.

A low wailing reaches my ears and I hold my breath, focusing on the sound.

Until Bryan shifts beside me, reaching into the pocket of his running pants and pulling out his phone.

"Shit." His voice is low and strained and his eyebrows are drawn together as he stares at the screen.

"What is it?" My voice is low as I stare at him expectantly, worry filling me and making my stomach flip.

"Mom just texted. She fell down the basement steps when doing laundry and hurt her ankle."

"Oh, fuck." Disappointment and worry mix inside me as I debate quickly, then shake my head. "Bryan, I drove us here. We need to head to my car and go to her. Is she able to get up?"

"She managed to crawl to the chair in the living room. She said it hurts to put weight on it." He types a message then pauses, waiting for her response. When he receives it, he shakes his head, anger coloring his face. "She said she doesn't want to call an ambulance."

I roll my eyes. "Of course she doesn't. Let her know we are on our way. But if you think we need to call an ambulance, we will. I don't care how pissed off she'll get about it."

Bryan nods, typing a text to his mom. When he's finished, he looks up at me, sorrow and regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry, man."

Shaking my head, I throw one last look at the small cabin. "It's probably for the best. I'll memorize this trail and we can come back later."

"Sounds like a plan."

Quietly sneaking away, we begin running as soon as we are far enough away we won't be easily spotted by anyone inhabiting the cabin. Our pace picks up after we hit the familiar path we were running on when I first saw the blonde girl.

We race down the hill, heading for my car.

Something bugs me about the cabin and the blonde girl. Her gait and movements were so familiar, reminding me of Everleigh.

Maybe it's simply wishful thinking on my part, but I have to listen to my gut and investigate that cabin.

Once Emma is okay, I'll come back to figure out what it is.

Chapter 8

Everleigh

My hands shake as I enter the code to my cabin, causing me to hit the wrong combination, the red light and beeping noise taunting me, not letting me inside, which only increases my agitation. Clenching my jaw, I curse under my breath.

Expelling my breath, my blonde bangs don't move. The wig is uncomfortably pasted to my forehead.

I can't wait to rip the fucking thing off.

Taking a few more breaths, I try again. My hands aren't shaking as badly so I'm able to successfully punch in the code, the green light and the cheerful beep assuring me I can enter. Turning the knob, I desperately seek the comfort and solitude of my cabin.

Stepping inside, I slam the door closed behind me, my back hitting the wood before my legs give out and I fall to the floor, breaking like a dam. Huge, wracking sobs make my body shake uncontrollably. I draw my knees to my chest, my head drooping from my sorrow, and my forehead hitting my knees. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I wail, breaking down from the unfairness of it all.

God, he was so fucking close to me as he ran by. I swear I could smell the sweat on his skin mixing with his spice and wood scent. I inhaled deeply, desperate to feel him beneath my skin. My fingers ached to touch him so badly, curling into the bark of the tree as if it were William's skin.

My blonde ponytail scratches against my bare legs, making my skin itch.

In a rage, I jerk my head up, grabbing the wig and yanking it from my head. Raising my arm, I throw it across the room. It hits the wall soundlessly, sliding to the floor, the golden strands reflecting the sun like a halo.

Shaking my head, bitterness rises within me, tasting like dark roast coffee. The wig is a painful reminder that my life is no longer my own. I have to wear a disguise to go out in public.

Leaning my head back against the door, I let the tears run down my face like a faucet. As I picture William's gleaming white smile as he joked with Bryan, an uncontrollable moan seeps from me, climbing its way from the recesses of my broken heart. Will looked so happy and... alive. He was living in the moment, his face relaxed and carefree.

I'm so fucking angry, yet sad, that I'm not with him to experience his joy.

Will deserves to be joyful and content. He has endured more in twenty-three years than most men twice his age, carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Growing up, the world William resided in was so dysfunctional. His mother

adored him, showering him with love and affection when his father wasn't around. When he was, William's mom had to restrain her affection, becoming almost distant toward William, or his father would punish both of them. He was insanely jealous and controlling, demanding William and his mom always conduct themselves properly. He beat it into them how to act and if they failed in any way, his fists were always ready to remind them.

Gregory Anderson is the worst kind of evil bastard. His greatest source of pleasure came from beating William and his mother down, stripping away their confidence, and replacing it with terror. Gregory is as volatile as a container of gasoline in the blistering hot sun, ready to spew forth, his fury permeating everything around him.

Whenever William talked about his father, he turned into a different person, becoming emotionally hardened. A mask would descend over his face, his features twisting with his barely suppressed rage, his blue eyes turning icy. He'd turn his body away from me, curling inward as though he was trying to protect himself. If I put my hand on him, he'd flinch and jump, pulling away from me as though he had an aversion to my touch.

I tried not to take it personally. Any other time, Will was constantly touching me.

But when he talked about his father, he became guarded, shutting off his emotions.

And I hated it because it wasn't who he was. It was a role he'd slip into, like an actor pretending to be someone else.

Once he finished talking about his dad, he'd remove the mask, and his taut muscles would relax. He'd take a deep breath and when he exhaled, his face would soften, thawing the ice that was in his blue irises and running through his veins. His head would turn toward me, his arms reaching for me, pulling me against him. His cold skin would warm as soon as my heated body touched his, and he'd sigh, burrowing his face into my hair, inhaling deeply.

The anger that flowed through my veins, heating my skin, removed any lingering chill from Will's body. His heart would beat faster and I'd feel his head shake as he'd reverently say, "I've never had anyone get as enraged as you do when I talk about my father. Most people didn't give a shit and those who did stared at me with sympathy and horror on their faces, pulling away from me, uncomfortable and unsure what to say. But not you. You wrap around me so tight it's as though you are trying to pull the pain from my body. As though your rage could incinerate the hurt, so I'd never feel it again."

I'd pull back enough that I could see him, my jaw unclenching, my features softening. "The rage I feel toward your father is palpable. It's so strong it could burn him up if he ever got close to me, turning him into a pile of ashes." My fingers would stroke his chiseled jawline, my gaze boring into his. "I'm so fucking sorry he hurt you, Will. I'd like to kill him with my bare hands, throttling the life out of him. He abused

you and your mom in nearly every way he could. The only thing he didn't do to you was sexually abuse you.”

William's face would cloud over as he struggled to push his past aside. My loving hands would stroke his skin, keeping him grounded and preventing him from getting lost in the horrors of his past.

He'd give me a grateful smile, his features soft, and he'd cup my cheeks, pulling my face closer to his. “Thank you, Everleigh. For loving me so damn much. For understanding me and seeing who I really am, even in those moments when I'm nearly impossible to love.”

I would shake my head, my fingers locking around the back of his neck, ensuring he knew I wasn't going anywhere. “You are never impossible for me to love, Will. Even in those moments when you become distant, when your past sweeps over you like a tidal wave. I remain steadfast, not going anywhere, no matter how high the wave gets.” My lips pressed against his, conveying all the love I felt inside me for him. When I pulled back, a smile would pull up my lips. “I'm not going anywhere, Will. I'm always here for you.”

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I crash back to my present, barren reality.

Fuck. I feel like such a goddamn hypocrite.

I left him, even though I didn't want to.

I abandoned him, just like everyone else.

Over and over, I assured him I'd never leave. And yet, that's exactly what I did.

I fucking left him.

My head pounds from the emotions bursting out of me like a volcanic eruption. They explode from me in a swift, fiery outburst, scalding tears flowing down my cheeks like a pyroclastic flow, overwhelming me, and burning my skin. My body quivers and shakes as I succumb to the anguish and misery, curling into the fetal position as I slump to the floor.

I lose track of time as my heart splinters and bursts inside my chest, feeling as though it's crumbling into nothing but a huge pile of ash.

It seems like I've been laying on the floor for hours when the shrill ring of my burner phone cuts through the sobs that have turned into hiccups, startling me from my despair.

There's only one person who calls me.

My body aches as I roll onto my back, then push up to a sitting position, my muscles screaming in protest. I try to get to my feet but am unsuccessful. Rolling to all fours, I crawl over to the table, my legs sore and shaky from my long run on the trail and then my desperate sprint home.

The stinging sensation on my hands and knees draws my attention to my skin. For the first time, I notice all the scratches and cuts from tree branches and briars that tore me open, causing red streaks of blood on the exposed areas of my body.

I finally make it to the coffee table, the loud rings piercing my ears as I wrap my hand around the phone, putting it against my ear.

“Hello.” My voice is brittle and low, barely above a whisper.

“Hey girl.” Savannah’s voice is never bubbly or cheerful, but in my current state of despair, it reminds me of that annoyingly happy chirping of the door alarm when I successfully entered the code. She pauses, as though she can gauge my mood through the phone. “How are you holding up?”

I open my mouth to respond, but a wail comes out of me as tears fill my eyes, blinding me. I blink as they fall like rain onto my cheeks, and swiftly roll down my chin, dripping onto my chest.

How the fuck can I produce anymore tears?

“Oh God. What happened?” Savannah’s concerned voice brings me back to the present moment.

My mouth opens to form the words to tell her I saw William, but incoherent sobs and noises escape instead.

I’m a blubbering mess for quite some time before I’m coherent enough to make any sort of sense. Savannah patiently waits for me to get control of myself, reminding me to breathe when I nearly hyperventilate from the tidal wave of emotions flowing from me.

Finally, I'm able to spill the whole story of seeing William and Bryan, and how deeply affected I was by him.

A long pause ensues. Instantly I know she knows far more than she's let on.

"What is it?" My tone is sharp. I suck in a breath and hold it, waiting for her to speak.

"William has been living in Pennsylvania for some time now. In fact, he moved there shortly after you did."

I close my eyes, tears burning my eyelids. Unable to speak because of the huge lump in my throat, I grapple to get control of my emotions.

"You didn't want to know, Everleigh." Savannah's voice is soft. "You asked me to keep tabs on him, but said you didn't want me to tell you anything."

Releasing my breath, I straighten my spine, my fingers curling tightly around the phone. "I want to know now. Tell me everything."

Savannah pauses for a few beats. Clearing her throat, she finally speaks. "Are you sure?" Her tone is gentle, the pain I'm feeling palpable through the line.

Nodding my head, despite her inability to see me, I say, "I need to know. It was a mistake for me to ask you not to tell me anything about him. I just... I thought it would be too hard." I swallow hard, tears continuing to spill down my cheeks.

How the hell am I crying?

I've shed so many tears in such a brief time. "I was afraid he'd move on after I left, and I... couldn't bear the thought. Cause I'm nowhere near over him. I'll never be over him."

Turning my head to the sliding glass doors, I stare out into the woods, my gaze fixated on a random large pine tree behind the cabin. I'm still sitting on the floor, my legs sore from my run. But it's not the pain in my limbs that paralyzes me. It's the stabbing pain coursing through my broken heart like a tsunami that's preventing me from moving. It washes over me, wave after wave, nearly drowning me. I can barely breath as I wait, hoping she'll tell me what I need to know.

William lives in Pennsylvania. He moved here shortly after I did. That can't be a coincidence.

Savannah's voice draws me in, and I press the phone tighter to my ear, hanging on to her every word.

"His penthouse is about thirty-five minutes away from the cabin you're staying in, by vehicle of course." I can hear her fingers moving over her keyboard, pulling up information on him. I suspect she has most of it memorized, but she's likely double checking to make sure she's giving me all the information I'll want. Her voice is low and soft. "He never forgot about you, Everleigh. He's spent a ton of money on private investigators searching for you."

He's been looking for me? Will... didn't forget me and move on like I thought he would.

Closing my eyes, I press my hand over my quivering lips. All my life, I've been expendable to everyone except my

mom. And Mrs. Johnston, who became my guardian after my dad was killed, thanks to my mom.

But Will, he's different.

He didn't give up searching for me.

Relief and hope blossom inside me. Although I've trained hard and kept running, following Ainsley, preparing for our inevitable battle, in my heart I held onto a shred of hope that William would still be there once this was over and I could return to him. But my head told me that wasn't realistic or likely.

Turning, I crawl to the couch, gritting my teeth as the adrenaline courses through me. The plush cushions sink as I collapse on it. "What else?"

"He's clearly quite hung up on you, judging by all the PIs he's hired." Savannah pauses, as though she knows I'm not going to like what she's about to tell me.

The urge to jump to my feet and pace around the room overwhelms me, but my muscles scream in pain as soon as I move them. Instead, I flop back against the back of the couch, my hand pushing my sweaty hair from my face. "How can you be sure he won't figure it out?" My voice is shrill, worry filling me.

I hear her taking a drink of something, ice rattling against the cup. "Eh, I'm not too worried. You know how often I move." She pauses. "And for another, if he finds me, then I'll be forced to tell him where you are."

“Are you *crazy*?” Forgetting about the pain in my legs, I shoot to my feet, immediately pacing around the small living room. Bile rises in my throat at all the unspeakable horror Ainsley could unleash on William because he’s guilty of loving me. “He’ll *die*, Savannah.”

“I know you’re concerned about that. But do you really think she’s smart enough to pull off killing a guy like William? I mean, yeah, I finally hacked his system. But I’ve been trying since you ran away, so the dude lives a pretty secure life. He’s as paranoid as you are when it comes to security.”

“But the point is, you hacked him. It’s within the realm of possibilities that she could as well.” I pause, biting down on my thumbnail. It’s a disgusting habit I stopped doing when I was a kid, but when I get really nervous, the habit rears its ugly head. Pulling my finger from my mouth, I slowly pace to the sliding glass door, staring out at the lush, dense forest. “You’ve been keeping tabs, right? Ainsley has been keeping her word and leaving William alone?”

Savannah sighs. “From all I’ve seen, yes, she is. The only people around him are Emma and Bryan, and his new friends, Darin, Max, and Irelynn—”

“Irelynn? Irelynn McDaniel?” My brows raise in disbelief.

“Actually, she’s Irelynn Devlin now. She married Max Devlin in June. But yes, she was Irelynn McDaniel.”

“Hmm... they must’ve worked through their past.” I gnaw on my lip, my gaze flitting around the room as I continue to pace. William told me what happened between them in high

school, alternating between hurt and anger. I've never been a jealous person, but an intense wave of jealousy rolled through me when it became apparent he had a crush on her in high school. I couldn't help but worry what would happen if they ever worked through their past.

Savannah's annoyed tone shakes me from my thoughts. "Stop worrying about her. William is like her big brother. Besides, she's all over her husband. I would be, too, if I married a guy who looks like Max—"

"How do you know *that*?" The level of information Savannah can obtain is mind blowing.

"I have my ways. You should know that girl. Look at all the disguises I've gotten you. The fake driver's licenses. Come on, now. Are you doubting my abilities?"

I can't help the smile that curves my lips. "No, I'd never doubt your abilities." Releasing a sigh, and no longer pacing, I press my forehead against the sliding glass door and say wistfully, "I miss you, Savannah."

"I know. That's why I'm coming to see you."

Astonishment fills me. "Wait... you're coming here? When?"

She chuckles. "Yes, I'm coming to see you. I'll bring groceries and anything else you need. Also, takeout." I hear various sounds, as though she's moving and lifting things. The sound of a zipper fills my ears.

"Are you leaving now?"

“Of course. I just packed up my laptop. Hold on.” I hear more noises, then the sound of her trunk slamming. “Okay, I’m back. I’m putting my laptop in the car now and I’ll be heading your way.”

“When will you be here?”

“Since I’m stopping for groceries and takeout, probably about an hour and a half to two hours until I see you.” Her voice lowers. “Do you want me to see if I can find a dildo the size of William’s dick to bring along?” She laughs as soon as she says the word, “dick.”

“Oh hahaha! Asshole.”

She laughs way too hard. “I can’t wait to see you, Everleigh.”

“I can’t wait to see you.” I chew on my fingernail, worry filling me. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“The last time I tracked her, which was fifteen minutes ago, she was at a conference in California. She’s been banging some nerdy rich dude with a pile of money. What do you want to bet his life ends in a fiery car crash?”

“No way am I betting on that. Poor guy.” I shake my head, moving toward my small bedroom. My small cabin consists of a living room and kitchenette that is separated by an island, a bathroom, and one bedroom.

“Eh, if he’s dumb enough to fall for her shit, he deserves it.” Her tone is flippant.

“Savannah.” My words come out as an angry hiss. Immediately, she is contrite.

“Oh Everleigh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean your father...”

My teeth are gritted tightly together, my hands balling into fists. I know she wasn’t thinking when she said that.

I blow out a breath. “Don’t worry about it. He was thinking with his dick instead of his brain. He never should have fallen for her shit.” Pulling open my closet doors, my eyes scan over my meager contents of casual clothing. For the first time in a long time, I wish I had something nicer. A cute, summery dress would be nice.

I want to stroll through the woods and bump into William on a run again, hoping to impress him.

But I don’t have anything cute. My clothing selection is full of workout attire, pajama sets, and a couple pairs of jeans, shirts, and sweatshirts. I don’t even have a pair of heels.

Sighing, I grab a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt, pulling them from my closet and throwing the outfit on my bed. “I’m gonna take a shower before you get here. I’ll see ya soon.”

“Bye girl. Think about Will when you’re in the shower.” She cackles, then hangs up.

Throwing the burner phone on the counter, I roll my eyes at her. She and I know damn well that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I’ve done little else but think of him since the day I left him.

And I sure as hell haven't been touched by anyone else.

William is the only one I want.



Turning on the water, I undress slowly. The scratches on my limbs make me wince as I strip out of my sweaty clothing. My mind is only partially focused on my injuries, though.

The image of William's muscular body fills my mind. The sheen of light sweat on his tanned skin was so sexy, making me bite my lip as longing surges through me. He's obviously been working out a lot, bulking up since the last time I'd been with him.

I picture the smile on his face and hear his laughter as he joked with Bryan. My hand comes up to my chest, rubbing over my heart as it squeezes and aches.

Stepping inside the shower, I stand beneath the warm spray, my eyes dropping down, scanning my muscular torso and legs. I've changed, too. I spend a lot of time training and working out.

William's chiseled face floats through my mind, his eyes the most beautiful shade of blue whenever he told me he loved me.

My chest hitches and my shoulders curl forward, barely able to breathe. I've had to sacrifice two fucking years of not being able to be with him, to touch him, to breathe him in, to feel him under my skin.

All because of that murderous bitch, Ainsley.

I've thought about shooting her and being done with this. But after everything she's done... all that she's taken from me.

No *fucking* way.

She murdered my mother, my father, and Mrs. Johnston.

I close my eyes, a wistful smile curling my lips when I picture Mrs. Johnston. I found it hard to call her Adelina when she became my guardian.

Mrs. Johnston was a badass who taught me self-defense. I had no idea she was ex-military, earning a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and Psychology while serving in the Army. After that, she worked as an FBI profiler. Unfortunately, eight years later, she was seriously injured by one of the serial killers she was trying to capture, ruining her career.

True to the strong, badass woman she is, she refused to allow her injuries to prevent her from taking care of me. Not only did she do her best to ensure my safety, moving me often if she got wind that Ainsley had figured out where we were. Because she was limited due to her injuries, she enrolled me in various self-defense and martial arts courses to teach me how to defend myself.

She was right to do so. Ultimately, Ainsley caught up to her. Mrs. Johnston died in a car accident about twenty minutes away from the house. We mistakenly thought we were safe and had resided in that house in New Jersey for a couple of years.

That's when I met Savannah, my best friend, as we both attended the same high school.

I've always believed Mrs. Johnston suspected Ainsley figured out our general location and was close to finding us. She knew Ainsley would try to eliminate her first, so Mrs. Johnston led her away from me.

Savannah was the one who rescued me after Mrs. Johnston's death. She immediately went to her foster family and begged that I live with them. They were wealthy enough that they really didn't care if I moved in and saw me as an opportunity to keep Savannah out of their hair unless they needed us to attend social functions. Having two well-behaved foster children improved their social standing.

It was harder for Ainsley to get to me because of all the servants and security they had. Because on top of being rich, they were paranoid people would steal from them.

We had security detail on the way to and from school, at various activities and events, and at all social events held at their house.

They rarely let us go to other people's parties, choosing to throw a more lavish party so they could ensure there was appropriate security. They even allowed some alcohol, which enticed other teens to hang out with me and Savannah. Though none of them were really our friends.

Again, their reputation was so important to them. If their foster girls were murdered, how bad would that look on them?

They feared that would really make them a target for prospective criminals and that was unseemly.

It worked out in my favor, so I couldn't complain.

After I graduated high school and got a scholarship to college, that's when the worry seeped in. Now that Savannah and I were legal adults, her foster family wasn't concerned with our security. We were going to be living on campus and they had university police, so why should they provide us with security detail?

I ran to California, hiding out and working odd jobs to occupy my time. It was the middle of the semester, so I couldn't start classes anywhere. I had money that I inherited from my parents and Mrs. Johnston, so I really didn't need to work. But what else was I going to do?

I've always dreamed of going to college. Because Savannah had been tracking Ainsley, it didn't seem she had any clue where I was.

I applied and was accepted at Stanford for the fall semester. Exhaling a long sigh when it seemed Ainsley still didn't know where I was, I settled into the routine of college life and training to fight.

One year later, my guard was down and I hadn't realized the bitch had found me. Savannah found out just minutes before Ainsley slammed into my vehicle, trying to kill me.

And that's how I met Will.



Pushing my mind away from the past, determination fills me, my muscles tightening in preparation. Now that I've seen Will and know he hasn't stopped looking for me, time is running out.

This needs to end now. The time has come for me to do whatever I need to do to eliminate Ainsley and get back to the man I love.

And that includes killing Ainsley.

I only hope murdering her doesn't change me.

Or if it does, Will can find it in his heart to love a murderer.

Chapter 9

Everleigh

I turn my body in the shower, the warm water flowing over my skin. My muscles relax and as I grab the loofah, my thoughts turn to William.

We showered or took baths together often, and he loved taking care of me, washing my hair and body.

I sigh, remembering what it was like to be loved by him. To have someone so thoroughly consumed by me.

And the sex was phenomenal. That man devoured me. Completely possessed me.

I blink and a flashback of the night we attended a masquerade ball crashes through my consciousness. My fingers trail over my body, caressing my soapy, wet skin, as I bite my lip, lost in my memories.



Standing in front of a huge table of food, I grab some grapes, putting them on a plate. William had just gotten pulled away for a team photo. The track and field team held an annual

masquerade ball every year at the end of their season and this year, they took first place, thanks to my boyfriend, who is amazingly fast and the star runner of the team.

Right now, he's having his photo taken with the coach and the university president.

As I turn around with my plate of food, he catches my eye, winking at me. I place a carrot in my mouth, sucking on it obscenely. His eyes widen, then heat, the blue darkening as he watches me.

I shift my weight so my leg is displayed in the slit in my long black dress, exposing it from my ankle to thigh. Giving him a seductive smile, I pop a grape in my mouth, sucking on it. He watches my every move, his Adam's apple bobbing when he swallows.

The photographer has to say his name twice, then the coach nudges his side to get his attention. He faces the camera and smiles. They snap a few pictures. And then his gaze returns to me.

He shakes the coach's hand, then turns and walks off the stage. I finish my glass of wine, watching William weave through the crowd, his gaze locked on me. Somehow, he manages to say a few polite words to those he passes who call out to him as he hurries toward me.

Turning, I set my plate down, feeling his strong hands grip my waist, pulling me against his muscular body. His spice and wood scent envelopes me as he leans over my shoulder, his face close to mine.

“God, I’ve fucking missed you. I’m glad that’s over.” His lips are right beside my ear, causing goosebumps to appear all over my skin.

I turn in his embrace. My smile grows wider as I slide my hands to the back of his neck. “You were only gone for a few minutes.”

“That was a few minutes too many.” His voice is a low growl as he shifts his body, his hard dick pressing into my lower belly. “Especially when you are over here sucking on a carrot like you wish it were my cock that was in your mouth.”

I laugh, tightening my grip on him. “Maybe I was pretending it was.” Giving him a seductive smile, I ask, “How soon can we leave?”

“Now.” His lips press against mine, then he pulls back, releasing me from his embrace. Wrapping his fingers around mine, he turns, tugging me toward the door. I try to hide my smile at how fast he’s moving—and that he ignores everyone who calls out to him as he leads me out the door.

William tugs me toward the elevator. As soon as the doors close, he pushes me against the wall, his body pressing against mine. His arms wrap around me tightly as he devours my lips. I moan into his mouth, my fingers winding through his silky blond strands. He grabs my leg, wrapping it around his hip. As he rubs his hard cock against my soaked panties, I gasp, wanting more of him.

When the elevator stops, Will slowly breaks the kiss. We are both breathing heavily. A slow smile crosses his face. “Let’s

get out of here, gorgeous, so I can fuck you the way you deserve to be fucked.”

Jesus.

My legs feel weak, and I grip his arm, hoping I can walk. He holds the door open, wrapping his hand around mine and raising it to his lips, kissing the back of it. His ice-blue eyes lock on mine, full of promise and desire.

He tugs me from the elevator, and we head to the car. Before we exit the building, he shrugs out of his jacket, draping it over my shoulders, before holding the door open for me.

I cup his chin. “Such a gentleman.” Pressing my lips against his, I give him a quick kiss and then turn to continue walking. William grabs my chin and turns my face back to his, pressing his lips against mine. I melt against him, his kiss making me feel like I’m floating with the brilliant stars overhead.

Pulling away, he gestures for me to walk through the door, then he follows. Grabbing my hand, he leads me to his BMW.

“It’s a beautiful night.” My eyes are on the thousands of twinkling stars above us and the bright full moon overhead.

“Yes, it is. Though the beauty of the night sky pales in comparison to you.”

My eyes drop to his face, warmth spreading through my body at his compliment. “You are so sweet.” I step closer to him, a big smile lighting up my face.

He releases my hand, wrapping his arm around me. "It's the truth, Everleigh. Everything dulls in comparison to your beauty."

We reach his car and I turn to him, shaking my head. "I've never had anyone compliment me the way you do."

"Good." His hand goes to my face, caressing my cheek. "You deserve only the best compliments, sweetheart. And I'm happy to be the one to shower you with them." He leans forward, his lips capturing mine.

Damn.

There is nothing like being kissed and loved by this man.

Breaking the kiss, he steps back with a smile, pulling the door open for me. Extending his other hand, I take it, sliding into the passenger seat. Once I'm settled on the seat, he releases my hand and closes the door.

I watch him confidently walk around the front of his car, looking fucking amazing in his tuxedo. He slides into the driver's seat, and I launch myself at him, my lips pressing against his. He moans into my mouth as my tongue licks the seam of his lips. As soon as they part, my tongue is inside his mouth.

When we part, we are both breathing heavily. I trail kisses over his jawline, then down over his throat.

"Babe," he chuckles as I try to undo his tie. "You need to wait just a little longer until I get us home."

“Can’t,” I whisper against his neck, breathing in his spice and woods scent, my skin humming.

He moans as I nip at the skin on his throat gently, then immediately run my tongue over it. One of his hands tangles in my hair while the other runs up my exposed leg.

Will pulls my head back, his lips claiming mine, his kiss desperate and hungry.

When we finally part, both of us panting, our heated breaths have steamed up his car windows. “Let me take you home and love you the right way, sweetheart.”

I give him a flirtatious smile. “Okay, but you better make up for this when we get to your penthouse.”

“Our penthouse.” He shoots me an annoyed look, then his face softens. “And baby, I promise. I’ll devour your pussy and fuck you until you can’t possibly have any more orgasms.”

Fuck. My nipples harden and I shiver from his words, my breathing heavy. Gritting my teeth, I squeeze my thighs together tightly. “Drive fast.”

His eyes sparkle wickedly. “You’ve got it, babe.”

He starts the car, and within seconds, peels out of the lot. I can’t help but laugh as he expertly guides his car through traffic, whipping in and out of lanes, passing other cars like they are sitting still. If anyone else was behind the wheel, I’d be terrified. But I’m never scared when William drives. I trust him completely.

Once we hit the less traveled road that leads to his penthouse, I reach up and turn on the dome light. William turns his head toward me, his eyebrows knitting together. "I'm not sure I can wait any longer." Raising my hips, I yank my thong down my legs, then lean forward and grab it from my ankles.

"Fuck, baby." His blue eyes burn with desire as his gaze bounces between me and the road. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard, his gaze on me as I shift my body in the seat, my head against the passenger door, spreading my legs wide so he has a view of my soaked pussy. "Christ, Everleigh," he pants, his hand tightening on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white.

"See anything you like?"

His expression is dazed as he says, "Everything. I see everything I like. That beautiful wet pussy, soaked only for me."

My smile widens as I nod, sliding my hand down my body to my cunt. Moving my hand to my clit, I rub over it slowly, my gaze locked on him. When his eyes shift from the road to my face, I give him a salacious smile. "I'd much rather you be the one touching me right now. But I guess this will do."

He moans, shifting in his seat, his dress pants uncomfortably tight from the raging hard on in them. He slams his foot harder on the accelerator, shifting gears. His voice is tight as he grits out, "You don't know how much I'd like for my hands and tongue to be on you right now."

“Oh God, yes.” His words fuel me. Lowering my other hand, I stick two fingers inside me as I continue circling my clit with my other hand. Imagining his head between my legs and his hands on my body causes me to moan.

“Everleigh.” There’s a warning in his tone, but it’s in opposition to the parting of his lips, heavy breaths heaving out of them. His tongue darts out, licking his bottom lip.

He clearly likes the show I’m giving him.

Shoving my fingers inside me further, I arch my back from the seat, moaning his name.

Then I feel his hand on mine, moving it away from my clit, resting it on my stomach. He replaces it with his thumb, circling my clit. “Oh fuck, Will.” I whimper. “Please don’t stop.”

“I’ll have to when I need to shift. But only for a few seconds, baby.”

God, that husky low tone of his voice drives me insane, nearly as much as his thumb on my clit and my fingers inside my pussy.

Every time his gaze leaves me and turns to the road, my body feels cold. The second it returns, my body heats like an inferno.

As if he knows the way he affects me, he smiles at me, one side of his lips pulling up higher.

Fuck, he’s so damn hot.

“Yes, sweetheart. Finger that pussy for me.”

Goddamn.

I arch up toward him, my fingers moving in and out of me faster as his thumb rubs over my clit, my body writhing from the pleasure.

I’m momentarily stunned when I hear his garage door open.

He drove really fast in order for us to be home already.

His thumb moves away from my clit again as he guns the engine, pulling his car inside and shutting the garage door. Turning the car off, he winks at me, then throws open the door. He gets out of the vehicle, shutting the door behind him.

What the hell? Why did he get out of the car?

Pulling my fingers out of me, I sit up, stunned he didn’t attack me as soon as he turned the engine off.

He yanks the passenger door open and before I can react, spins me in my seat, his knees hitting the garage floor.

“Will, what are you... oh fuck.”

He yanks my legs open and dives in, his tongue devouring me. I awkwardly fall back onto the center console. The discomfort of it digging into my back is quickly eased by his experienced tongue doing things to my body that are probably illegal in some countries.

“God, Will, yes.” I grip his hair, my hips bucking up against his mouth, wanting everything he can give me. Throwing my

legs over his shoulders, he feasts on me like I'm an all you can eat buffet and he's starving.

He moans against me, the vibrations nearly making me lose control. But before I can, he pulls his mouth away. "Don't come until I tell you to."

A long whine comes out of me from him stopping, and a scowl covers my face. I hear him chuckling, a devilish glint in his eyes.

What is he... oh! Good lord.

The scowl instantly disappears as he raises my hips, licking me from ass to slit before his tongue sucks my clit hard into his mouth. My hips arch up as he does it a few more times, his blue eyes watching every move I make.

How the hell does he expect me not to come? Is he crazy?

He pulls away from me, his lips shining with my juices. I immediately protest, but stop as he gets to his feet, pulling the mask he wore at the masquerade party from his jacket pocket. He puts the mask on, then shrugs off his jacket, his gaze locked on mine.

He undoes his tie, then slowly unbuttons his shirt, sliding it from his torso. I lay there, panting, my eyes roving over his chest and abdominal muscles. His pants hang low on his hips, revealing his V taper, and I instantly start salivating.

Slowly, my gaze roves over his torso, memorizing the defined ridges of his abs to his pecs, then up to his face. His

bright blue eyes shine behind the black mask, giving me a lascivious wink.

“Give me your hands, baby,” he demands, his tone low.

I hate to be bossed around, but I give up all control to him whenever we do anything sexual.

Sitting up, I move my hands together, holding them out to him. He squats down, putting his shirt and jacket over his thighs. He wraps his tie around them, then leans forward, his full lips feather light as he presses them to mine. I’ve never kissed a man after he’s gone down on me—until William. Somehow, it’s sexy when my juices are on his lips, the combination of him and me on his mouth turning me on more.

Pulling back, he rolls up his shirt and jacket, places them against the center console, then guides me back so that I’m lying against them, using them like a pillow. That simple move makes tears prickle in the back of my lids. Pressing a kiss to my forehead, then slowly down my nose, and finally, to my lips, a tear falls down my cheek, overwhelmed by his sweetness.

“Are you okay, baby?” Concern is in those blue eyes, shining from behind his mask.

Nodding, I say, “Your thoughtfulness takes my breath away.”

His lips curve up, his warm breaths caressing my skin. “I’m always thinking about you, gorgeous. Your comfort and happiness are my sole purpose in life.”

Jesus.

My lungs constrict and I desperately want to stroke his face, but my hands are tied together.

He winks and slowly moves down my body, his eyes roving over my cleavage that swells over the bodice of my dress.

I'm dripping as he slowly drops to his knees again, his piercing blue eyes meeting my brown ones.

"I'm gonna feast on your pussy now." His hands lightly run over my legs, goosebumps covering my skin everywhere he touches.

He spreads me wide, leaning in and closing his mouth over my clit, sucking hard. "So wet," he mutters against my pussy, the vibrations of his lips making me writhe against him. He looks into my eyes and then devours me.

"Oh Will," I moan, the pleasure overwhelming me. "Please, don't stop."

His tongue is relentless, moving from my clit to deep inside my pussy, then back again. I arch my hips into him, desperate for more. He smiles against me, then inserts two fingers inside me.

My head rolls around, my eyes on the roof of his beamer.

"Look at me, baby." His voice is low and commanding.

My gaze instantly moves to his as he puts his masterful tongue against my clit, sucking it just the way I like. His fingers move in and out of me as my breathing hitches,

pleasure radiating through me. My legs shake as I try to fight the orgasm building, wanting so badly to let go. But I fight it, knowing he'll deliver on his promises.

I'm a sweaty, quivering mess when he finally decides he's tortured me enough, his mouth and hands pleasuring me in unimaginable ways. I've never had a man please me like he does.

His low, sexy voice whispers, "Come all over my tongue, sweetheart." Then he delivers, lapping and sucking at me, devouring me like I'm his last supper.

"Oh my God, Will." My body contorts around him, and I wish my hands weren't bound so I could pull his face against me as I tremble all over, falling over the cliff, coming all over his tongue and fingers. He stays with me, licking every drop of my orgasm from me.

Slowly pulling back, he wipes his hand over his face, a sexy smirk covering his lips as he takes in my heaving chest and sweaty body. I lay in the passenger seat of his car, panting and weak, waiting for my breathing to regulate and my strength to return.

Will gives me that, slowly getting to his feet. He reaches in, unties my hands, then shoves the tie in his pants pocket. Holding out his hand to me, I wrap my fingers around his, letting him pull me from the car.

As soon as I'm on my feet, he bends down, scooping me into his arms. I lean my head against his shoulder. There's no need

for any words as he pushes the passenger door closed, then carries me to the elevator.

When he steps inside with me, I lift my head. As the elevator begins its ascent, my fingers move to his chin, tugging his face closer to mine. My voice is low and seductive as I say, "I'm going to take care of you as soon as we get inside." Then I press my lips to his, tasting myself on him.

My hands tug on the hair at the nape of his neck as I devour his lips with my own, feeling emboldened by him letting me take control.

When the doors open, he hits the switch, lighting it up enough so he can carry me to the bedroom. Our gazes lock together as he carries me down the hallway.

As soon as he turns on the bedroom lights, I touch his face, drawing his attention to me. "I have a surprise for you. Strip and sit in that chair." My lips meet his, kissing him long and hard, then I pull back, giving him a smile.

He lowers me to my feet and I stand there, watching him. He obeys me, slowly backing away, his hands going to the waist of his pants, unbuttoning them. I bite my lip as I watch him strip, staring at his enormous bulge as he drops his pants, then his boxers, kicking them away.

"Leave the mask on." I wink at him, my hips swaying as I walk to the dresser, grabbing a small bag that sits on it. The strap dangles from my fingers as I watch him lower himself into the chair. "Good boy." I smile seductively, then walk to the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

Excitement courses through my veins as I set the bag on the bathroom counter. Quickly yanking off my dress, I toss it onto the floor. Reaching into the bag, I pull out the thigh-high lace stockings, the burgundy and black lace teddy, and the black lace gloves. I leave on the pearls I wore to the party, knowing they will look sexy with this ensemble.

As I pull on the outfit, my pulse pounds inside my ears, imagining Will's reaction when I enter the bedroom. Adjusting my boobs so my cleavage spills from the top, I smile at my reflection in the mirror.

I leave my hair pinned up, then lean forward, examining my face.

My makeup needs to be touched up.

Once I'm finished, I study myself from all angles.

Not bad at all.

Taking a deep breath, I put my hand on the doorknob.

Opening the door, I step into the bedroom. His blue eyes widen from behind his mask, his eyes roving slowly over my body. He lets out a long whistle that makes my smile grow wider.

Locking my eyes with his, I saunter over to him, swaying my hips seductively.

Leaning over him, my gloved finger trails down his cheek to his jawline. "I'm going to give you the same pleasure you gave me." My hand moves to his chest, feeling every ridge and muscle, before continuing over his abs.

Desire blazes from his eyes as my hand moves lower, wrapping around his hard cock. I stroke him from base to tip, causing him to hiss in a breath between his teeth.

As I continue stroking him, his head drops back. Leaning in, I rain kisses over his throat to the side of his neck, sucking his skin between my lips.

His breathing changes, becoming faster as I move my hand faster, a smile tugging up my lips. "Fuck, Everleigh." My name comes out almost as a sigh from his lips. "The lace gloves feel amazing."

"Oh, we're going to fuck." I wink at him. "But first, I need to have you in my mouth." Removing my hand from his cock, he lets out a frustrated groan that makes me laugh. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll take care of you." Pulling off my gloves, I grab his hands, tying them to the chair.

His head leans forward, a smile curving his lips up. "You know I can break these in a few seconds if I want to."

"I'm aware." My voice is throaty and seductive as I lean over him, my lips nearly touching his. "But you won't. At least, not until I tell you."

He nods. "I'll behave." He gives me a wink, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

Fuck, this man is so damned hot.

My lips crash against his, my hands roving over his skin, desperate and aching to touch and taste all of him. And I do, beginning with his mouth, then moving lower, down his neck

and chest, then dropping to my knees between his legs, pulling him into my mouth.

“Oh, fuck yes, baby.” He arches his hips up, his cock sliding deeper into my mouth.

Moaning, I slide my mouth up to his tip, swirling my tongue around it, tasting the salty goodness of his precum.

Tightening my lips around his shaft, I suck him all the way down. The way he’s staring at me, his eyes burning with desire from behind his mask, increases my confidence and makes me ache between my legs. Watching his jaw clench from the pleasure I’m giving him emboldens me. I suck him harder and faster, watching the way his veins stand up beneath the skin of his forearms and hands. He wants to break the gloves that bind his wrists to the chair, but he doesn’t.

As I move my mouth down his shaft again, he arches his hips up, his cock hitting the back of my throat. Releasing a long moan, the vibrations of my mouth seem to make him harder. His head falls back as he mutters curses as I take him as deep as I can, my fingers moving to his balls, caressing them.

The taste of him, along with his moans, drives me nearly crazy with lust. I pull him from my mouth, my tongue licking down the underside of his shaft, then back to the tip. Opening my mouth, I shove his cock deep inside, hitting the back of my throat, and feel him pulse against me. I slowly work up his shaft to the tip, then use my hand to stroke him. Lowering my head, I suck one of his balls into my mouth.

“Jesus Christ.” His body jerks from the excitement as I release his ball, then suck the other one in my mouth. I do this a few more times, watching his reactions as I stroke his cock.

Moving back up, I shove his cock into my mouth again, sucking him a few more times. His muscles are taut. He throws his head back and I know he’s close, so I release his dick from my mouth, then move up his torso. His head lowers, chest heaving with his breaths. Cupping his face in my hands, I stare into his ice-blue eyes. “I want you to break free of your restraints and fuck me.”

I don’t even have time to blink before he raises his hands, snapping the lacy gloves. His lips capture mine, devouring me, as he rises from the chair. His hands move to the top of my head, gently pulling out the pins, releasing my long hair from the updo so it flows down my back. Dropping the hair clips on the floor, he guides me to the bed, his hands running through my hair. When my knees hit the back of the bed, he breaks the kiss, his hands going to my ass, lifting me. He lowers me to the mattress, his body falling on top of mine, his hands catching his weight so he doesn’t hurt me. I wrap around him like an octopus, needing to feel all of him against me.

Immediately, I grind against his hard cock. Our mouths fuse together, his kiss swallowing my moans. He slides his cock against my clit, making me moan. “You’re so fucking soaked for me, sweetheart.”

“I need you inside me,” I plead, my hands curling around his back, digging into his shoulders. “Please, Will.”

I've barely finished saying his name before he shifts his body, sliding inside me. We both moan, although it sounds more like a long sigh. He slides through my wetness until he can't go any further, his forehead pressing against mine. "How do you want me to fuck you? Slow and deep?" He shows me exactly what he means, rocking his hips and swiveling them against me slowly. I moan, his movements teasing me. A slow grin stretches his face as he watches me. "Or hard and fast?" Again, he demonstrates, pounding into me hard and fast, my nails digging into his back, slicing into his skin.

I can't answer as waves of pleasure flow through my entire body.

"Or both?" He slows down, moving soft and gentle, then pulls out to the tip, thrusting into me hard and fast.

"Oh Jesus," I pant, my hips arching up to his. "Both."

He pounds into me a few more times, then teases me by going slow and deep, driving me out of my mind.

Grabbing my hands, he pins them above my head, his fingers locking around mine. His forehead is still against me as he continues to torment me by teasing me slowly. My pussy squeezes his dick, my hips rising to meet his.

"Do you know how much I adore you, baby?" His blue eyes darken, glowing softly at me, so much emotion pouring from them it heats me from the inside out. It's as though I'm laying in the sun in the middle of a hot July day.

I swallow hard. My mouth is so dry it's hard to speak. "More than anyone else ever has," I finally mutter, my voice hoarse from all the emotions circulating through me.

He grins, then changes his thrusts, pounding into me. My head rolls from side to side from the pleasure he's giving me. Closing my eyes, I moan as I feel his warm breaths heating my skin. "Open your eyes, gorgeous."

I do as he instructs, and he slows the pace again, teasing me.

"I'd lay the whole fucking world at your feet, baby." His face is so earnest as he observes me, watching my reaction to his words.

Squeezing his hands tighter with mine, tears spill from my eyes. "I only want you. I don't care about anything else."

He moves so slowly inside me, it's like he's hardly moving at all, and yet, the pleasure is overwhelming as he gives me a slow smile that builds. "You've got me, baby. All of me."

With those words, he pounds into me, my entire body trembling and shuddering beneath his as my pussy clamps around his cock like a vise. I scream as I come all over him. He doesn't slow his pace, pounding into me until my orgasm finishes.

A few more pumps and he tenses, a loud moan coming from his lips as he thrusts inside me as far as he can, his hot seed filling me. My pussy squeezes him, milking every drop of his cum from him.

Releasing my hands, he falls against my neck, both of us breathing heavily, our hearts pounding in unison. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tightly against me, contentment stealing over me.

Our racing heartbeats slow in perfect unison until they are beating normally.

William lifts his head from my neck, gazing into my eyes. "You are my everything, Everleigh. My entire fucking world."

My heart melts as my hands come up, tracing over his jawline. "You are my entire fucking world, Will."

I've never had anyone make me feel so damned much in my life.

And for the first time in my life, at twenty-one years old, I start to envision my future.

With him.



Crashing back to reality, my fingers slide from my pussy, my orgasm over. Defeat fills my body as I lower my head, tears coursing down my face, mixing with the water that flows from the showerhead.

For the second time in a few short hours, I'm completely bereft, my legs no longer able to hold me. Sliding to the floor, despair wracks my body as I watch the water swirling down the drain, just like my dreams.

I had it all until Ainsley took it from me. Just like she always does.

And because I love Will more than I ever thought I could care for anyone; I gave him up to spare his life.

My sobs turn to whimpers and then hiccups. Leaning my head against the shower wall, I take a deep breath, trying to get my emotions under control.

Barely able to swallow over the lump in my throat, I draw my legs up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them.

I miss him so fucking much.

Losing him has been the hardest thing I've ever endured. Even harder than losing my mom to cancer and my dad in the fiery house explosion.

And in a cruel twist of fate, I was finally able to see him, but I can't be with him.

A mournful sigh comes from my lips from the hellish torment of living without him.

Is it worth it?

For the briefest moment, I toy with the idea of leaving tonight to go to William. Savannah says he lives thirty-five minutes away from this cabin.

No, Everleigh. You can't. Not yet.

My mind tosses around various plans and obstacles, strategizing ways I can overcome them. My heart rate increases and my body jolts from adrenaline.

Standing up, I rinse off, then shut the water off. Grabbing two towels, I wrap one around my hair, then the other around my body.

Stepping onto the rug, I raise my arm, rubbing my forearm over the mirror, removing the condensation.

Dropping the towel, I stare at my reflection, taking in the muscles that cover my frame.

Ainsley, I'm coming for you, bitch.

Chapter 10

William

By the time Bryan, Emma, and I get out of the emergency room, pick up dinner, and have Emma settled at home, it's too late to return to the cabin in the woods.

Plus, I'm starving after our run and not eating anything since breakfast. Bryan and I eat dinner with Emma at the table, propping her ankle up, and listening to her bitch about us fussing over her.

As if either of us mind. Emma is the one constant person in my life and has been a mother figure to me since mine was murdered.

Pushing the nagging feeling about Everleigh and that cabin away, Bryan and I focus on Emma. We watch a movie with her, ensuring her sprained ankle remains elevated, just like the doctor instructed.

She's lucky she didn't break it.

I meet Bryan's eyes while we are in the kitchen, grabbing snacks and drinks. I see the guilt shining in his brown eyes and

I know what he's thinking. "Don't worry about it, Bryan. We'll go back and check it out. Emma needs us."

Bryan runs a hand through his short brown hair, his gaze averted to the floor. Releasing a sigh, he looks up at me. "I'm sorry we didn't get to stay longer and check it out. Everleigh means the world to you and if there's a chance..."

Nodding, I give him a tight smile. "She does, but so do you and Emma. I needed to make the two of you a priority." Grabbing the popcorn from the microwave, I pour it into a bowl. "We'll go back soon."

I decide to stay over at Bryan and Emma's townhouse, staying in their guest bedroom. Bryan lends me a pair of his gray sweatpants and boxers since I'm still wearing my running shorts and a t-shirt I had thrown in the back seat of my car.

After I change into them, I turn on the TV, pull back the comforter and slide beneath the sheets. My eyelids droop from exhaustion as I yawn, my limbs feeling heavy.

Closing my eyes, I drift off.



Bryan and I get out of my beamer, and I grin at him over the roof of my car. "Are you sure you wanna let me choose the trail?"

Bryan scowls. "Not at all. But you beat me the last time we played basketball, so I lost the bet."

I shrug, keeping my face expressionless. Inwardly, I'm smirking, knowing I'm about to torture the hell out of my best friend. I really need to run from all the angst and misery I've been feeling. Talking about my dad in therapy, then talking about my past with Irelynn really has me worked up and feeling out of sorts. Missing Everleigh doesn't help.

Bryan joins me, arms crossed over his chest, waiting for my signal. I point to a trail, and we start running. The tension drains from my body as soon as my feet hit the pavement, then the trail. Running was something my mom and I did when I was a kid. It's how we dealt with all the stress, anxiety, and abuse we experienced at the hands of my father.

It was an escape from our miserable existence. My mom and I ran like we were running away from that horrible, gothic looking mansion where we'd known mostly misery.

There was a time when my father would leave for business and mom and I would dance, sing, and bake cookies. We'd play games and laugh, and life was so good. Emma and her husband, Robert, and their kids, Bryan and Bristol, would join in.

I lived for those moments.

But then my dad hired Cole England as a servant, and all the fun we had ended. Cole constantly spied on us and reported everything we did to my father. And when we were punished, Cole's black eyes would shine, and he'd smirk and laugh.

I told my mom what Cole was doing, so running would be our escape, because Cole hated the outdoors and didn't run anywhere. It was the only time my mom and I were free to laugh and have fun again. And we'd run far and fast, as though we were running away from my overbearing and abusive father.

After my mom died, my father sent me to boarding school. I was tormented and bullied relentlessly by the other kids. I had no friends and was absolutely miserable. It was pure hell.

Two months later, I swallowed a bottle of pills, hoping to die and join my mom, the only person on this earth who loved me.

But fate had other plans, and I was found by one of the staff members, who called 9-1-1 and I was rushed to the hospital. They pumped my stomach and saved my life. When I regained consciousness, I was furious with them, and my rage overwhelmed me. I cursed, hit, and kicked at them until they restrained me. They had to give me a sedative to calm me down and placed me on suicide watch.

My father was called and informed of my "mishap" as he referred to it when he showed up. When the nurse gave us a few minutes alone, he flew into a rage, telling me I was a complete embarrassment and I needed to "grow some balls" and be a man. He drew his fist back, and I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head. But the nurse came in and instantly, my father pasted a smile on his face and pretended to be concerned.

I hated him for acting like he cared when he didn't give a shit about me.

When he left, I stared at the ceiling, believing my dad secretly wished I would have been successful when I'd attempted suicide.

I've never felt so alone and unloved.

When I was allowed to return to boarding school, I was a different person. Gone was the sweet, kind, eleven-year-old who mourned for his mother and desperately wanted someone to love him. In his place was a callous, vengeful, and angry person who was about to show these dumb motherfuckers they'd been fucking with the wrong boy.

Sure, my dad sent me to the best counselors and therapists, but they weren't helpful. When I told the therapist I tried to kill myself because I was being bullied, she didn't believe me. She told me I was attending one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country, and bullying didn't happen there. She went on and on, but I tuned her out, rage filling my body that she wouldn't believe me.

Meeting with a different counselor, I told him I'd been bullied and that's why I tried to commit suicide. His eyes were full of sadness, but he said the same thing as the other therapist—that bullying doesn't happen at one of the most affluent schools in the country and I was mistaken.

That's when I lost all faith in humanity. And set out to get revenge on all those who wronged me.

I went after the biggest bully in school. Austin Campbell. I manipulated his friends so they turned on him and gave me information about him. I'd spy on Austin every chance I got, discovering his secrets.

Oh, what a secret Austin was trying to keep! Not only was he gay, but he'd been having sex with one of the male teachers. I recorded it and blackmailed him.

And once he started kissing my ass, the others in the school soon followed.

Suddenly, I became popular, pretending to be charming and nice and feigning interest in their pathetic lives until I learned their weaknesses.

Then I exploited the hell out of every single one of them, manipulating and blackmailing the elitist bastards until I made them as miserable as they made me.

I showed no mercy, no matter how much they begged for it.

They never showed me any.

When I was fourteen, Austin tried to hide that he was gay by dating Amber Lewis, one of the most beautiful girls in the school, but dumb as a box of rocks.

I studied her intently, watching every frown and clenched jaw on her face whenever Austin pissed her off, which was often. Neither of them noticed me watching them, noticing the problems between them.

Then I set my plan in motion. I was the polar opposite of Austin, acting like a gentleman, being her friend, giving her

advice when she and Austin fought. On the surface, I acted like his best friend.

Then I blackmailed one of the computer geeks into sending the video I had of Austin giving and receiving blowjobs and fucking other men. Each time, Amber ran to me, and I comforted her.

She kissed me one day, then pulled away, feeling guilty. I told her she'd seen Austin do far worse. She resisted—at first. But at a party one night, after a couple of drinks and watching Austin flirt with Brad, she gave in to me.

I took her back to my room and fucked her in every position imaginable. The whole thing was recorded by the cameras connected to my phone.

After that, she couldn't get enough of me. She refused to break up with Austin since he was heir to an even bigger empire than I was set to inherit.

Publicly, she was his. Privately, she couldn't get enough of my dick.

I waited patiently until she finally decided she couldn't do this anymore, and she told me she loved me. But I was too smart for that bullshit. I knew she didn't love me. Otherwise, she would have ended things with Austin a long time ago.

That's when I rained hellfire down on them. Utilizing one of the computer nerd's help, I had him send out the video of Austin and all the men he'd been with, including the professor, to everyone in the school, as well as the entire administration.

I also had all the videos of Amber and me released to everyone in the school as well.

Austin was expelled and completely ruined. And Amber was humiliated and labeled as a cheating slut. Her parents picked her up and took her home, never to return to the school again.

A pang of guilt shot through me, but then I remembered how Austin bullied me, and Amber laughed harder than anyone as he humiliated me in front of the entire school.

I continued wreaking havoc on the student body, and the occasional teacher, until one day, one of the assholes, Mark Sampson, got tired of it and confronted me. I denied everything, of course.

Mark made a near fatal mistake. He told me my mother was a whore who was fucking the servant, humiliating my father, who had no choice but to have the servant kill her.

Rage like I've never known coursed through my body. Blood flowed like fast moving lava through my veins, red-hot, burning me from the inside. Adrenaline rushed through my body like a raging river and all I could see was Mark's blood, covering my hands and clothing as it flowed from his skin.

Fear was in his eyes as I smiled, clenching my fists, the pounding sensation in my ears so loud it drowned out all other sounds, including his voice. He held up his hands in a pleading gesture, but it was far too late.

With an animalistic roar, I lunged at him, tackling him to the ground, beating the hell out of him. Only, it wasn't just Mark

who I was punching. I saw my father, Austin, and every single bully's face as my fists continued pummeling him, his face unrecognizable when I was finished.

My father pulled some serious strings and, rather than be expelled after I nearly killed Mark, he sent me to the school counselor. Holly Martin was young and beautiful, fresh out of college. She looked at me like I was insane when she asked me questions about Mark and I told her what he'd said about my mom. It was the same spiel—bullying doesn't happen here bullshit.

Outwardly, I put on a show, making her believe I was confused and in need of her help. Inwardly, I was furious she was in denial or choosing the school's reputation over the truth. Whatever the case, I manipulated Holly into thinking she was helping me. And then I fucked her, over and over again, until I was certain she was in love with me.

Then I paid the computer nerd to send the video to the administration where Holly lost her job and any chance at ever being a school counselor again.

I was finally released from boarding school and sent home to live with my father and attend Anderson Academy.

I'm so lost in my past I don't even realize Bryan is lagging until he gasps my name, bending over and putting his hands on his knees while huffing and puffing. Turning, I give him a bemused grin, shaking my head.

I stop, waiting until he catches up to me, then our feet strike the trail as we continue running.

“Seriously, Will, you’re fucking killing me. Why the fuck did you choose this trail?” Bryan’s voice is hoarse as he pants, struggling to keep up with the pace I’ve set.

“Come on, Bry. I’m not running that fast.”

Bryan throws me a disgusted glare. “I’m not a superstar track runner like you, asshole.”

I laugh, pushing his shoulder playfully. “I’m not, either. So step it up, jackass.”

“Yeah, but you used to be. And you clearly haven’t slowed down.”

As we run, a rustling noise in the woods causes me to stop and spin around. My eyes rove around the thick foliage, scanning rapidly, finally landing on a woman. Her long blonde hair is pulled up in a ponytail as she sprints away, leaping and jumping over rocks and roots as she heads further away from Bryan and me.

My eyes narrow behind my sunglasses as I watch her go. There is something oddly familiar about the way she moves.

“Everleigh,” I yell, but she speeds up, running faster. She’s running away from me. I can’t let her escape. Not this time.

I try to chase after her, but my feet are frozen in place. My gaze slides down to my shoes, but I’m unable to see them. I stare in disbelief as I realize I’m sinking into quicksand.

No, I need to go after her.

But the more I struggle, the further I sink.



Bolting upright, my breath heaves out of me. My arms dart around the darkened room, the glow of the television illuminating the space.

It was just a nightmare.

My hand rubs over my chest as I struggle to compose myself.

As my dream rushes through me, something nags at my consciousness. Running a hand through my sweaty hair, I swing my legs over the side of the bed. The dream was full of things that happened in my past until I started sinking in quicksand.

But that's not what bothers me. As my eyes move to the wall, a realization flashes through my mind.

I heard a sob before I heard the rustling in the woods, and it sounded just like Everleigh!

That's what made me turn around and scan the area.

I've never made Everleigh cry, but she has sobbed when she told me about her mom's illness and her dad's unsolved murder. I held her in my arms, stroking her hair, feeling her pain and wishing like hell I could take it away.

My hands bunch the material of the gray sweatpants I'm wearing.

I'm going back to that fucking cabin in the morning.

Chapter 11

William

I toss and turn for quite some time, desperate to go back to that cabin in the woods and see if Everleigh is there. It's futile for me to attempt it at 3:00 a.m. since it's far too dark to be running through the woods.

Releasing a long sigh, I contemplate using Google to search out the road that leads to that cabin but decide against it when my gaze moves to the window, noting the darkness outside. There's no way I could drive to the cabin without using my headlights, and that would alert the occupants of my arrival.

Everleigh is smart and likely has prepared dozens of escape plans. I will have to be extremely stealthy and on top of my game to find her.

Rolling over, I punch my pillow in frustration. I really need to get some sleep so I can focus in the morning.

Lost in thought, I replay the moment I saw the blonde running through the woods like a frightened deer. That gait... it had to be Everleigh. She and I ran together often enough that I know the way she runs.

I know every curve of that woman's body. The way she moves is ingrained in my head.

I'll admit I'm obsessed with Everleigh. When I was with her, she completely captivated me. Every time she walked into a room, my breath quickened, and my heart beat frantically inside my chest. I needed to be close to her, to touch her, smell her, and taste her. When I held her in my arms, that was my own personal heaven.

She didn't just make my world a better place; she was my entire world.

Closing my eyes, I take deep breaths, longing filling every facet of my body. Pain rolls through my body, making me wince. Internally, it feels like someone is beating the hell out of me.

Opening my eyes, my gaze moves to the window, staring out at the inky blackness. Images of Everleigh laying on a bed inside that quaint cabin, curled up on her side, with the covers pulled up to her chin, fill my head.

Whenever I had to get up early in the morning, she'd curl into a ball, pulling the covers to her chin, a slight pout on her lips. I wanted to crawl back into bed every damned time she did that, tugging her body against me so she could wrap around me, knowing her pout would turn into a soft smile. She'd release a long, content sigh, clinging to me as she held me against her.

She made me feel wanted. Needed. *Loved.*

It was the best fucking feeling in the world. Not just because I'd been longing for love for so long, but because this woman was so fucking strong, she didn't need anybody. Everleigh could survive a fucking category five hurricane because she's so fucking fierce. She is the storm.

She didn't need *me*—she could take care of herself just fine. She'd been doing so for a long time.

And yet, every time she clung to me, my heart galloped inside my chest like a horse running a race. I felt on top of the world, knowing this strong ass woman chose me.

Tears fill my eyes as I lay there, in the stillness and quietness of the room, longing to touch her. I ache to feel her warm body in my arms, to smell her familiar aroma of jasmine and amber, to feel her warm, gentle breaths on my skin.

I just fucking miss her and want her. Desperately.

Rolling over, I snatch my cell phone from the nightstand. My heart squeezes inside my chest as her beautiful face stares at me from my lock screen. My finger traces over the curves of her face, remembering the feel of her silky skin. Her long lashes frame her chocolate eyes as happiness flows from them, her smile wide and angelic.

Sighing, I press buttons on my phone, clicking on Bryan's name and shooting him a text, informing him I want to return to that cabin in the morning. I don't bother waiting for a response, figuring he's asleep, and knowing he will accompany me. He knows how miserable I've been without Everleigh, and how determined I am to find her.

Setting my phone on the stand beside me, I roll onto my back, my hands running through my hair. Releasing a huge sigh, I scold myself.

You need to sleep so you'll be focused in the morning.

Closing my eyes, I imagine what it would feel like to arrive at that cabin, rip open the door, and see Everleigh standing there, wide-eyed and shocked at first. Then her face changes to pure exuberance as she smiles, her chocolate eyes sparkling, as she runs toward me. Striding forward, I catch her in my arms, pulling her against me, holding her so tightly against me I feel her heart beating in time with mine. I whisper promises against her hair, ensuring her I'll never let her go, and we'll destroy Ainsley together.

When Everleigh pulls back slightly, lifting her face to mine, she sees the promise in my irises. Nodding, her lips turn up into a smile, an ethereal light emanating from it, before our lips crash together, hungry and desperate for one another.

My body relaxes as the drowsiness overtakes me.



Small bare feet step onto the concrete patio. Bright sunlight filters across the large garden, a kaleidoscope of colors as the flowers lift and stretch toward it, a combination of the sweetest fragrances filling the air. I inhale deeply, wanting to capture the scent inside my nose, holding it there all night as I sleep in my bed.

My mom's head lifts, a huge smile transforming her face. She stands, a wide straw-hat protecting her fair skin. Waving, she tugs at the thick gardening gloves covering her hands, pulling them off.

I bound toward her, happiness filling me as her love flows from her. "Hi, mom. Tending to your flowers?"

Her fingers ruffle my hair as she chuckles. "Of course. Every chance I get." The smile fades; her face clouding over. "Remember: not a word to your father that I'm out here."

I'm already shaking my head, my face earnest. "Never, mom. I know better." A brief shudder rolls through my body as I imagine the hell he'd unleash on her for gardening.

My head turns as I hear the sound of the door opening. My flight response kicks in and I hurriedly hide beneath a nearby bush, shaking like a leaf.

My father is too enraged to notice me as his gaze lands on my mom. Her eyes widen from her horror as she takes in his face, now scarlet from his rage.

"We have servants for that," his voice drips with contempt as he strides toward her. Before she can react, he's in front of her. I hear the crack of his hand against her cheek, the watering can flying several feet in the air.

My mom topples to the ground, an angry red handprint on her face, visible from where I'm crouched. Clasping my hands together, I silently pray he'll stop hitting her, and that he won't

notice me. Once enraged, my father takes his fury out on anyone within range.

For once, my prayers are answered as my father storms inside the house, the door slamming behind him. My hand rubs over my face where my dad slapped my mom, her pain radiating through me, even though he didn't hit me.

I wait a few beats to ensure he's not going to return, then dash from my hiding spot, running as fast as my little feet will carry me. My arms wrap around her as she sits up, tears falling down my cheeks.

"I'm okay," she says as soon as she locks eyes with me, plastering a reassuring smile on her face. It falters as she does her best to quickly compose herself.

"I hate him, Mom." My hands clench into fists as I pull back from her, sitting back on my feet, my knees on the cool grass. Anger flashes in my eyes. "One day, I'm going to be bigger and stronger than him. And I'll never let him hurt you again."

Her eyes shine with moisture, her voice cracking as she cups my face. "Oh, William. You are the sweetest boy. One day, you will grow to be a strong and protective man." Her fingers wipe away my tears. "You are already deeply loyal and loving. You're gonna be a heartbreaker someday." She lightly pinches my cheek, a smile on her face that soon falters. Her gaze drops to the ground as she heaves out a long sigh. "But you shouldn't say that you hate your father, William."

I frown, not understanding why I shouldn't say it. "But I hate him, Mom. He's ugly inside. Always mean to us and the servants. He yells all the time and is quick to hit others."

My mom bows her head, her cheeks turning pink. Her chin quivers as she fights to maintain her composure. But she fails.

"Will, I—"

"I promise you, Mom, that one day, I'll take you away from this. I'll treat you like a queen because you deserve it. And when I find a beautiful woman, just like you, I'll treat her the same way." I pause, my emotions overwhelming me. Once I get them under control, I continue, "We will dance and sing every day, because we will only know happiness."

My mom raises her head to mine, her big brown eyes shining with love and pride. "You are my happiness, Will. Every day, no matter how bad things get, you make me smile." She grabs my hands, pulling me to my feet as she stands. She nods her head, and releasing one of my hands, we start walking.

I follow her to the woods, wondering where we are going. My bare feet sink into the damp moss on the trail as my mom stops, our house barely visible from this spot in the forest. Her hands clasp mine as we twirl in a circle. "You make me feel like dancing and singing every single day, Will." We keep twirling in circles as my mom sings, "You Make Me Feel Like Dancing." Laughter bubbles up inside me, spilling out of me.

Little did I know, that was the start of a new tradition. Mom and I would sneak off to the woods, singing and dancing, every

chance we got. It was our safe haven. My father hated the forest and all its insects and creatures, and the briars that snagged your clothing and tore at your skin. He wasn't a fan of anything outdoors unless it was a golf course where he'd shmooze and conduct business.

My mom loved running through the woods. In her running attire, her blonde hair pulled up in a ponytail, she looked carefree and youthful. She'd smile at me, telling me she'd be back soon, and to listen to Emma while she was gone. Then she'd ruffle her fingers through my hair, kiss the top of my head, and head out. I'd watch her graceful form, wishing I could go with her.

When she returned, she'd be exuberant. One day, I asked her why running made her so happy. She smiled, cocking her head slightly. "When I run, I forget everything else and focus on putting one foot in front of the other, controlling my breathing. All my stress vanishes as the endorphins kick in. Plus, it helps me stay thin." The smile doesn't reach her eyes when she says those last words. My father bitches at her for gaining even a few pounds.

As I grew older, my mom allowed me to join her on her shorter runs. The first time I ran with her, I didn't understand why she liked it so much. But a few runs later, those endorphins kicked in and I fell in love with it.

There was a freedom in running as the sweat rolled down my face, coating my skin. It was an escape from all my problems at home. My mom and I felt as free as the birds in the

sky when our feet pounded on the trails, winding us deeper and deeper into the woods.

In the cool darkness of the forest, lightness engulfed me, filling me with hope and happiness. There was nothing like running in nature, where our misery faded away as the beauty of mother nature filled our souls.

Mom and I would dream about our future, clinging to the false belief that things would get better for us.

We clung to hope, despite knowing how fleeting it could be. What choice did we have? If we didn't, we'd succumb to the darkness that hovered around us daily.

Foolishly, I lived for that moment when my mom and I could escape this hell. I knew my mom was getting sick of the constant verbal and, oftentimes, physical abuse my father heaped on both of us. As I got older, his expectations for me grew. My mom tried to reason with him, saying he was setting me up for failure because there was no way a child my age could live up to his demands. He'd argue that as an Anderson, I was certainly capable. But when he turned away, I saw the devious smile on his lips and I knew he was setting me up for failure so he could punish me.

Foolhardily, I held onto the belief that one day, my mom and I would leave this hellhole and start over.

Tragically, my hope vanished when my mom's life ended in the most violent manner.

The sound of gunshots drowned out the Christmas music that was playing at my father's annual holiday party. I didn't understand what was happening until I saw the horror etched on my mother's face as the gold dress she wore turned red from her blood.

The moment my mom's chocolate eyes locked with my confused blue ones, I froze, terror filling my body, rooting my feet to the floor. The fear in her eyes wasn't for herself, but for me. As the light drained out of them, she tumbled down the stairs, a red sea surrounding me as her body stopped at my feet.

As the rusty scent of her blood filled my nostrils when I bent over her crumpled body, I feverishly wished this was all a horrible nightmare.

The shrill sound of people screaming, their shoes tapping rapidly across the floor as they fled from the room, penetrated my denial. It started sinking into my young ten-year-old brain that my mom had just been shot.

Kneeling beside her, my hand gripped her cold upper arm as I shook her gently, whispering, "Mom, please, open your eyes."

But she didn't. There was no movement of her body, no fluttering of her lashes as her eyes opened, and no soft breaths hitting my skin when my face hovered over hers.

As I clung to her, disbelief filled me, my heart barely beating inside my chest. I could no longer form words.

Please, Mom, don't leave me. I need you. You're the only one who loves me and I love you just as much. Open your eyes. Say my name. Please.

But my prayers weren't answered.

As I slid my hand from my mom's upper arm to her hand, her blood covered my skin. My chin quivered and tears filled my eyes, her body blurring in front of me. I blinked, and they ran down my cheek like raindrops hitting a windshield and streaking down it.

Gentle, soft hands gripped me, startling me as reality started sinking in.

My mom wasn't coming back. Not from this.

An angelic voice is beside my ear, the tone soft. "I'm so sorry, William." Gentle hands grip me, pulling on my body. I want to resist and stay there with my mom, but my strength wanes. I find myself being pulled to my feet, my hands releasing my mom's body, but still reaching for her.

Like a bad accident, I couldn't tear my eyes away from my mom, lying on the cold floor. Unable to speak, my mind whirled with my thoughts.

My mom was the only person in this hellhole who loved and understood me. She never tried to force me to be something I wasn't, loving and accepting me for who I was.

Fear rose inside me, making my body tremble.

Who's going to protect me from the monster now?

Who will prevent my father from pulling me into the darkness?

I don't want to be like him, dammit.

In the distance, I heard my father barking instructions at everyone, his voice emotionless. Turning my head, my gaze locked on him, observing him.

He's flustered that his party is ruined. He doesn't care that she's dead.

Turning my head away, bitter disappointment filled my soul. I overheard my mom telling Emma that my dad was a callous bastard. I knew what a bastard was but didn't know what the word callous meant until I asked Emma. She told me it's often used to describe someone who is unfeeling or emotionless. One who lacks sympathy for others.

My eyes narrowed as I watch my dad glance over at my mom, his face emotionless.

Callous bastard.

Turning my gaze away from him, bile rose in my throat. Clenching my hand into a fist, my eyes drifted to the lady who still gripped me, realizing she's guiding me toward the door. I blinked, realizing it's my mom's friend, Rosalyn. They'd meet for coffee and sometimes I'd play with her son, Mike.

Rosalyn's arm wrapped around my shoulders, leading me away from my mom. When we reached the door, I turned, craning my neck, unable to resist one last look at her. But Jack, Rosalyn's husband, came up to us, lifting me in his arms.

“My, William, you are really growing.” He ruffled my hair as he strode through the door, holding me tightly against his warm body since we weren’t wearing any coats. The cold December air wrapped its frigid fingers around us as we huddled outside.

Glancing around, I noticed people heading to their cars and some already driving down the road, fleeing from this horrific evening. I understood. I’d wanted away from this place long before this tragedy occurred.

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing louder as they reached the house. Their flashing lights filled the night sky, turning the festive white Christmas lights into a sea of red and blue.

After that night, I despised red and blue flashing lights.

Grief consumed me, and I barely remember anything after that moment. My heart splintered, then broke into millions of tiny pieces.

My father walked out the front door, talking to a man I’ve never seen before. I heard Jack tell Rosalyn he’s a medical examiner. They talked for a few minutes before the examiner went back inside and my dad came over to us.

“Jack. Rosalyn. Would you mind if William stays with you tonight?”

“Not at all,” Rosalyn said. “We’d be happy to have him.” Turning away from my dad, she ran gentle hands over my

arms and I realized I was trembling. “We are taking you home with us tonight, okay? You can see Mike.”

I blinked at her a few times, then reached forward, touching a lock of her hair. “You have blonde hair like my mom.”

Rosalyn blinked, a tear rolling down her face. “Yes, I do. And so do you.”

Nodding, I thought, What a stupid thing to say.

She squeezed my hand, drawing my attention back to her. “Let’s go see Mike and Irelynn, okay?”

Giving her a weak smile to make her feel better, I let her guide me toward her and Jack’s vehicle.

As I climbed into the back seat, and Rosalyn fastened my seatbelt, my gaze returned to my house. Sadness engulfed me, knowing my mom’s bloody body was still inside.

You’ll finally get to escape this hellhole, Mom.

Unfortunately, I won’t be going with you.

As Jack drove us away from the house, tears flowed down my face. My dad waved at us, a smile on his face, as though nothing was amiss.

For the first time in my young life, I was jealous of my mom because she had finally escaped.

But I was at the mercy of the monster who rules with an iron fist.



Bolting upright, sweat pours down my body as my breathing is ragged and out of control. My eyes scan the room, wide and frantic, as reality seeps into my consciousness.

It was only a nightmare.

Focusing on my breathing, my pulse and heart rate finally slow as I get it under control. Pulling my legs up to my chest, I rest my forehead on my knees, my hands clasping the back of my head.

The nightmares had stopped when I was with Everleigh. For nine months, I peacefully slept through the night.

Now that she's disappeared, they've returned. Every fucking night.

Lowering my hands, I lift my head, looking out the window. Sunlight beams through it, lighting up the room and warming my overheated skin.

Twisting my torso, I reach over and grab my phone from the nightstand. I look at the time, blink a few times, then look at it again.

Fuck! It's already 9:00 a.m.

I wanted to be up at sunrise to head to that cabin in the woods.

My fingers race across the screen, typing a text to Bryan. Once I'm finished, I grab the covers, throw them off my body,

then head to the restroom.

Grabbing the toothbrush and toothpaste Bryan put in here last night, I square my shoulders, looking in the mirror as I shove the toothbrush inside my mouth. My muscles are taut as my spine stiffens, my posture straightening from my determination.

It's time to get the day started and find Everleigh.

Chapter 12

Everleigh

The early morning light streams through my window, and I blink several times, disoriented. Putting a hand to my forehead, I realize I forgot to close the blinds and curtains before I fell asleep... actually, passed out is a better description.

The events of last night swirl through my head, as do the remnants of the wine I consumed.



After Savannah arrived, she helped put the groceries she brought for me away, then we ate Chinese takeout and split a bottle of wine. Since this is the first time I've had any alcohol in a long time, let's just say, it hit me really hard.

"Is this the first time you've had Chinese food in a while?" Savannah asks, tucking her right foot beneath her left leg on the chair as she takes a seat at my small kitchen table.

I shake my head. "No, I usually grab takeout and an iced coffee after Krav Maga class."

Savannah's eyes trail over me as I shove a huge bite of food in my mouth, practically starving after my long run in the woods. Raising her brows, she watches me for a moment, then asks, "How often do you go to class?"

"Three times a week." I grab my glass of water, taking a long sip. "You have to consistently train, or you'll lose the progress you've made."

"Do you train locally?" She takes a bite of her orange chicken, watching me intensely.

"Yeah. It's about thirty minutes from here. Josh is one of the best instructors around." A wry smile pulls up my lips. "He sure doesn't go easy on me." I pause, my eyes moving to the window, thinking about my first couple of classes with him. "I thought he hated me and wanted me to quit when I first started because he was that hard on me."

Savannah's eyebrows shoot up. "Why would he hate you?"

"He didn't hate me. He later told me I was far more advanced than the other students." Releasing a small laugh, my eyes drift from my plate to Savannah. "You remember Mrs. Johnston enrolling me in various martial arts classes over the years? Josh noticed, but he thought I was too cocky. He made an example of me in front of the entire class." Memories of how sore I was after my first class run through my head, making me cringe.

She giggles. "I can't imagine him thinking you are cocky when you fight." Sarcasm drips from her voice.

Balling up my napkin, I throw it at her. “Haha! I know you are referring to me kicking those guys’ asses that night in the bar. Those assholes deserved it for not heeding my warnings.” I shrug, taking a bite of rice. Chewing and swallowing it, I meet her blue eyes. “They learned the hard way not to put their hands on us.”

Savannah practically chokes on the bite of food in her mouth. “You dislocated that one dude’s shoulder and broke his nose.”

“I let him off easy. There’s so much more I wanted to do to him.”

“Yes, but then you would have gotten into trouble. You played the part of a helpless woman who doesn’t know how to defend herself pretty well when you let him shove you up against the side of the bar and punch you. I was worried you met your match until I saw you smile. Then I thought, ‘Oh shit. She’s going to jail tonight for murder.’ But you surprised me.” She grins, winking at me, tossing a lock of light brown hair over her shoulder.

I give her a smile. “I knew if I let him hit me, then beat his ass, he wouldn’t press charges against me. The guy’s ego was too big. But if I would have killed him... I would have been in a lot of trouble.”

Savannah laughs. “His friend ran away like a little bitch while you beat his buddy up.”

I can’t help but grin. “Too bad I didn’t get to watch him. When I heard him say, ‘Fuck. I’m not getting my ass kicked

tonight,' then run away, I focused solely on kicking his friend's ass. Unfortunately, I took all my anger out on him, rather than dividing it equally." I take a bite of food, chewing and swallowing, before adding, "I'd still like to beat the coward's ass that ran away. He had no right to put his hands on you like that."

Savannah waves me away. "I couldn't beat his ass like I wanted to because he did it in front of too many people. It's a shame I had to settle for a knee to his nuts. I wanted to do a lot more to that asshole."

Raising my glass of water, I say, "And you would have certainly done it. That guy stood no chance against you."

She toasts me with her water. "Here, here." Taking a drink, she sets her glass on the table.

We finish eating, the conversation flowing between us. *God, I've missed her*, I think as I look over at Savannah. She is so intelligent, has an amazing sense of humor that I love, and she's gorgeous. But she avoids the opposite sex as much as possible because of her past. She had a boyfriend once before her life was turned upside down.

Realizing she's snapping her fingers in front of my face, I pull myself from my thoughts, focusing on her. "Hey, where'd you go?" A smile grows across her face. "Oh, never mind. You were thinking about Will, right?"

My lungs constrict, and I struggle to maintain my composure. I haven't thought of him since Savannah arrived but now... a lump forms in my throat as I picture his muscular

body, clad in a pair of running shorts and sneakers. God, he looked fucking amazing. My heart aches to hold him in my arms, while my body craves his touch. Turning my head, I stare out the window, missing him so damn much.

When my gaze goes back to Savannah, she's staring at me with sympathy in her blue eyes. Reaching her hand out for mine, she gently squeezes, offering me comfort. "I'm so sorry, Everleigh. I shouldn't have brought him up."

Blinking back my tears, I shake my head. "It's fine. My thoughts would have gone to him sooner or later." I take a deep breath, then exhale it. "They always do."

A guilty look is on her face, and I know she feels bad for bringing him up. Forcing a smile to my face, I stand up, going over and grabbing a bottle of wine and two glasses, and return to the table, pouring her a drink. Giving her a smile, I slide the glass to her. "Let's not think about the past. I've done that enough today." Grabbing her cell phone, I pull up a Spotify music playlist. "Let's drink and dance."

Her blue eyes sparkle as she pushes herself out of the chair. "I'm in."

We drink, dance, and sing the night away, polishing off the bottle of wine. It started with a nineties dance party mix, but then Savannah had to play 10,000 Maniacs "Because the Night," which means I had to stand on a chair and sing it. I kept choking up as I thought about the time Will and I made dinner together and this song came on. I started singing it and we ended up dancing in the kitchen. Things quickly grew very

heated between us, and we ended up burning our dinner, but were too lost in each other to care until the smoke alarm started beeping. While Will ran around opening windows so we could breathe, I called and ordered a pizza. We ate it while sitting on the floor naked, drinking wine and singing songs until his hands started caressing me, and once again, we got lost in each other.

“Hey, don’t start crying and thinking about the past. You said none of that was allowed.” Savannah lightly shoves me and I laugh, nearly toppling off the chair and spilling some wine on her.

“Then you better find a song that doesn’t remind me of Will.”

“I’ve got just the thing.” She grabs her phone and turns on Shania Twain’s “Man, I Feel Like a Woman!” I groan and tackle her, easily taking it from her and changing the song to Backstreet Boys “Everybody.” We started dancing again, and for the first time in a long time, I let myself go, not worrying about anything.

By the time we open a third bottle of wine, I’m completely relaxed, my earlier pain forgotten. We change the playlist to eighties music. Neither of us can stop laughing as we do one ridiculous dance after another.

By 2:00 a.m., I’m drunk, sweaty, and tired. Savannah changes the playlist to more mellow music, collapsing onto the couch beside me. “I’m exhausted, but man, this is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

Turning my head, a radiant smile is on my face. “Same, girl. Tonight has been an absolute blast.” My smile falters slightly as emotion bubbles inside me. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me too, girl. But don’t start getting all emotional on me.” She throws me a pretend angry face, then dissolves in a fit of giggles.

I shake my head. “You’re drunk, girl.”

“Yes, I am.” She laughs harder, grabbing a pillow and hitting me over the head with it. I retaliate, and an epic pillow fight ensues, our exhaustion evaporating as we jump to our feet. We run around my small cabin, whacking each other, then trying to run away before the other can retaliate. Both of us are unsteady from drinking, so we’ve done more falling into each other and accidentally hitting the other with the pillow. But we are having too much fun to care.

“Okay, I’m done!” Savannah sticks the pillow under her arm, holding up a time-out sign like she’s a referee in a football game. I hit her one last time before collapsing on the couch again in a fit of giggles.

It takes a few moments for us to get ourselves under control, but we finally manage. In the blink of an eye, my entire mood shifts, and I’m plunged into despair.

The song on the random playlist changes and “I Still Believe” by Brenda K. Starr fills the room. Tears well in my eyes. My mom always loved this song, and she’d sing it every time she heard it, usually by grabbing whatever was handy, such as a water bottle or a hairbrush, and using it as a

microphone. I'd join her, swaying to the song beside her as we'd sing our hearts out.

But now... it doesn't only remind me of my mom. It reminds me of Will.

When the chorus plays, I turn into a sobbing, blubbing mess. Savannah wraps her arms around me as I break like a dam, my tears falling like rain on her shirt.

"I-i-it's so u-unfair," I finally stutter out. "First, that b-bitch murders my mom. And... n-now... I can't b-be with W-Will." My body shakes like a tree in a windstorm. Savannah tightens her arms on me, gently running her hand over my hair. Just like my mom and Will used to do. Surprisingly, the gesture helps calm me.

As I pull away from her, Savannah loosens her arms from around me and moves to the kitchen to grab a box of tissues that are on the counter. When she returns, I pound my fists on my thighs. My tears have been replaced by the fury that is welling up inside me like a massive storm. There's no holding it back, especially with alcohol flowing through my veins.

"That fucking psycho *bitch*." Pushing my hair from my face, I spit my words out like a nail gun. "I should have killed Ainsley a long time ago." Before Savannah can hand me a tissue, I shoot up from the couch, running to my small kitchen and grabbing a large knife from a drawer, my bare feet slapping against the wooden floor as I head toward the front door.

Savannah throws herself in front of it seconds before I do, her blue eyes pleading. She presses her back against the door, holding up one hand. “Please, Everleigh, I know you’re pissed, but you need to put the knife down.”

Her words barely register through the relentless rage coursing through my veins, turning them into molten lava.

If you kill and dismember that bitch, you can go back to Will.

My grip tightens on the handle of the knife, a smile pulling up my lips. Considering how Savannah presses her body harder against the door, as if she’s trying to sink into the wood, I know I must look demented, with a malicious sneer curling up my lips, my eyes wild as they dart around, and heavy breaths being expelled from my lungs. Killing Ainsley sounds so fucking good right now. Once she’s out of the picture, I can return to Will.

I can almost feel his hard muscles beneath my fingertips, and taste his soft, kissable lips, as his spice and wood aroma infiltrate my nose. He’s obviously lifting weights, judging by how much muscle mass was on his body when he ran by me. I’m panting now, my tongue poking out and licking my lips, as images of falling against him and pressing my lips to his fill my mind.

I’d never let him go again.

My eyes light up as determination courses through me, my shoulders pulling back. “Step out of my way, Savannah.”

She bites her lip, her arms spreading out and pressing against the door. “I don’t want to tell you this, but I have to. This is a terrible idea, Everleigh.” Her worried gaze is locked on mine. “Everleigh, you can’t go off, pissed and drunk, to seek vengeance against Ainsley. I know you are sick of all this shit, but you’ll get killed. And if you die, it will kill Will.” She moves her hands away from the door, her movements sloppy as she pushes her brown hair from her face. “He’s barely hanging on as it is.” Her pitch is low, but those words ring through my ears like a shotgun.

My eyes widen and my grip on the knife loosens. “What do you mean?”

Her cheeks turn pink as she exhales a breath. “I’ve watched him and Bryan a few times since you left him. And girl, he’s beyond devastated.” Her gaze drops to the knife in my hand, then back to my face, watching my expression change from fury to concern.

She swallows and then says, “Bryan was worried Will was going to kill himself or someone else, drinking too much scotch and racing his BMW around. But that’s how he coped after you left. And one night, he nearly wrecked and killed himself. I overheard Bryan talking to him about it in a coffee shop in California about two weeks after your abrupt departure. Had Bryan not been in the car with Will and jerked the wheel back onto the road when he passed out behind it, Will would probably be dead. Bryan worried Will wanted to... end his life. He was trying to get Will to see a therapist.” She lowers her head, looks at the hardwood floor, then raises it,

taking in my astonished face. “Will was driving on the same road where Ainsley hit your car. He drifted off nearly at the exact spot where your car flipped over, and you were hanging upside down in it. Where... he met and rescued you.” Guilt flashes in her blue eyes, but then she pulls her shoulders back with conviction. “I turned my focus on Ainsley because I knew Bryan could handle Will, drawing him out of his depression and downward spiral. Ainsley was the immediate threat to us, so I focused on her, and only occasionally checked in on Will to be sure he was doing okay.”

My heart stops beating inside my chest. The knife hits the floor as my hands raise, covering my mouth. Nausea swirls inside my stomach as tears fill my eyes. “No,” I weakly cry out, my lungs burning from lack of air. Images of Will almost wrecking his car fill my head and... I can’t.

Despair hits me hard, like a heavy stone was just dropped on my body. My legs shake as I remove my hands from over my mouth, trying to breathe, but I can’t. My limbs tingle and my vision blurs, the room darkening at the edges, as though I’m inside a deep cave, desperate to reach the light.

Savannah’s arms wrap around me, startling me. I didn’t realize she’d moved away from the door. “Breathe, honey. Will is fine. Bryan saved him, and he stopped drinking after that. He rarely touches alcohol since that incident.” Stepping back, she guides me away from the door and to the couch, easing me onto it.

Sagging against the cushions, air circulates through my lungs again as her words penetrate my brain. “Will... he missed me that much?”

She lowers herself beside me, her hands pressing against the inside of her knees. “Honey, I’ve never seen him like that. He was just full of despair, as though his entire world had just ended. He had dark circles beneath his eyes. He wore clothes that looked like he tried sleeping in them but failed and just tossed and turned all night. His hands shook when he picked up his coffee and it seemed like he lost a good bit of weight.” She hands me a tissue as a tear trails down my cheek. “He was pale and gaunt. Sickly looking. It was rough seeing him like that.” She sighs, one hand raises and rubbing her forehead. “I know I don’t know Will nearly as well as you and mostly saw him through our video chats, but Everleigh... that man has it bad for you. He looked like he was lost, unsure how to save himself.”

My heart squeezes inside my chest, like someone with an iron grip is crushing it with their bare hands. My throat is dry, like I’m deeply dehydrated from walking beneath the excruciatingly hot desert sun.

Slowly turning my head to her, my soul feels like the aftermath of a tornado. Nothing left except a path of destruction, suffering in silence without him. And Will obviously was in agony as well.

An image of his smiling face as he joked with Bryan fills my head, turning my heated body frigid. He didn’t appear to

be hurting when I saw him. Anguish barrels like a train, speeding down the tracks while I struggle against the ropes, tied to the tracks.

He's over me. I've waited too long.

Averting my gaze, I stare with unseeing eyes out the window into the inky blackness that surrounds the cabin. I finally give voice to my pain. "Will is over me, Savannah." It feels like my heart is bleeding, the blood somehow seeping out of my body as the life slowly drains from me.

"Oh, Everleigh, that's not true." Savannah's tone is adamant as she grabs my face with her hands when I try to turn it away. She leans closer to me. "Trust me, honey, he still aches for you. I've periodically checked in on him and Bryan since he arrived in Pennsylvania. Most days, he's barely hanging on. He hasn't once stopped searching for you." Her gaze locks with mine, raging sincerity pouring from her blue eyes. "You just happened to catch him during the one minute he wasn't thinking about you." She gives me a soft smile. "I'm sure he was thinking about you after that."

I'm still unable to smile. While she means well and I believe what she's telling me, that image of him and Bryan, happy and laughing, is burned into my brain. With the alcohol coursing through my veins, it's hard for me to be convinced he's missing me as much as she says.

"Maybe that was the case when he first moved here. But I just saw him and... he was happy. I mean, I want him to be

happy, but... I can't stand the thought of him moving on from me. Getting... over me."

Savannah releases a long sigh. "Fine. You forced my hand." She stands and heads to her bags. Pulling her laptop from one of them, she comes over, tucking one leg beneath her as she sits down beside me. Opening it, she waits until it boots up, then clicks on a file.

"Before this video starts, I lied. I was closer than I told you, staying at a hotel in town to make sure it was safe before coming here. I followed Will a few times, as well as him and Bryan..." She pauses momentarily. "Has Bryan always been that hot?"

I can't help the giggle that escapes me as I turn to her, studying her fire-engine red face. Lord, I can practically feel the heat of her embarrassment. "He's attractive." I shrug, never paying attention to him much because I was always focused on Will. The only time I saw Bryan was when Will was around, and I was too distracted to give him more than a few cursory glances.

"Attractive? Do you have eyes, girl?" Savannah twirls a lock of brunette hair around her finger. "Smoldering eyes, gorgeous smile. And that bod!" She releases her hair, fanning her face with her hand.

I grin. "I was too occupied with Will, but I know he's good looking. And I'm pretty sure he's single, but I don't know what his deal is." Pausing, I study her for a few moments. "I'm shocked. I've never seen you express interest in a guy before."

She waves her hand. “Let’s just watch the video. I have a point to prove.” Turning her attention to her computer, she seems uncomfortable by my comment, despite her being the one who brought up Bryan.

Hmm. I need to ask her questions when we aren’t tipsy from wine.

Turning my attention to her laptop screen, I lean closer as Will and Bryan sit across from one another in a coffee shop. Bryan stares at Will with concern while Will... oh gosh, his face. He looks so damn mournful, his despair evident in the slump of his shoulders. Dark circles are beneath his eyes as he stares at his cup, spinning it around, clearly lost in thought.

“The PI had nothing, man.” His hand tightens on his cup and his jaw clenches. “All that fucking money spent on the best PIs and they can’t come up with one goddamn clue where Everleigh is.” He squeezes his iced coffee so hard I’m afraid the lid is going to shoot off and coffee will fly in the air like a geyser.

Bryan shakes his head, taking a drink of his coffee and slamming the cup down. “That fucking sucks, man.” He stares at his cup, twirling it aimlessly, then looks at Will. “Are you going to fire them?”

Will slumps in his chair. “I should... but I can’t. I need everyone I can to help me find her, Bry. I fucking ache for her. I’d do *anything*—and I mean any motherfucking thing—to get her back.”

Bryan reaches out, putting a hand on Will's arm that is still squeezing his cup. "I know, man. We aren't giving up. You and I will keep looking for her. Apply more pressure to those bastards. Make them crack."

Will's lip quirks up slightly, but then it disappears, as if he doesn't have the strength to smile. "You've got that right. I'm *never* fucking giving up on her." He pauses, tilting his head to the side. "Any dirt on the PIs? Family or anything? Threatening to hurt a loved one usually lights a fire under someone's worthless ass. Especially if they are making half-hearted attempts to find her." He runs a hand through his flaxen hair. "I don't fucking care if they have to take sticks of dynamite to blow open caves to crawl inside and search for her. I just want her found." His voice cracks on the last word, matching the new crack that just formed in my heart as I study his handsome face, listening to the passion in his tone.

He isn't over me.

Like the sun rising over the horizon, lighting up the world, hope blossoms inside my chest, like daffodils and tulips blooming to life in the spring.

Savannah pauses the video, watching my face. "Since he was still looking for you, I had to ensure I was keeping tabs on Ainsley or both of you would have been in danger."

A hush descends over the room as I ponder everything she just said to me.

After several beats, I turn to her, a determined smile pulling up my lips. "I'm ready."

Her eyebrows raise. “For?”

My smile turns victorious. “War.”



The events of last night—actually, early this morning—fade away. Putting a hand on my forehead, I take a deep breath, and slowly release it, the rollercoaster of emotions slowing, before determination and hope set in.

I hop out of bed, go to the restroom to brush my teeth, and get ready to begin my day. Even though it’s only 7:00 a.m. and my head pounds slightly from the wine I consumed last night, I feel refreshed. Like a sailor, lost at sea, who has finally spotted land.

After spitting out my toothpaste in the sink, I raise my head to the mirror, my chocolate eyes shining with purpose. I know what I have to do. And I’m ready for it.

Dressing in running attire, I hurry into the living room. “Savannah, get up. It’s time to go for a run.”

She bolts upright on the couch, one hand going over her heart. “Jesus, Everleigh! Did you have to storm out here like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack!” Her breathing is shallow as she narrows her eyes at me. “Why are you dressed like that? What time is it? It feels like the middle of the night.”

My smile is bright. “Nope, it’s 7:15 a.m. I have an idea. Let’s go for a run, then go for breakfast and a coffee. My treat.”

Her eyes roam over me, studying me from head to toe. “You’re gonna run through the woods like... yourself? No disguise?”

Bending over, I lightly swat her legs. “No, silly. I haven’t put on a wig yet, nor am I wearing colored contacts.” Shaking my head, I head to the refrigerator, grabbing two bottles of water. Returning to her, I hand one to her. “Drink this and get ready. We have places to be and things to do.” Leaving her alone, I head to my room, perusing the selection of wigs. My eyes land on the red one with the long, wavy curls.

Seems fitting for today.

After wrestling my brunette locks tightly against my scalp, I slip the wig over my head. Walking into the bathroom, I adjust it, then pull it into a ponytail. Grabbing the green contacts, I pop them in.

When I head back into the living room, Savannah is yawning, dressed in her running clothes. She grabs a black wig from her collection, turning to look at me, smirking when she sees the red wig on my head.

“Seems symbolic.”

A sardonic grin is on my face. “It is. It will match Ainsley’s blood when it spills from her.”

Her smirk fades away as she gives me a long, appraising look. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

Nodding my head, my red ponytail bounces for emphasis. “It’s what I’ve been training for. Poetic justice. She’s taken

everything from me. It's time I take the only thing that means anything to her." I pause, thinking about all the research Savannah and I have done. Secretly meeting in dingy places, going over surveillance videos, poring over laptop and computer screens, studying phone records. Savannah is a computer nerd and I swear, there is nothing this girl can't hack. "We've examined every angle. There is nothing she values more than herself." I crack my neck from side to side, then meet my best friend's gaze. "It's time I end her life."

A smile blooms on Savannah's face. "I have no doubt you will." As if our conversation is something every normal person has at 7:30 a.m., she nonchalantly grabs the wig and heads to the bathroom. She fist bumps me on the way.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I walk to the sliding glass doors, staring at the dense forest beyond. Even though Savannah said Ainsley is in California, my gaze still sweeps the woods. Satisfied that I don't see anyone, I turn around as Savannah comes up behind me.

"Ready?" She grabs her keys and phone. "We'll head to my car and leave for breakfast and coffee when we finish with our run."

"Sounds good. Let's go."

We exit the cabin and I set the alarm, ensuring the cameras are working by watching Savannah, who checks her phone, then nods at me. We both have access to the cameras that are placed around and throughout the cabin. If there's any type of motion, it notifies both of us. That's mainly why I have a

burner phone. And also, to contact Savannah if I encounter any trouble.

As we take off running, the smell of the forest making my senses come alive, the remnant of my headache slips away.

“Should we go over the plan again?”

Savannah turns her head, her black bob swinging slightly from her sudden movement. “Do you think you need to?”

“No one ever got hurt from being over prepared. It’s the surprises that can kill you.” I keep my eyes averted as our feet pound against the trail, the brisk air feeling good on my warm skin. Tinges of autumn are everywhere as the fleeting summer comes to an end.

Glancing at the date on my phone before shoving it into the pocket of my running tights, I realize autumn officially begins in a week.

Fall is the perfect time for murder. The cooler days will mean I won’t sweat to death when I dispose of her body. After all, no body, no crime.

After that, nothing will stand between Will and me.

For a few minutes, my brow wrinkles as I doubt my sanity. Images of my mom, my dad, and Mrs. Johnston roll through my head, finally ending with Will finding me and all the wonderful moments we had until I had to run again.

My hands clench into fists as I run. No, this is how it has to be. She’s pushed me too far, eliminating every person I’ve

loved, one by one. I have no doubts she'd kill Will to destroy me.

I'll be damned if I let her kill the one person I love more than anything and anyone else.

The bitch must die.

And I'm going to take great pleasure in killing her.

Chapter 13

William

I try to hide the smirk as I race down the road, shifting gears. Bryan sits in the passenger seat, giving me irritated looks as his hand presses against the dash.

“Jesus, Will. We aren’t on a racetrack.”

“I wanted to be on the road early, but I overslept.” Glancing at the time, I curse under my breath. “It’s 9:30. I wanted to be on the road by 6:00 a.m. Fucking nightmares.” Staring at the road ahead, I try to prevent the images from my past from circulating inside my head. I feel Bryan’s eyes boring into the side of my face, but I don’t acknowledge it.

“Nightmares, huh? About your past?” Bryan stares at me, watching my reaction. He is well aware of my explosive temper, particularly when I don’t want to discuss things, such as my past.

Releasing a long sigh, my gaze leaves the road, raking over him and noting his tense posture and taut muscles. “Yeah. Unfortunately.” My jaw clenches, but I go easy on him, even though Bryan handles my anger better than the vast majority

of people. He knows too much about my past—and me—to be frightened away.

“Sorry, Will.” He pauses and I know he’s gauging my mood.

We are interrupted by my phone, the noise indicating I have a new text message. Grabbing it, I look down to see it’s from Max. Slowing my speed, my lips quirk up in a smile. “Max wants to know if you and I wanna shoot some hoops with Darin and him tonight.” I glance at the road, then to Bryan, who has a knowing grin on his face.

“You can’t answer until you know if Everleigh is at that cabin.”

Nodding, my heart beats faster as soon as he mentions her name.

Is it possible she could be there, after searching for her all this time?

I desperately want her to be, but there’s a side that keeps cautioning me not to get my hopes up. “Exactly,” I finally say.

Speeding through the parking lot, I pull my car into the first available space, my pulse thrumming through my body. As I cut the engine and grab my keys, my hands are shaking, every nerve firing in my body. It feels like yet another obstacle course I’m running through in my desperate search for the woman I love. Like I’m trying to run up a steep mountain range, a beautiful brunette standing at the top like a vision I can’t clearly see. I exhaust myself physically, emotionally, and

mentally trying to reach the top, only to find that she's vanished. But I can't stop. My desire and obsession for her are relentless and all-consuming. I won't find any peace until she's in my arms again.

Taking a deep breath of the slightly brisk air, hope swirls inside me like butterflies fluttering inside my stomach. I've been met with disappointment as I've chased so many leads, none of which ever brought me to her.

My phone dings and I look down, my lips turning up as I see Irelynn's name on my screen. I open and read it, some of my turmoil calming from her words.

Irelynn: Good luck, Will. I hope you find her. And when you do, I wanna meet her.

I reply back to my best friend, her words renewing my determination, hope filling my soul like the warmth of the summer sun.

Me: Thank you. I'll keep you posted. And of course you'll meet her once I find her. Max texted me but I haven't answered yet.

It doesn't take long before my phone is dinging with a text. As Bryan and I start on the trail, I switch my ringer off, then read her text.

Irelynn: He knows what you are doing so he doesn't expect a response until later. I have class tonight so he figured he'd take the opportunity to hang with his friends.

My chest hitches, love for my friends washing over me. I'm certain Max is offering to shoot hoops to be around me if I don't find Everleigh. He knows how depressed I get when I don't find her. My heart sinks inside my chest as the shadows wash over me, leaving me lost in the darkness. But he's reaching out a hand to keep me in the light as much as possible.

Guilt causes my chin to dip to my chest as my posture slumps, my thoughts turning to all I did to Irelynn and Max. I swallow hard, my throat burning as the guilt lodges there, making it harder to breathe.

“Will, stop it. Max and Irelynn have forgiven you, as have the rest of her family and friends. Even Vanessa... and she was a hard ass about what you did... at first.” Bryan puts his hand on my shoulder as we arrive at the trail that will lead us to where I first spotted the blonde in the woods. We run, our pace slow to warm our bodies up, but becoming faster as our muscles loosen.

“It's hard, Bry. I just... I spiraled out of control. As much residual anger as I carried toward Irelynn, she brought me the most comfort.” I look at him. “I could breathe easier around her and my heart ached less. Even though she was a substitute for the one I really wanted.”

Bryan's eyebrows raise. "I know that, Will. That's why I went along with it, despite my early reservations about what you were doing. You needed that closure with Irelynn and to realize she wasn't who you really wanted." He pats my shoulder. "It was all transference. You were simply redirecting your feelings and desire for Everleigh onto Irelynn. And Irelynn realized that the second you told her about Everleigh." He turns his head, looking at the trail and watching his footing on the rocks before he continues. "I'm fucking proud of you for realizing what you were doing. You could have easily tossed Irelynn out to fend for herself against Damian, but you didn't. You kept her there to protect her, knowing Max couldn't since he was hospitalized. You prevented her from being sexually assaulted. And ultimately, saved the four of them from your father and Damian." He pauses, giving me a proud look. "You're a hero, Will."

A sarcastic laugh bursts from me. "A hero, huh? Yeah, I don't know about that. I did what needed to be done to save them."

"You weren't friends with them yet, and there were still unresolved issues. But you cared enough about them to risk them rejecting you, or worse yet, turning on you when you arrived." Admiration is in his gaze. "You are a hero, Will. You've never been the villain. The anti-hero, sure. But you had reasons for your actions. You weren't inflicting pain for personal enjoyment, unlike your father and Damian."

I wipe the back of my hand over my brow as I sweat, not from running, but from the emotions warring inside me. "Well,

yeah, I'm not evil like they were." I pause, waiting to feel sadness because they are dead, but I don't. "But how I did everything is... questionable." Shame fills me as I look at the trail beneath my shoes, my heart twisting into a knot.

Bryan's hand on my shoulder causes me to lift my head and look at him. "You did the right thing, even if it wasn't for the right reasons. The point is, your intentions were good, even if your actions were questionable when you took her." He gives me a soft smile, his hand moving from my shoulder as we duck beneath a branch that hangs over the trail.

We are getting closer to where I first spotted the blonde. My heartbeat speeds up as my focus changes, my eyes darting around, looking for her.

She could be wearing a wig to disguise herself. Possibly colored contacts to change her appearance.

Glancing over at Bryan, his gaze moves from the forest back to mine, his smile growing as he takes in my face. "No matter what, we aren't giving up, Will. Even if things don't pan out today, we will keep searching."

I nod, trying not to let the disappointment rise through me. Despair won't be far behind, and I can't... I need to focus and not drown in my emotions and fears right now.

We reach the area where I first saw her and I slow, moving off the trail to study something I noticed on the tree. I stop, stepping closer, my brows furrowed. Is that... marks in the bark? It looks like nails were digging into it.

Bryan's breath hits my shoulder as he leans closer, examining the tree. "Is that... fingernail marks?" He sticks his face so close to the one side of the tree, his nose practically touching it. "It looks like some of the bark fell..." His voice trails off as he squats down, looking at the pieces of bark on the ground. He lifts one, then looks back at the tree, then down at the bark again.

I move closer to him, kicking up some leaves as my feet slip on the rock that was hidden beneath them.

"Wait. Don't move." Bryan holds up a hand, leaning closer. He points at what he's found. "Look."

I hunker down, studying the footprint in the soil that he's pointing at. There's another one beside it, about shoulder width apart, and the outline of the tread of the shoe is clearer on that one.

"My guess is that's around a size eight sneaker," I say as I shift my weight, studying it intently. When I shift my weight to lean over and grab another piece of bark, Bryan examines the shoe print.

"I concur, Will." He looks at me, his eyes bright with barely restrained excitement. "My guess is that someone hid behind this tree to prevent being seen. And judging from the fallen pieces of bark, that suggests this person gripped onto the tree, likely spotting us before you saw them." He glances down at the shoe print again. "More accurately, her."

My heart bangs against my chest, excitement racing through me, the blood inside my veins flowing hotter and faster.

“Possibly the blonde I saw running away?” I expel a breath and speak before he can say anything. “I heard a sob. That’s what made me notice her.” My gaze locks with him, my muscles tense. “When I woke from my nightmares, I remembered seeing the blonde in the woods. What drew my attention was a noise, but I couldn’t identify it... at first.”

Bryan’s face changes and I see the hope in it. I’m positive it matches mine. “Let’s go.”

Dropping the bark, he stands. It’s foolish, but I shove the small piece I’m holding in the pocket of my running shorts, not voicing the thought in my head.

It may be the only piece I have of her.

Completely irrational since I have no idea if it was her or not. But my gut says it is, so I’m going with it.

We run, the only sound the light pounding of our feet and our steady breathing as we look around, on alert for any possible signs. Neither of us says anything until we see the cabin in the distance ahead.

Turning my head, Bryan and I exchange a glance, slowing our pace. We find a group of large trees and move behind them, peering around, scoping out the area. After a few minutes of not seeing or hearing anything, we stealthily move toward another group of trees. We repeat this pattern until we get close to the cabin. I’m standing behind a tree that faces the front door of the cabin. I glance down and frown. Squatting down, I pick up a green leaf, moving it closer and taking in the red spot on it. It looks like blood. Not surprising, since the girl

I saw running and leaping through the woods was moving pretty fast and likely cut herself on all the briars and low-hanging branches as she darted away.

I hold it up to Bryan and he inspects it, then nods as I put it in my pocket. Bryan and I have some contacts that work in a lab who can inspect it. When Everleigh was in that car accident, I learned her blood type from Dr. Jackson, so we'll see what type is on the leaf. I'm trying not to get my hopes up, yet my blood rushes through my veins, my pulse thrumming, that Everleigh could be so close.

If she's not inside that cabin but there's a possibility she was, I'll fucking rip the damn thing apart looking for every possible clue.

Whatever it takes, I'm getting my woman back!

Determination pulls my shoulders back as I creep closer. Bryan nods at me to indicate he's keeping an eye out. Taking in a large breath, I look around and spot a problem.

"Cameras," I hiss.

Bryan immediately pulls out his phone, typing something into it. "Hold on. I've jammed the signal... and let me look at the door keypad. I'm certain I can easily get around that." Bryan follows behind me, typing something into his phone. Within a few minutes, he's grinning and I hear the door beep and the light turns green. He gives me a thumbs up and then holds up a hand. "Let me jam any Wi-Fi signals and cameras inside."

Once he gives the signal, I grab the gloves he hands me and I grip the knob, turning it and pushing it open. The second I step inside, I freeze, the familiar aroma of jasmine and amber assaulting my senses.

Everleigh!

I close my eyes, memories tumbling inside my head, aching to see her, touch her, hold her. Bryan pauses, knowing something monumental is happening because I haven't moved.

As my body pulses to life, I move inside, heading to the bags on the floor. I hear Bryan moving behind me, but I'm focused on gathering information from what is in front of me.

Squatting down, I unzip the bags, digging inside. There are articles of women's clothing, but the style is different from what Everleigh wears. Of course, she's been incognito since she ran, or it would be much easier to locate her.

My hands touch something that doesn't feel like clothing. Clasp my fingers around it, I gently lift, the clothes falling away from the item to reveal a laptop.

"Bryan." I don't even need to turn my head. He's already kneeling beside me, his gloved hands reaching for it.

"Give me a couple of minutes with it. Continue your search."

I'm already rising to my feet, anxious to see what else I can find, anticipation running through my veins.

The cabin is small and the kitchen connects with the living room, a small island separating them. An empty bottle of wine

and two wine glasses sit on the table. I open the refrigerator and look over the contents within. My heart beats faster, seeing Everleigh's favorite foods and beverages inside. I pull open the freezer door and suck in a breath at the two cartons of Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream. Everleigh's favorite. I made sure we always had some in the freezer.

I flash back to a memory that flows through my mind.

I walk out of the locker room, having just showered and dressed after track practice, anxious to head to my car and home to my apartment where Everleigh waits for me. Shoving my hand inside the pocket of my jeans to pull out my car keys, my phone rings. I pull it from my pocket, smiling when I see Everleigh's name.

"Hey, gorgeous." My smile is wide from the happiness circulating through me.

"Hey, handsome. Are you on your way home?"

I pause, hearing the discontent in her tone of voice. I'm probably the only person who would notice it, but it's not surprising. When I'm not in class or track practice or meets, I'm with her.

"What's wrong, baby?" Concern courses through me, hoping nothing has upset her.

She laughs, easing some of my anxiety. "I'm not even going to ask how you know something is bothering me." Her voice

drops and I can almost see her lip stick out in a pout. “I’m out of ice cream.”

I can’t help the laugh that comes out of me, relieved it’s nothing serious. “I can fix that, love. I’ll stop and get some on the way.” I glance around as I head toward my car. “As long as I can eat some of it.”

“Of course you can. I share.”

I can feel the smirk on my face as I say, “That’s not what I meant. I want to eat the ice cream from you. Preferably with your legs over my shoulders and my face buried in your pussy that’s covered in it.”

Her breath hitches and she lets out a small laugh. “As if I’d say no to an offer like that.” Her tone is flirtatious. My jeans are uncomfortably tight from my hard cock.

Unlocking my car, I pull the door open and slide behind the wheel. Shutting the door, my voice is low and husky. “I can’t wait to get home with your ice cream. I’m gonna strip you naked and—”

“I’m taking care of that right now.”

Turning my car on, I hurriedly shift and slam on the gas, racing out of the parking lot and heading toward the store.

“Are you sure you wanna get it? Emma could—”

“No, I don’t have time to wait on Emma to get it. Plus, she’ll want to chat with you and I just need your pussy on my face, then to sink my cock inside you.”

“Fuck, Will.” Her tone is low and breathy, her desire coming through the phone and making my dick even harder. “Hurry. I need you. Bad. I almost want to say fuck the ice cream.”

I laugh as I speed through town, putting her on speakerphone, my eyes moving from my phone to the road and back. “I’m getting you ice cream, love. I know a shortcut and I’m ordering it online so I can pull up and have someone bring it out.”

“Will. Are you ordering and driving?” Her tone changes to scolding, and desire courses through my veins. I love when she worries about me.

Downshifting, I stop at a light. “I just finished ordering, sweetheart. I’m about five minutes away from the store.”

“Jesus! How fast are you driving?”

“Pretty damn fast. The sooner I get it, the sooner I’m home with you.” The light turns green and I shift gears, slamming my foot on the gas.

“God! Please be careful, Will. I know you’re a helluva driver, but I couldn’t...”

“Babe, nothing is going to happen to me. I promise.” I hit my turn signal and change lanes, turning onto the road that leads to the store. “I’m almost there. I’ll see you soon.” My tone lowers. “I love you, sweetheart.”

I hear the smile in her voice. “I love you, Will. Now get your ass home in one piece.”

“Yes, ma’am.” As I pull up to the front of the store, I grin. “I’ll bet your pussy is soaked for me.” Then I hang up, laughing. I check into the store so they can bring out the bags containing the six cartons I ordered for my girl.

Whatever she wants, I give her.

My phone beeps, indicating I have a text. I look down at my phone, my breathing becoming heavy when I see the picture of her pussy she sent. Jesus, she’s soaked.

The store clerk brings the bags of ice cream out. I hand him a fifty-dollar bill. As soon as he steps back, I race out of there, hurrying home to my queen.

God, she’s the best fucking thing to ever happen to me.



Pulling myself from my thoughts, I make my way back to the hallway, knowing Bryan will let me know as soon as he finds something. I’m sure he’s covering his tracks so the owner of the laptop won’t even know he’s been in it. Unless he wants them to know.

The scent of jasmine and amber become stronger the closer I get to the bedroom. My heart pounds furiously and I know I’ve found her before I even step through the door.

The room is empty, and I spot a doorway leading to a bathroom, but it’s so small that I can see she’s not there. The room screams that everything in it belongs to her, from her taste in comforter to toiletries I spot on the bathroom counter.

Spotting a door that likely belongs to a closet, I make my way across, opening the door. Casual clothing greets me, several wigs, and a couple pair of sneakers. My fingers touch the sleeve of one of the long sleeve t-shirts. Lifting it, I inhale the scent of laundry detergent she prefers. I also know the Brooks sneakers that line the floor of her closet are size eights without looking.

“Will,” Bryan’s voice calls from the living room.

Closing my eyes, I inhale her scent one more time. As I move to step away, I spot a purse sitting beside the nightstand. Hurrying over to it, I open it, searching for an ID.

Bingo.

I pull it out, my heart squeezing when I see her beautiful face gazing back at me. The eye color is different, and she’s wearing a wig, but I’d recognize that face anywhere. I see it every night in my dreams.

The name Elizabeth Morgan is on the ID.

Closing the purse, I put it back where I found it. I shut the closet door, then exit the room.

I’ve found you, sweetheart. And there’s no fucking way you are slipping through my fingers this time.

Chapter 14

Everleigh

I slide into the passenger seat, my dark sunglasses hiding my eyes. Savannah slides in on the driver's side, glancing over at me.

“That was so good. But way too much food.”

I groan in response. “Agreed.” I gingerly rub a hand over my stomach. “But they have the best chocolate chip pancakes I’ve ever eaten.”

She grins at me. “Even better than yours?”

I smirk. “I think so. Or maybe that’s because I didn’t have to cook them.” Putting my elbow on the door, I lean my head against it, turning my head towards her. “Why does food always taste better when you don’t have to cook it?”

“That’s why I always loved when you used to cook for me. Although, you are a helluva cook.” She starts the car, putting it in gear. “Coffee shop and then Krav Maga class after?”

I nod my head when she looks over at me, then she pulls out of the parking lot and begins driving toward the coffee shop I

often stop at after class. Grabbing her phone, I turn the Bluetooth on and search through her playlists.

“While you are searching for music, check the cameras and make sure everything is still good.”

Nodding, I pull up the cameras, noting the time. 9:00 a.m. “Everything is fine.” I go back to the playlists on her phone, and after pulling up one, I set her phone down.

As the music plays, Savannah glances at me, then back to the road. Her eyebrows are raised when she glances at me again. “‘Fade to Black’ is pretty dark, girl. Should I be concerned?” The corners of her lips twitch, indicating she’s joking.

“The only thing you need to be concerned about is me finding another pillow and smacking you with it.” I laugh, my eyes automatically scanning the woods. “This is one of your playlists. Maybe you should be concerned about yourself?”

She laughs. “Touché. And that was an epic pillow fight. I think we both needed that. Too much stress isn’t good for you.”

“Stress is bad for you.” Propping my foot on her dash, I glance over at her, her black bob wig making her skin look pale. “I can remove any residual stress you’re feeling. Pillow fighting, round two is on.” I lean back in the seat, the endorphins flowing from our run and being able to interact with my friend after we’ve been apart so long. I study her as she drives, biting my lip. “You’ve taken Krav Maga classes before, right?”

Savannah nods. "I'm not nearly as advanced as you, but of course."

I stare at her with unblinking eyes, trying to figure out how to address this. I open my mouth, close it again, then open it. But before I can utter a word, Savannah speaks without looking at me.

"There's nothing you can say, Everleigh, even though I know you want to take away my pain. It will live inside me forever, even though I finally killed that bastard." Her knuckles are white on the steering wheel. A pang of guilt goes through me as I study her emotionless face. But then she turns her head toward mine, and the pain and anger in her blue eyes makes me suck in a breath. She turns her head back to the road, quietly saying, "I am who I am because of my past. But I need you to be crystal clear about one thing. When you take someone's life, even if they deserve it for taking everything away from you, it changes you. It stays with you, haunts you, unless you make peace with it." She pulls into a parking space, putting the car in park, and cutting the engine. Twisting in the seat, she stares at me intently. "Sometimes you have to do things you never thought you'd do. Taking someone's life is a huge deal, Everleigh. Just like with me, it comes with a huge risk. Death. Because if you don't kill her, she'll certainly kill you and feel zero remorse for it. If you decide to go through with our plan, you can't hesitate, nor feel sorry for her, or you will be the one who dies. And Everleigh, I'm not ready to lose you. And I guarantee, neither is Will."

Her words circulate through my head. Like a child looking at a brand new toy, I turn her words over in my mind, analyzing them, understanding everything she's saying... and everything she's not. As I look in her eyes, I see the fear and panic there. She knows what I'm going through because she's been there. Although hers was much worse than I've endured.

Reaching over, I grab her hand, squeezing it tightly. "This isn't just a revenge gig because she's hurt me, Savannah. Ainsley has taken everything from me. And taking Will... well, this may sound foolish to say after only nine months of being with him, but he's the love of my life. And I had to leave him to protect him. Yet I'm unable to live, in any sense of the word. I can't even go for a run without wearing a wig, always looking over my shoulder. And after seeing Will..." My voice breaks and I avert my gaze, tears prickling my lids.

I fucking hate crying in front of people.

My throat burns as I choke back the tears. Once I get myself under control, I look at her again. "I deserve to be happy and in love. To live. And there's only one way I can do that." I pause, moving my hand from hers, squeezing it into a fist as rage flows through my body for all I've lost. Gritting my teeth, anger flows like red hot lava through my veins. "I need to fucking kill her and dispose of her body. Just like we've been planning."

A small smile crosses Savannah's face. "I just wanted to make sure you fully understood the stakes here. Everleigh... I know you can do it if you stay focused." She holds out her fist.

I smile and fist bump her. Turning to the doors, we open them, stepping out of her vehicle and heading toward the coffee shop as though we didn't just have a conversation about killing someone.

After ordering our iced coffees, we sit at a table, sipping them quietly. I look at the clock on the wall and see it's 9:10 a.m. Savannah studies her phone, her brows pulled in. When she looks over at me, I give her a questioning look. "Everything okay?"

"Yup. Just checking the cameras. All is well." She sets her phone on the table, then picks up her coffee, taking a long sip. "Before we head to class, why don't we let our food settle by hitting some thrift shops and stores?"

"What time are classes today?" I ask, setting my coffee on the table.

"There's a couple today. One at 10:00 and the other at 4:00. How about we do the class at 4:00? It's been a long time since you've been out." Savannah studies me, her violet eyes boring into me like lasers, begging me to say yes.

I toy with her a bit, cocking my head like I'm in deep thought, already knowing my answer. "Sure. Let's do it," I finally say.

She lets out a little squeal, causing me to laugh. "This is going to be epic! A day out with my bestie after so long!" She pumps her fist in the air, drawing some of the coffee shop patrons' attention.

“Way to remain incognito,” I say, sarcasm dripping from my words. Leaning closer, I ask, “Did anyone ever tell you those violet contacts are creepy?”

“If by creepy, you mean amazing, then no. But they should.” She bats her long lashes, making me giggle.

I shake my head, taking a sip of my iced coffee, looking around at the other patrons. They’ve all resumed their business. Not one soul is paying attention to us.

Just the way I like it.

“If you say so.” I wink at her, knowing my opinion doesn’t matter here. Savannah wears what she wants when she wants. No one can convince her differently.

We finish our coffees and then head out of the coffee shop. I link my arm with hers as we walk to her car. “Thanks again for... everything.” A frown crosses my face and my features darken. “It’s been a long two years.”

“Not that you are counting or anything.” Savannah gives me a smile, unlocking the car. I unlink my arm from hers, heading around to the passenger side.

“Not at all.” I grin at her before sliding into the vehicle.

Sliding in beside me, she shuts the door. “I know, girl.” She doesn’t start the car. Instead, she faces me, her violet eyes cloudy. “I’ve worried about you a lot. When you called me the day you ran...” Her voice trails off, remembering the terror in my voice when I told her about Ainsley’s threats toward William. “I knew it was going to be harder than hell for you to

be alone. You've been training for a while and I was hoping we could do this sooner. But she keeps moving around."

I nod, my heart heavy as I think back over the long, lonely year of my life that I've lost. I ran away from college, from Will, from my life. It has sucked beyond the telling of it. "Do you think she knows I'm coming for her?"

Savannah shrugs. "Maybe at first. But as time goes on and you remain in hiding, she likely thinks you are scared. That's what we want. Catching her with the element of surprise will be that much better."

"Agreed. But there's more, isn't there?" I know my friend well and she's hiding something from me.

She starts the engine, keeping her eyes averted. As she backs out, her eyes trained on her backup camera, she says, "She's a crazy bitch, Everleigh. A real psychopath who studies and uses her prey until she's done with them. And she's done a lot of criminal shit, so she never stays anywhere for very long."

I nod my head. "True."

Even as I say that, it doesn't ring true.

Why don't I believe Savannah? What is she hiding from me?



Sweat drips from our bodies as we stop and take a breather during our Krav Maga class. It's almost as though Josh knows

I'm getting ready to go to war. He's pushing me more than ever. But that's not the biggest surprise.

Savannah is good. Really good. I expected her to be struggling more, but she wasn't lying when she said she's taken classes before. She's not quite on my level, but she's impressed Josh, and that's not an easy task.

As I wipe the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, I lean over and grab the bottle of water from the floor beside me. "I'm glad we waited for the later class. Had we gone earlier, I likely would be puking all over the mats."

Savannah adjusts her wig slightly, nodding in agreement, her breathing heavy. "You're not kidding. I'd be getting sick beside you. And we both hate puking, so that says a lot."

I make a disgusted face, wrinkling my nose. "It's almost like he knows I'm going to be going to war soon and is making sure I'm prepared." Taking another drink, I study Savannah but see nothing to indicate she's said anything to him.

"You weren't kidding when you said he's tough. Jesus. No wonder he looks like he could just walk up and kill two people simultaneously with his bare hands."

Snorting, I screw the cap on my water bottle. "Hopefully, I'll be able to do the same when we leave here." Giving her a wink, I set the bottle on the floor, then tighten my ponytail as I stand. "Although I'd settle for just being able to kill one person with my hands." I grin at her as Josh claps his hands,

asking us to pair off for the next lesson. He demonstrates the moves and we determine Savannah should start.

Taking advantage of her distraction, I say, “Tell me about Will’s friends. Darin and Vanessa, and Max and... Irelynn.” I nearly choke on her name, jealousy rising. Will told me what happened in high school between the two of them and her brother, Mike. It really hurt him and made me furious at her that she could think Will would do something like that. Yes, he’s manipulative and powerful, but he wouldn’t force himself on a drunk girl, especially one who passed out. She doesn’t know him well if she thinks he’s capable of that.

Savannah answers with a grunt. “I’ve told you before that you don’t need to worry about Irelynn. She and Will are just friends. Vanessa confirmed that in conversations I’ve had with her.” She pauses, shaking her head. “Vanessa managed to snag a hilariously hot guy, Darin.” Her face briefly clouds over. “Although there was a brief period of trouble between them.” She trails off, biting her tongue.

I’ve heard her mention Vanessa before, but never met her. Vanessa and Savannah were friends through junior high, until Vanessa’s family moved and she changed schools.

But there’s something Savannah isn’t telling me. We’ve been best friends since high school and I know her well.

I give her a sharp look and take advantage of her distraction to twist her arms behind her back before she realizes what’s happening. “Tell me whatever it is you’re withholding, and I’ll let you go.”

“Everleigh.” Her tone is surprised and I apply a bit more pressure. Not enough to really hurt her, but enough to make her uncomfortable. “It’s not something you should be worried about.”

“When I asked if there was more to it earlier, you wouldn’t look at me. And now you tell me something cryptic about Vanessa and Darin but are clamming up about it now. And last night, despite the wine, you had this guilty look on your face. So out with it.” I squeeze a little tighter, taking advantage of Josh’s distraction as he helps another group with some moves across the room.

“Fine, Everleigh, but you need to let me out of this position.”

I don’t move, not trusting her until she tells me. She heaves out a sigh and begins. “After you left Will, he spiraled really bad. He was desperate to find you, and as I mentioned, he spent quite a sum on private investigators. Will took Bryan and Emma with him, leaving school during the semester, and moved back to Pennsylvania. His dad was ill, but that wasn’t the real reason for his visit. He wanted his dad to use his resources to find you. But his dad declined.”

I release her arms, my heart pounding inside my chest. “He... he asked his father for help finding me?” My hand covers my mouth, trying to hide my quivering lips. I know how tumultuous his relationship was with his father.

She nods, sorrow on her face. “From what I overheard him tell Bryan when I was following them to determine if they had

figured out where you were hidden, Will swallowed his pride, helping to care for his dad some. He had full-time nurses, of course, but Will was managing some of the business aspects for him. Even doing some of his dad's dirty work." She pauses, studying my face. I know that means Gregory Anderson was involving William in illegal shit.

That fucker. I should take him out after I kill Ainsley.

"There's no need," Savannah says, reading my face. "He's dead, and so is Damian."

My brows raise and I stop, all movements ceasing.

"You have to keep up with class, girl. Otherwise, Josh will really put us through the ringer."

Nodding, I resume training, but my focus is on the bombshell she just dropped on me. "They're dead?"

She sighs. "Yes. As I said, Will really spiraled after you left. He... well, enrolled in classes at Maple Valley University, thinking maybe you were a student there and because his dad is an asshole who used him and refused to offer any assistance in finding you. He told William he was ruining his life over a girl, even giving up his education because he was 'pussy whipped.' Will got angry, stormed out of his dad's house, determined to find you on his own. He was on campus on a Saturday before classes started to get his books when he saw Irelynn."

I can't help the surge of jealousy that rages through me like a river after a storm, angry and destructive, the flood waters

destroying everything in its path. My hands clench into fists and I hit Savannah with a much harder force than necessary. She yelps, and I'm instantly contrite. "I'm so sorry." I grab her arms as she bends over, her arms holding her stomach. "I didn't mean to hit so hard."

She takes a few breaths, holding one hand up slightly, then putting it back over her stomach. After several beats, she stands. "It's fine," she says between clenched teeth. "But damn, you had some force behind that hit."

I lower my gaze to the floor, remorse hitting me hard. "I'm so sorry, Savannah. My temper... Well, I didn't control it when my jealousy started getting out of hand." I take a few breaths in and out of my nose, forcing my anger to abate.

She watches me and when she sees me cool off to a simmer, she crosses her arms over her chest. "I'll tell you the story, but you have to promise you won't kick or hit me like that again."

"I promise." I hold my hand up like a scout, and she cracks a smile.

"You were never a scout, but I'll take you at your word." She gingerly rubs her hand over her stomach, then resumes her story. "Will was hurt by her reaction to seeing him, or thinking she saw him, and he spiraled. He slammed her against the side of one of the buildings, and according to what I overheard him tell Bryan, he only hoped to make her listen to him. He wanted to tell her the truth about that night. But things got out of control and her blonde hair and eyes reminded him of his mom... he went into a downward spiral. Max intervened and

he and Irelynn ended up falling in love. But unfortunately, their relationship reminded him a lot of your relationship. He ended up transferring his feelings to Irelynn and kidnapped her.”

I gasp, my eyes wide. I gesture for her to head to the bathroom with me. Although everyone is busy training and not paying us much attention, I can no longer concentrate on anything except this story.

Once we are in the bathroom, I lock the door behind us. Folding my arms over my chest, I lean my head against the wall, squeezing my eyes shut, disbelief scrambling my thoughts. Rubbing my hands up and down my arms, I force myself to focus on Savannah. As much as I hate hearing this, I need to know what happened.

“So after Will... kidnapped...” I swallow hard. “What happened next?”

“Do you remember that house in the woods that was owned by his grandparents? He took her there. Kept her imprisoned for a couple weeks. They worked their past differences out...” Her brows lower as she studies my pale face. “He did not work things out with her by having sex with her. Bryan asked Will if anything sexual happened between them and he said no.” She pauses again. “He looked sick at the thought of it. Like he was betraying you at the mere mention of it.”

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I sag against the wall. It’s irrational to feel this way. Even though I unwillingly ran away

and he's free to do as he chooses, a part of me hopes he remains loyal to me. It's selfish and stupid, yet I can't help it.

I want to spend forever with him.

Waving my hand for her to continue, I take a deep breath, then release it.

Since I'm calmer, Savannah resumes talking. "Things got really complicated, though. Max was desperately searching for Irelynn and went to one of Will's warehouses he recently purchased that I found on the dark web—"

"You were helping him?" My voice raises, betrayal courses through my veins.

"No, I was helping Vanessa. She had contacted me for information and I was working as fast as I could to find out where Will had taken Irelynn. At the time, I didn't know where Will was holding Irelynn because I wasn't watching Will and Bryan as much, since I had my own demons to deal with." She pauses, patting her wig as though to make sure it's still in place. "There was no immediate danger to Irelynn, so I only kept occasional surveillance on them."

Calming down, I nod at her, feeling contrite. "I'm sorry."

She waves a hand. "I wouldn't betray you like that, Everleigh. Vanessa is a friend, but we aren't as close as you and I are. She's best friends with Irelynn. This was going on during my revenge gig that you helped with. And damn, can I say your fighting skills were impressive as hell? I got in over my head and you saved me, risking your own safety."

A smile stretches across my face. “I should know better than to think you’d betray me. You’re my best friend. I knew your rash behavior was going to get you in trouble. I had to intervene.” I step closer to her, giving her a hug. As I pull away, I grin. “It gave me practice for the war I’m getting ready to wage.”

Savannah laughs and fist bumps me. “As long as you don’t go off irrationally like I did, you’ve totally got this. But if you do... you know I have your back.”

I nod, my throat tightening, and tears prickling my lids. My voice is hoarse as I croak out, “I know.” Clearing my throat, I say, “So what happened next?”

“Well, Max went off half-cocked before the three of them came up with a plan. Damian was there.” She sees me cringe. I never met Damian, but I heard a lot of stories about him from Will. Will wouldn’t let Damian get within a ten-mile radius of me. He despised his half-brother, and said he’s a monster, just like their father.

Her voice pulls me from my thoughts. “Damian shot Max and blew up the warehouse. Darin and Vanessa got there in time to save Max, or he likely would have been killed.” I gasp in horror, feeling sorry for them. Even Irelynn, who I still feel a twinge of jealousy over. “Now Will had a problem. The warehouse was destroyed, and he wasn’t sure if Max was dead or alive at first. He found out he was alive, but Damian disappeared off the grid for a while. Will kept Irelynn at the house, knowing he couldn’t risk her safety, especially because

Max was hospitalized for a while. Will and Bryan went after Damian. Apparently, it was a trap, and Damian went after Irelynn. Will saved her and took Damian to his dad's house. I'm pretty sure he thought his dad would let him kill him, but that isn't what happened." She shrugs. "I'm not entirely sure what went down, because they didn't go into detail about it, but apparently Damian captured Vanessa and Darin went after him. Irelynn and Max arrived after he did, and Damian and Gregory Anderson ambushed them. Things were going wrong until Will and Bryan showed up. During the altercation, Damian tried to shoot Max, but Irelynn jumped in front of him. She's alright though."

I release a deep breath, my head swimming from all she's telling me. "So did Will kill Damian?"

Savannah nods. "Apparently, Damian shot Gregory for betraying him, and Will shot him before he could kill anyone else." She smiles at me. "Your boyfriend was a real hero that day."

Pride rolls through my chest and I wish I could have been there. "So Max and Will... they are friends now? And the rest of them... including Irelynn?"

"Irelynn apparently escaped and ran back to Max while Will was taking Damian to his dad's house. After the warehouse incident, they were grateful for Will and Bryan's help. But it was because Irelynn told Max that Will told her about you during her time in captivity that Max forgave Will for what he

did. Irelynn recognized the transference as soon as he told her about you.”

“H-he told her?” My eyes are wide with shock, yet happiness courses through my veins. My insides light up like the dawn of a new day.

She gives me a smile. “He did. And when I accessed his computer, I saw messages between her and Will. She was asking if he found you yet and he said he’s still looking. She even encouraged him to use Max’s help since he’s interning at a PI firm this semester. She also wants to meet you when he finds you.”

My head spins, my thoughts running through my head like a freight train barreling down a track. “Wow. It’s going to take me a bit to process all of this, but... I don’t know what to say.”

Savannah steps closer, throwing her arm over my shoulders. “The man desperately loves you. He spiraled because of you.” She gives me a gentle squeeze. “You know how traumatic his past has been. He’s nowhere close to being over you. Not by a long shot.”

A huge smile spreads across my face. “Thank you for your honesty. And I’m really sorry for hitting you so hard.”

She laughs, waving her hand dismissively. “Water under the bridge. I understand. Your anger and jealousy got the best of you.”

I nod, the weight on my shoulders feels lighter. “What do you say we go back out there and finish training? I want to be

sure I'm ready because this needs to end. We can go back to my cabin, eat ice cream, and review our plan again." Determination pulls my shoulders back. "It's time to end Ainsley and get back to my man."

Savannah high-fives me as a loud knock sounds on the door. We giggle and hurry over, unlocking and opening it, passing by another student in our class, who stares at us with her mouth open. Likely forming all kinds of assumptions about why two girls were locked in the bathroom.

Wrapping her arm around me, she slaps my ass with her other hand. "Fighting just gets me all riled up. I can't help myself, love." She throws a smile at the stunned woman, who is still frozen outside the open bathroom door, as Savannah and I giggle and walk off.

"You are so bad," I say when we are out of earshot.

She shrugs. "Eh. I just like to have fun. Now let's go fight and make sure you are ready to beat a bitch's ass."

Chapter 15

Everleigh

As Savannah and I step on the mats, Josh stands with his legs spread apart, hands on his hips, his brows lowered.

“Uh oh. He noticed we were gone,” I say in a low tone to Savannah, my eyes not moving from him.

Savannah gulps loudly, a slight squeak coming from her throat. “Here comes the pain.”

Josh gives us the “come here” gesture and, like two kids who know they are in trouble, Savannah and I head to the center of the mats.

“Elizabeth and Tamera are going to demonstrate what we have learned in class today. The two of them will fight in the ring.” We use the names that match our fake IDs whenever we go in public.

“Oh shit,” Savannah mutters.

My face pales, but my mind is working. Stepping closer, I whisper, “Josh. Tamera was feeling sick and like she was gonna pass out. That’s why I went with her to the bathroom.

Sorry we were gone so long. I didn't have time to flag you down. Not with the way she looked."

Josh's head swivels to Savannah, appraising her. She looks pale, but I know it's from being singled out and having to fight me in public.

Luckily, he's convinced by her paleness and shaking hands. "I apologize. You two can sit and watch. But next time, you two will be the first in the ring."

Nodding, I thank him, putting my hand on her arm and guiding her away from him. Josh selects two other opponents, and they step into the ring. Savannah and I stand outside, watching.

"Thank you for thinking on your feet, girl," Savannah hisses. "I was paralyzed by terror. Still am when I think about the next class. I'm not looking forward to you beating my ass in the ring."

I can't help but laugh. "I'll take it easy on you, bestie." I wink at her, trying to ease her fears.

As the two face off in the ring, Savannah puts a hand on my shoulder. "I know it's a lot to take in, Everleigh. But you need to understand that Will was in a very bad place, spiraling out of control after you left. I know you had to leave in order to protect him. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty." She squeezes gently, then removes her hand, pushing a piece of hair from her face.

“It is, but I appreciate you being honest and telling me. I understand why he spiraled, and I feel terribly guilty. But it could have been much worse. At least he didn’t fall in love with Irelynn. I don’t think I would have survived hearing that.”

Her face is full of sympathy. “No, he didn’t fall in love with her. Nothing sexual happened between them, so there’s that.” Looking back at the ring, she says, “One kiss is all that happened.”

There’s a dull roaring in my ears as I turn my head toward her, my heart shattering inside my chest. “He kissed her?” I hiss, betrayal coursing through me. It feels like someone stuck a knife through my chest.

Savannah’s eyes are wide as she slowly turns and faces me, her hands flying over her mouth. She stares at me in shock for a few beats as my eyes narrow at her, zeroing in on her face. Finally, she drops her hands from her mouth, remorse pouring from her violet eyes. “I’m so sorry, Everleigh. I—”

Spinning on my heel, I don’t wait for her to finish what she’s saying, and rush from the room. Nausea wells inside me. Deep inside, I know I’m being irrational, but it’s overruled by the betrayal I feel toward Will.

He kissed her! How could he do that?

Blinking rapidly, tears course down my face. I can barely see as I turn the corner, heading to the locker room. Running inside, I head to my locker, opening it and grabbing my phone.

A strangled sob pours from my lips, hurt and deception whirling around inside my body like a tornado.

Why didn't Savannah tell me that earlier?

She told me nothing sexual happened between them. Apparently, she doesn't consider kissing to be sexual. And while that point could be argued, I remember the way Will and I used to kiss and...

Hunching over, I choke back another sob, pressing a fist to my lips. My lungs constrict, making it hard to breathe. Standing, I gasp for breath, my eyes going around the locker room. There's no one else inside.

Anger rolls through me.

Savannah deceived me. She deliberately refrained from telling me they kissed.

My hands clench into fists, my anger somehow making it easier for me to breathe again. It gives me purpose.

Shutting my locker, my eyes land on Savannah's locker beside me. I'm great at memorizing things, my brain storing useless facts and numbers I often have no need for.

Stepping in front of it, I spin the combination lock. Within seconds, it opens. Biting my lip, I grab her car keys and phone. Shutting it, I head toward the entrance, slipping outside and hurrying down the hall toward the back door. As I round the corner, I hear Savannah's voice as she pushes open the locker room door, calling my name.

I sprint through the back doors, running around the building, my heart pounding inside my chest. Unlocking her car, I slide inside, my hands shaking slightly as I put the key inside and turn it.

Just get away.

Putting it in reverse, I shoot backward out of the space, then quickly hit the brake, putting it in drive. Slamming my foot on the gas, I fly out of the parking lot, frantic to get out of there.

Once I hit the highway, I grab her phone, pulling up a playlist of rock and heavy metal music. I select the option for it to randomly play the music on the list and settle into the seat. I'm not entirely sure where I'm headed right now.

"Deify" by Disturbed comes on and the tears start flowing. Every time I hear that song, I think of Will. My knuckles tighten around the steering wheel, turning white from gripping it so hard, my jaw clenched. I try to hold back my tears, but I can't.

Oh shit. I can't sob and drive.

Hitting the button to skip the song, I feel a sense of relief as "Enter Sandman" by Metallica starts playing. Wiping my face with the back of my hand, I aimlessly drive, knowing that Savannah can't contact me since I have her phone. I also borrowed her car without asking.

Guilt hits me for leaving her stranded and taking her phone. I know Savannah is resourceful and can take care of herself, but what I did... I feel like a horrible friend.

But she withheld information, my brain argues. You had to practically force it out of her. And even then, she wasn't completely truthful.

As Ratt's "Closer to My Heart" blares through the speakers, I bite my lip. What if Will and Irelynn had sex and Savannah knows, but is lying about it? She knows how jealous I get.

Insecurities rise inside me.

I need to scope out Irelynn and see what she looks like.

My stomach roils as I picture a gorgeous blonde who has her life together.

She probably has the perfect fucking life.

Unlike me, who has faced one traumatic event after another.

Maybe Will and Irelynn have an affair going and Max doesn't know it?

Deep down, I know I'm being completely irrational, which is completely out of character for me. The only exception is Will.

My emotions rule me when it comes to him.

Desperation fills me with manic energy, my heart galloping inside my chest like a horse running a race. My thoughts are erratic as images of some blonde chick looking at Will with lust in her eyes, touching his face, pressing her lips against—

No! I can't bear the thought!

I'll sacrifice anything right now to find out what is going on between them.

Stomping my foot on the gas, I take the next right, heading in the direction of my cabin. My plan is to hurry inside, grab the binoculars from Savannah's bag, and then find Irelynn.

She better not be messing with William or I'll fucking kill her.

Chapter 16

William

Sitting beside Bryan on Everleigh's couch, my breaths heave in and out of my lungs as I stare at the elaborate plans on Savannah's computer.

She's planning to kill Ainsley.

There is tons of surveillance and other information about Ainsley, including bank statements, phone records, and a whole host of information about her.

Savannah has certainly done her research on her.

Bryan was also able to determine that Savannah hacked into my computer. I'm sure she did that for Everleigh.

Jumping to my feet, I pace around the small living room, my hand going through my hair.

So, you think you can hide out from me and watch what I'm doing, sweetheart? While I sit around, fucking miserable and broken-hearted, doing everything I can to find you?

"What's your plan, Will?" Bryan sets the laptop in the spot I vacated on the couch, his hands on his knees, leaning forward and watching me intently.

Stopping, an evil smile slowly lights up my face. “Can you circumvent their security cameras here? Make them think they are working, but they aren’t?”

A grin stretches across Bryan’s face, knowing exactly what I want him to do. “Of course. Do you want the alarm on the door code to stay the same?”

“Absolutely. I don’t want them to have any idea I’m here. Also, get me Everleigh and Savannah’s phone numbers. I’m sure Savannah gave her a burner phone. I want you to have those numbers as well.”

Bryan already has the laptop on his lap, his fingers flying over the keyboard. Bryan has always been skilled with anything technological. My father took advantage of this during my boarding school years, having Bryan hack into competitors’ computer networks and stealing company secrets that my father could use to his advantage.

When I returned home, Bryan and I bonded over all the horrible shit my father did to us. More importantly, Bryan was always able to see through my bullshit. When I first came home from boarding school during Christmas vacation, he studied my face and said, “Those jerks are bullying you, aren’t they?” He helped me craft revenge plans and dug up information about my bullies. I used nerds at school, helping to guide them toward information that Bryan had already found and informed me about, and Bryan and I ensured I’d never get in trouble for any of it. We concocted an elaborate scheme framing the bullies’ friends, and I had the pleasure of

watching and recording it on my phone and sending it to Bryan.

We were so good at keeping our friendship hidden so my father would never figure out how close we were, knowing he'd sabotage us. Emma and her husband were the only ones who knew.

Bryan and I carefully craft out plans for Everleigh and Savannah, fist-bumping before Bryan heads out the door. Bryan hacked into their cameras, so it repeatedly plays clips of the previous day's footage but is date and time stamped appropriately so that when Savannah or Everleigh pull it up, nothing will be amiss.

Meanwhile, I'm watching the area surrounding the cabin via the cameras, waiting for them to return. Bryan is going to take care of Savannah, while I take care of Everleigh. He's laying in wait, hidden outside right now.

I occupy my time by going through photos of Everleigh on my phone. Bryan also found some on Savannah's computer of the two of them during her time here.

Even though I'm angry as a fucking rattlesnake at her, I can't help the pang that goes through my heart when I see the sadness in her eyes. Black circles and bags rim them, and her skin is pale. In every picture, her gaze tells me exactly how she was feeling.

She was fucking lonely and miserable, too.

It feels like time has stopped, along with my heartbeat, as I stare at the picture of the woman I love. I hate that she was hurting, and I just want to hold her tightly against me, running my fingers through her hair and kissing her pain away.

I want her radiant from the happiness that lights her up inside, making her beam like the sun when it rises in the morning.

My fingers trace over her face. Realistically, I know it's the phone screen I'm touching, but I'm transported to a moment in time. I feel her soft, porcelain skin, like silk, beneath my hand. Her warm breaths drifting over skin, hitching inside her chest, whenever I hold her.

Fuck! I almost drop my phone from the ache inside my chest.

I miss her so goddamn much.

At 5:10 p.m., Bryan sends me a text.

Bryan: There's a car coming up the driveway. I hear it but don't have a good view yet.

Me: Let me know when you do. I want info.

About a minute later, I receive another text.

Bryan: It's a redhead behind the wheel. She's driving fast. Silver Audi. Heading your way now.

Me: Perfect. Was anyone else in the car with her?

Bryan: That's the weird thing. She looked to be alone. I'm moving closer so I can get a better view when she gets out of the car.

Me: Let me know.

I move into position, my heart beating like a drum inside my chest, sweat trailing down my back. Hope swirls inside me like the melting of snow from a late storm, revealing the first flowers of spring underneath.

I clutch my phone to my chest, my leg bouncing as I await a text from Bryan.

My phone beeps and I flip it up, reading his message.

Bryan: That has to be Everleigh. Same height, body type, and walk when she got out of the car. She is storming your way now.

Me: I'm ready for her.

Pounding footsteps sound from outside the cabin.

She's stomping like she's pissed.

Then I hear her fingers pressing the code on the keypad. She swears, then tries again. The door chirps and unlocks.

She pushes the door open and steps inside. Her scent, mixed with sweat and fury, assaults my senses. Her red hair is in a ponytail, and it swings as she turns around, slamming the door.

I make my move, my hands going around her waist as I press her into the door. She releases a startled yelp, confirming her identity to me, then manages to get an arm up. An elbow flies at me, but I dodge it, catching her arms and wrenching them behind her back, pushing her into the door as I press my body against hers.

And fuck, does she feel good against my body. She's more muscular than the last time I was with her, but she still has curves. My dick instantly hardens, pressing against her ass as I restrain her.

Her heavy breathing fills the room and then I hear her sniff.

“Will?” Her voice is low, and I hear the hope in the way her voice shakes slightly. She stops struggling, waiting for me to confirm my identity.

She already knows it's me. She knows my scent and the feel of me.

Just as I know hers.

Stepping back slightly, I spin her around, pushing her back against the door. My arms still grip hers, pinning them behind her back as I press myself tightly against her front, needing to feel her.

It's as though I need to convince myself that she's finally here, right in front of me.

Her breaths heave in and out of her lungs, while her wide eyes search my face. She's wearing colored contacts, but it's her.

Her gaze locks on mine, her eyes softening in the late afternoon light that streams from the window.

My cock is so fucking hard it hurts, but my fury at her for leaving me overrides the urge to bury myself inside her.

I don't say a word as I release one of my hands from behind her back and raise it to her head, my fingers gripping the wig she's wearing. I tug, pulling it from her head, seeing her wince. Not from pain, but from the disguise that no longer hides her identity.

Tossing the wig on the floor, my hand cups her face, her velvety skin so familiar that I close my eyes for a beat, breathing in her scent.

God, I've fucking missed this woman.

Opening my eyes, I drink her in, consuming her essence until I can feel her humming beneath my skin. Her silky brunette locks are pulled up tightly in a bun, driving me crazy. I've always loved her hair hanging loose, the silky strands flowing over me.

Releasing her other arm, I yank the pins from her hair, releasing it from the bindings. Relief flashes in her eyes.

Once her hair falls over her shoulders, I gently cup her face in my palms, lowering my head so my lips are a breath away from hers.

“Everleigh.”

That one simple word causes tears to well in her eyes, then spill over her cheeks. Her voice cracks when she says, “Will.”

My breath hitches from the way she says my name, as if she's struggling to grasp that I'm standing in front of her, so close that I can feel her pulse race beneath her skin.

Before I can wipe her tears away, she closes the distance between us, pressing her lips against mine.

As soon as her soft, warm mouth presses against mine, my body comes alive, as if I've been asleep for a thousand years and only her kiss could resuscitate me. My hands lower, wrapping around her waist, tugging her against me so hard a muffled squeak comes from her throat. I swallow the sound, my mouth devouring hers, inhaling her jasmine and amber scent and relishing in the feel of her warm body against mine. Her arms wrap around me, nails digging into my back through my shirt, as she clings to me like she never wants to let me go.

Our lips and tongues are frantic as we moan into each other's mouths, desperate and needy. Her inhaled breaths are my exhaled breaths as my head turns, changing the angle of the kiss.

My stomach flutters like a thousand butterflies are flapping inside as my heart slams against my breastbone. My pulse is erratic, like a caged bird frantically flapping, trying to escape the confines of the cage. Intense euphoria wells inside me, bursting in a kaleidoscope of color behind my eyes.

Adrenaline flows through my body, making me hyper aware of every touch, every kiss, every tiny whimper and sound she makes as we continue devouring one another.

All the tension in her body left as soon as our lips crashed together, surrendering to me. I taste her tears as they run down

her face. They taste like a mixture of ecstasy and longing.

Her mouth tastes like every dream I've dared to dream, but always been too scared to release into the harsh light of day. Like every secret wish I've held inside, bursting to be free, but too afraid to reveal, fearing they'd see only the monster, and never the child that hides inside, desperate for love and acceptance.

She tastes like my past, present, and future. Like a fucking lifeline that is keeping me anchored to this plane, while my head floats in the clouds, complete bliss infiltrating my soul.

As we cling to one another, a soft moan of pleasure comes from deep inside my chest.

She is my salvation.

My entire fucking world.

Needing to breathe, I finally pull away from her, heaving oxygen into my lungs. Her eyes slowly open, her long lashes framing the colored contacts she's wearing, but they can't disguise the love that flows from them.

A smile slowly spreads across her face as her body sags into my hands. "Will," she says my name reverently, her hands moving to grip the front of my shirt tightly. "You're here." Her face is radiant as she slowly shakes her head. "It seems like a dream."

I stroke her hair, then move my hands, cupping her face. "Everleigh. I'm here. I'm so fucking pissed at you, yet I've

missed you so goddamn much. I'm nearly dying from the euphoria of holding and kissing you again."

She lets out a breathless laugh. "I should be pissed at you. You're lucky I smelled you and recognized your touch or I would have kicked your ass."

Laughing, I lower my hands to her ass, squeezing it. "You're a badass, love. But I'd like to see you try to kick my ass."

She arches an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? That can be —"

Before she gets another word out, I lean down, throwing her over my shoulder. Spinning around, I carry her toward the bedroom. She laughs, smacking my ass. "Will! Put me down."

"With pleasure." I toss her onto the bed, then climb on top of her, pressing her into the mattress.

Her eyes shine up at me, happiness beaming from her smile. I have zero doubt my expression matches hers as heat radiates from my chest, my heart beating like a drum.

God, I just want her naked beneath me, clinging to me as I shove myself deep inside her, claiming her. She's always been mine, even when she ran away.

I want to fucking tie her up and keep her locked away with me forever, so she can never leave me again.

Then reality seeps into my consciousness, and my brow wrinkles. As much as I'd like to be naked and inside her, there's a lingering matter we need to discuss.

“Where’s Savannah?”

She blinks a few times, guilt on her face, her eyes clouding over. She bites her lip and I watch the guilt and remorse battle with anger. Her hands try to clench into fists around mine as I press them into the mattress.

I pull my head back slightly, analyzing her expression.

Something happened between them. Savannah hurt Everleigh.

“Tell me, baby. What is it? What happened between you and her?” My voice is low, full of sympathy as I watch my girl struggle to put her feelings into words.

Releasing her lip from her teeth, she blows out a breath. “We went to Krav Maga class. I knew there was something she was hiding from me. I restrained her, demanding she tell me.” Averting her eyes, her cheeks flame scarlet.

Her voice comes out as a whisper. “She confessed that she was watching you and Bryan and heard the two of you discussing your downward spiral.” Blinking rapidly, she swallows hard. “She told me about Irelynn...”

Oh fuck. No one should have told her about that except me.

I release one of her hands so I can cup her face, waiting until her eyes meet mine. The hurt swirling inside them is like a knife stabbing me in my heart. “I’m sorry, love. You shouldn’t have heard about that from Savannah.” Pausing, I stroke her cheek, desperate to ease her pain. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know. The entire story from start to

finish, if you wish.” I lower my head, no longer able to meet her gaze. “I’m not proud of my behavior.”

“Look at me, Will.” She waits patiently, wanting me to do that willingly.

After several beats, I raise my head, meeting her eyes. Her fingers caress my skin, rubbing over the stubble on my face. It takes everything inside me to resist the urge to close my eyes and turn my head into her soft touch.

“I’m so sorry I left. I fucking hated every minute of being apart from you. But Ainsley threatened to kill you if I didn’t, and I couldn’t...” Her voice quivers, trailing off, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

I nod slowly. “I know why you did it. To protect me.” My hand tightens on her face. “But baby, I can take care of myself. And you, too. You didn’t need to run to spare me from death.”

She shakes her head. “You’d be too focused on me. She’s a heartless, unfeeling bitch who only cares about her own needs, driven by a vendetta. She wants to make me suffer because I know too much.”

Lowering my forehead to hers, my voice is full of vehemence as I say, “I won’t let her touch you, let alone make you suffer. I’ll kill that bitch with my bare fucking hands if she goes near you.”

Her eyes widen from shock, not used to seeing the darker side of me. The villainous side I’ve often kept hidden from her.

“I’ll kill anyone who fucking goes near you, Everleigh. I don’t care if I have to slaughter hundreds of people to keep you safe.” I stare intently at her, showing her how much I mean those words from the darkness that spills from my body, swirling around us and infiltrating her. “The only thing I care about is you. I want to spend every day showing you how much I love you.”

Her lips curl into a smile before she raises her head, her mouth crashing against mine. My hands move to her head, fisting the strands of her hair, as I devour her mouth again, kissing her like I’m never, ever letting her go.

Because I’m not. No matter what I have to do, I’ll do it.

I can’t live without her. And I fucking refuse to even try.

I try to pull the darkness back inside me, but she won’t let me. She clings to me, her nails digging into my skin, basking in it. She’s tasting it, reveling in it, showing me she isn’t afraid of what is inside me, no matter how dark it is.

I’ve never had anyone accept me like this.

My fingers grip her tighter, melting into her. My body is a live wire, sparks flying from me, my nerves jumping beneath my skin.

This woman does unimaginable things to me, making me feel sensations that are foreign to me.

Her legs wrap around me and we grind against one another. The friction of my clothing is almost painful against my skin,

yet I can't stop. I'll accept every drop of it because she makes me feel alive.

I kiss her until I feel her beneath my skin, breathing her in so deeply she's permanently infused inside me.

She kisses me back just as fervently, as though she wants to crawl beneath my skin, wrapping herself indelibly around my heart and soul.

She doesn't realize she's already done that.

My mind flashes back to the first time I saw her. When she locked her wide, terrified eyes with mine while hanging upside down in her mangled car, something went through me. I couldn't identify it at the time because I'd never felt it before.

Now I know what it is.

An instant, soul-deep connection so intense, it terrified me. At the same time, the tingle of my nerves made me feel an intense rush of jubilation mixed with peace. It was so potent I never wanted it to stop.

After she left, my heart and soul completely fractured, and I felt nothing but despair. For over a year, I barely existed, shrouded in complete darkness, the monster inside me unleashed, wreaking havoc on the world, wanting everyone to hurt like I did.

Now that I have her in my arms, I'm at peace.

It's crystal clear to me that she's the other half of my soul.

The love of my life.

The only one strong enough to handle my darkness and my light, because her darkness and light are just as potent as mine.

Finally breaking away from her decadent mouth, my breaths heave out of my lungs, and I'm dizzy from the smell and taste of her infiltrating my senses.

Focus, Will. Where is Savannah?

Forcing my thoughts back to our previous conversation, I avert my gaze so I'm not swept away by her swollen, kissable lips and the passion that blazes from her eyes like an inferno, heating my skin.

Clearing my throat, I say, "We got off track a bit." I give her a huge grin, letting her know I'm enjoying our reunion as much as she is, but I need to know this.

Her friend could be in danger and Everleigh doesn't know it.

"Where is Savannah?"

She blinks a few times, my words finally pulling her from the haze. "Umm... Well, she told me about you and Irelynn. And she said, well..." She swallows audibly, her cheeks turning scarlet. "That Irelynn and you never had sex. I was so relieved."

I nod, confirming her words, squeezing her tighter against me. "And?" I arch a brow, not sure how that led to Everleigh taking off.

"Well, we were watching two opponents go head-to-head and Savannah slipped up, telling me she overheard you telling

Bryan that you and Irelynn kissed. And I..." Her words cut off as devastation and jealousy replace her embarrassment. Her lips flatten as a slight growl rises from deep inside her. I'm doing my best not to smile as I watch her, understanding she's as possessive of me as I am of her.

Finally, she's able to continue. "It hurt so bad, and I felt like maybe she deceived me, and maybe she was lying about what happened between you and Irelynn. I ran to the locker room, sobbing and upset, and grabbed my phone from my locker. And then... it just hit me. I was overwhelmed by these dark feelings, my hands shaking as the anger took over. Opening her locker, I removed her keys and phone, then left her there."

Tears spill down her cheeks as the guilt and remorse take over. I know how much she loves her friend, so to go to that kind of extreme, the betrayal she was feeling overruled everything else.

I lean down, kissing her tears away. "Baby, she'll forgive you. But I need to text Bryan right now, okay? Then we'll talk about things." I kiss her lips lightly, sitting up and grabbing my phone from my back pocket where I shoved it before Everleigh entered the cabin.

As I'm typing, relaying what I've been told about Savannah to Bryan, I ask her questions, confirming where the class was held.

"I'm sending Bryan out to look for her. She will probably need to borrow someone's phone to call for an uber. Bryan is calling Josh right now to see what he knows."

Everleigh sits up beside me, a frown marring her face as my earlier words sink in. “Why did you need to text Bryan right away? Is Savannah in danger?” She fists her shirt over her chest, as though she’s in pain thinking she could be responsible for anything bad that happens to Savannah.

“We’ve also been tracking Ainsley. She’s not in California. She left a few days ago. She’s not using her real name, nor any previous aliases that she’s used in the past.” I wrap my arm around her, my phone in my other hand, waiting for an update from Bryan. “He’s running to get my car, and he’s going after her. Even if she’s in an uber, he’ll get her.”

Everleigh clings to me, her body quaking. “Oh God, Will. I put her in danger.” She buries her head against my neck, clinging to me.

“Hey, hey, baby, no. Both you and Savannah thought she was in California. Ainsley may not be here yet. We don’t know exactly where she is. That’s why we want to make sure we have both of you to ensure your safety.”

Pulling back, her tear-stained face lifts to mine, her eyes wide.

Laying my phone on my lap, I grip her chin. “You’re not leaving me, Everleigh Renee Morrison. Get that fucking idea out of your head right now!”

“But Will, I—”

Slamming my mouth on hers, I cut off whatever argument she was trying to make. It’s pointless because I’m not fucking

letting her go.

There's no one that can keep her as safe as I can because I love her so fucking much. No one values her life more than I do.

Her body responds to mine, her arms encircling my neck as all the tension drains from her muscles. I can't help the victorious smile that crosses my lips before I tighten my arms around her, locking her into the protective cage of my embrace.

We fall back on the bed as I lose myself in our kiss, the feelings of love and devotion swirling between us. I know we have issues going on and things to discuss, but right now, I'm just so fucking grateful she's in my arms.

Pulling back slightly, I stare at her porcelain face, her long lashes touching her cheeks because her eyes are closed, her lips swollen from our kiss. They slowly flutter open, and I'm enveloped in the warmth of her love. It mends the pieces of my broken heart, suffusing them together, as the depth of her feelings infuses deep inside my soul.

“I love you with every fucking piece of me, Everleigh. You are my heart and soul. My home.”

Her eyes soften, melting me with the heat and radiance that pour from them. A slow smile curls her lips. “I love you with all of me, Will. I'm where I belong whenever I'm with you.”

I capture her lips with mine, kissing her gently this time, trying to stay focused. My phone buzzes against my leg. It

must have fallen onto the bed when I kissed her.

Releasing her, my hand pats the bed, searching for my phone. Locating it, I wrap my hand around it, pulling us both into a sitting position. She leans over my shoulder, holding her breath, as I open his text.

“Oh, thank goodness. Josh was waiting with her for an uber.” Her words pour out in a rush.

“Josh says he’ll wait there with her until Bryan arrives.” I wrap my arm around her, pulling her against me, kissing the top of her head. “It’s fine, baby. She’s okay.”

Everleigh nods, then pulls back so she can look at my face. “Can you ask Bryan to confirm when he has her? I need to know she’s safe.” She bites her lip, worry drawing her brows together. I know if she had any clue that Savannah could be in danger, regardless of how betrayed she felt, she never would have abandoned her.

“Of course, baby.” I text Bryan, then look at the time. Reaching over, I set it on the nightstand. “We have about thirty minutes until he gets there.” I push her back onto the mattress. “And it’s been too long since I’ve been without you.”

Her smile is seductive. “What are you going to do?”

My smile widens. “It’s much better if I show you.”

Chapter 17

William

THIS WOMAN IS MAKING me insane.

I press her into the mattress, my hands roaming over her muscles and curves, my mouth sealed over hers. She's so responsive to my touch, arching into my hands, grinding her hips against my dick as hard as she can, whimpering into my mouth. I'm seconds from losing all control, but there's something swirling inside my mind that I need to talk to her about.

Breaking the kiss, I open my eyes, staring down at her blissful face, nearly desperate to rip her clothes off and lose myself completely in her.

But I can't. Not yet.

Taking in a deep breath, Everleigh's eyes flutter open as I exhale, my face inches from hers. She tilts her head, studying me, her brows drawing together in confusion. A sense of dread causes her to press her body tighter against the mattress, as though she hopes it will swallow her.

I despise that I'm making her feel like this and just want it to stop. The only thing I want to see on her face is rapture.

My words tumble out in a rush, despite knowing this conversation will be difficult. "We need to discuss one thing before we continue." I swallow hard, knowing I'm getting ready to inflict pain on her. And I fucking hate it.

But I also know I'll pull her right back and make her drown in me like I do her. "The kiss with Irelynn."

Her body snaps taut, like a tightly wound string that's about to break. She sucks in a breath, hurt filling her eyes as I predicted. Her pretty pink lips turn down in a frown and I hate every fucking second of it.

Cupping her face, I stare into her eyes, imploring her to understand. "I was in a very dark place when I... captured Irelynn," I begin, hoping she'll understand. "It felt like you had abandoned me. I was searching all over for you, paying tons of money for private investigators. Poor Bryan. I nearly ran him to the ground from exhaustion, pleading with him to use his extensive technology and computer skills to keep searching for you."

My thumbs rub over her skin when I see the guilt on her face. "Stay with me, sweetheart. This isn't to make you feel remorseful, okay?" I wait for her to nod, then continue. "Even though part of me knew better, the other part... well, the darkness took over. Irelynn reminded me of my mom in many ways, but she has your eyes. And there are some similarities between the two of you, although I know you don't want to

hear that.” Pausing, I stare at the only woman I love. The only one remotely strong enough to handle me. That one who is complete perfection in my eyes. “The problem is she’s not *you*. Not even close.”

She exhales a breath, her muscles relaxing. Her face shines from my words, but more importantly, my body language shows her all the things it’s hard to convey with words alone.

“I wanted Irelynn to finally understand that I didn’t sexually assault her in high school. But the first time I saw her on campus, the horror and revulsion on her face gutted me. And after losing you... I felt like a fucking monster no one would ever love again. As though I were worthless. The inadequacy rolled through me, making me feel as helpless as I did when I was a child.” Hanging my head, my pain rolls over me in waves. My head is barely able to stay above water as those feelings engulf me like an inferno. “And you know how much I hate feeling weak.”

She sucks in a breath, her hands coming up to my face and tugging it to hers. “You are *not* unlovable, Will. I’ve *never* stopped loving you. Never stopped aching to be with you.” Her eyes fill with moisture. “There hasn’t been a day that’s gone by since I left that I haven’t thought about you, wishing like hell I could be with you.” A tear trails down her cheek and I lean down and kiss it. “As far as being powerless, that couldn’t be further from the truth. You are *the* most powerful man I’ve ever met.” Her cheeks glow as a slow smile pulls her luscious pink lips up. “That’s why you are the only man for me.”

My breath hitches from her words, my stomach fluttering like a thousand butterflies are inside it. My heart bangs like a drum beneath my breastbone as I stare at the only woman I want to be with for the rest of my life.

Everleigh always saves me from drowning. She pulls me from the darkness when it threatens to completely take me over.

My thumb brushes her tear away. “Thank you, gorgeous. Your words light up my life—and my cold heart.”

She shakes her head. “Your heart isn’t cold. You just hide all the love and warmth you possess from everyone else. But not me. I pull it from you, like the bright light of a lighthouse that guides the ships lost at sea.”

I’m too choked up for words, so I lean down, capturing her sweet lips in mine.

She tastes like strawberries and all my hopes and dreams.

Like my eternity.

Fighting the urge to lose myself in her, I pull back. She opens her eyes, understanding filling them. She knows I need to get this out and clear the air between us.

“When I kissed Irelynn, I was desperate to stop the pain. In my heart, I knew she was in love with Max, and I was in love with you. And it felt all wrong.”

For a moment, I flashback to that kiss, remembering how I tried to convince Irelynn I was nothing but the villain in her

story. But she broke through my walls, seeing through the mask I wore that protected me.

“I’m going to tell you everything that happened, Everleigh.”

She nods, and I begin, knowing this will hurt her, but the truth needs to come out. I don’t want any secrets or lies between us.



Irelynn stands in front of me, her hands on her hips, defiance flashing from her chocolate eyes. “You can use whatever defense mechanism you desire to protect yourself; you can push everyone away from you, and you can paint yourself as the villain all you want, Will. Convince yourself if that’s what you need to do.” She moves closer to me, encroaching into my personal space. “But you know what you can’t do?” She pauses, staring at me expectantly. “You can’t change my mind.”

Silence descends over the room as we engage in a heated stare down. I want her to break like everyone else does.

But Irelynn refuses, standing there like a petite warrior.

I shake my head, running a hand through my hair. “I’m not the hero in this story, Irelynn. I’ve never wanted that role.”

She nods. “I know you aren’t. But you’re not the villain, either.” Squaring her shoulders, her next words pack a punch. “Trauma has wounded you, and it’s easier to protect yourself if you never let anyone in.”

Her words remind me so much of the things Everleigh has said to me. For a moment, Irelynn's hair color changes to a silky brunette, and her face morphs, changing into the woman I love.

The one I adore and would do anything for.

The one who left me, barren and broken-hearted, sucking all the light and happiness from my heart and soul, leaving me a bereft shell of who I was before.

Everleigh is all I can see. I'm desperate for her, longing dulling all my senses until I can't hardly feel anything at all.

I know if I could touch her velvety skin again, losing myself in her pillowy lips, I'd light up inside, nerves firing like a live wire, the sparks burning me from within.

I'd come alive.

Stepping into her, my hands cup her face and my head lowers, my lips capturing hers.

But something feels all wrong about this kiss.

I stand there in a stupor, my lips pressed against hers. She doesn't smell like jasmine and amber, and she tastes different.

There is no warmth and light infusing through me. No fire leaping beneath my skin, burning the scars within.

I'm frozen like an iceberg. Apathy still rolls around inside me.

I fucking hate it, but I'm paralyzed by the weight of it, dejection making the hollowness inside my chest feel too

heavy.

Her hands shove against my chest, and I instantly stop, stepping back. As I stare at Irelynn's face, guilt slams over me like a tidal wave.

I'm disgusted with myself. I just cheated on Everleigh.

My head lowers in shame as I stare at the plush carpet, realizing my mistake.

She's not Everleigh. Not even close.

My chest is tight and there's a pain in the back of my throat as I struggle to maintain my composure, fighting back the tears. My thoughts swirl in my head, filled with self-loathing that I just betrayed the woman I love by kissing someone else.

Finally, it occurs to me that Irelynn is standing awkwardly in front of me, watching me, her arms wrapped around her petite frame, as though she's hugging herself.

I clear my throat, trying to hide the remorse I'm feeling. "I shouldn't have done that." My voice cracks. "I'm sorry." I step around her, desperately wanting to leave the room and sit in my room, letting the darkness overtake me. But Emma turns the key in the lock, stepping inside, with Bryan on her heels.

Fuck.

Put on the mask and act like William.

And though my eyes prickle with tears and my chest is so fucking tight it feels like a piano wire about to snap, outwardly, I'm not falling apart.

I'll lose myself to the darkness later.



When I'm finished, Everleigh stares at me, shock evident in her wide eyes and her fist pressed to her mouth. Breathing out a shaky breath, she cups my face reverently.

“You thought she was me? Because of her words.” Her voice is breathy, her body sagging into the mattress.

I nod my head, lost in the woman who has haunted me since the day she walked out of my life. The woman I've been obsessed with since I carried her from the mangled wreck of her car, desperate to take away her pain and keep her safe.

The one I have filled an entire house with her things, custom-built and designed for her.

It was the surprise I planned to give her after I proposed. But she ran off before I could.

Her words pull me from my thoughts.

“Will, I understand now. Thank you for telling me.” Her eyes shimmer with tears that she fights to hold back.

“Are you... okay with what happened?” My fingers caress her porcelain skin, wanting nothing more than for us to be okay again. “Those really aren't the right words, but—”

She drags my face to hers, pressing her lips against mine, winding her hands through my hair. A slight smile pulls up my lips, and she breaks the kiss, putting a slight distance between

our lips. Her gaze moves from my mouth to my eyes. “This feels right, doesn’t it?”

My hands push her hair back from her face. “You damn well bet it does. You feel like home to me, Everleigh. Your darkness matches my own, and your light draws mine out.” I swallow hard, my Adam’s apple bobbing. “I fucking love you.” My lips capture hers, and I lose myself in our kiss, pressing her body into the mattress. She lets out a surprised squeak as I grab her hands from behind my neck, pinning them above her head.

I pull away slightly, raising my brows. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” Her answer is immediate, with no hesitation at all.

My smile widens. “Good. I don’t have time to do everything I want to your body, but I’m about to give you a small taste of it.” Reaching over to the nightstand, I grab the belt I found in her closet earlier.

Quickly wrapping it around her hands, I make sure it’s snug, but not so tight that it cuts off her circulation. Or at least it won’t as long as she doesn’t yank against it.

But she will and I know it.

My lips quirk with amusement at the thought of marking her skin so anyone who looks at her knows she’s mine.

Sitting back, I pull her shirt up, exposing her bra. God, her tits are exquisite. For such a petite, muscular woman, she has big tits.

Yanking on her sports bra, I free her breasts, my hands cupping them. Her breaths heave out of her lungs, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she watches me. I rub over her nipples, teasing her, before pinching them. She groans, then bites her lip. I lightly rub over them again, then pinch even harder, feeling her thigh muscles tighten as she tries to squeeze her legs closed. But I'm sitting between them, preventing her from doing that.

And I know she's fucking soaked.

I lower my head, taking one nipple in my mouth, sucking hard, then gently biting down on it. She whimpers, her hips bucking up toward me, her hands yanking at the restraints. I chuckle, her nipple falling from between my teeth, and gently blow on it. Then I suck it into my mouth again before biting down once more. She arches her back from the mattress, trying to shove her breast further into my mouth, moaning my name. Her tongue darts out, her tongue lightly tracing her bottom lip.

God, I wish I could taste all of her at once. Her mouth, her breasts, and that exquisite pussy that I know is drenched.

My girl likes a little pain with her pleasure. And I'm prepared to give her all she can handle.

I release her pert nipple, then move to the other one, paying the same attention to it. She whimpers and twists her body, biting her lip as she tugs harder at the belt.

Releasing her breast, I move down her body, kissing over her abs. "Beautiful muscles, baby. You've been working out."

Her voice is breathy as she says, “So have you.”

Stopping, I arch a brow. “How do you know that?”

She squirms, swallowing hard. Wanting to tell me but impatient that I stopped giving her pleasure.

“I saw you running with Bryan in the woods.” Her voice is so wistful, her lips parting as an affectionate smile pulls her lips up. Her entire face lights up as she stares at me with such intensity it’s as though I’m inside her head.

My nerves fire all at once, lighting up my body like the grand finale of fireworks that light up the night sky like the dawn. Everything else fades away as I lose myself in her.

Sliding up her body so my face is inches from hers, my hand cups her chin, preventing her from moving, as I absorb all her truths in her chocolate eyes. “I’m right here, baby. For you to touch, hold, and kiss anytime you want. I’m not going anywhere.” My hand tightens on her face slightly. “And neither are you.”

She exhales a breath, her smile widening. “Good,” she whispers.

My mouth slams onto hers, her whisper a caress over my skin that sets my body on fire, calling me to possess her.

When I break the kiss, we are breathless. Her eyes are closed, her expression dreamy. Her eyes flutter open, adoration and love washing over me, drowning me.

But I can take it. I’m the only one strong enough to withstand the force of her feelings because I feel just as

intensely as she does.

My mouth lowers to her neck, my tongue and lips feasting on her skin, electric bolts firing from my nerves every time I touch her. She trembles slightly, as though she's experiencing the same thing.

A smile pulls up my lips as I move lower, her head rolling from side to side on the mattress, as I watch her drown in the sensations I'm giving her.

My tongue and lips covering every inch of her skin as my hands move to her running tights. Her breath hitches and she lifts her hips, but I push them back down, causing her to groan.

“Greedy, baby?” I arch a brow, smirking at her.

“Will, please,” she pants.

“Please, what, sweetheart?” I'm enjoying the torture I'm inflicting on her, watching the frustration make her scrunch up her face.

“Take my damned pants off and touch me,” she growls, her expression full of anger and frustration.

I rain kisses back up her stomach, not complying with her demands. I'll give her everything she desires, but not before I punish her for leaving me.

“Do you think you deserve to demand that I do anything? After all, you left me alone for a long time.”

She gasps and I take advantage of it, moving up and covering her mouth with mine, my tongue slipping inside. I

grab her bound hands, feeling them clench tightly around mine. As much as she's surrendering to me, she's still fighting me.

I tease her mouth, devouring every inch with my tongue, then pull it out, kissing her. She whimpers and thrashes around, tugging at the belt.

“Keep tugging, baby. You'll have marks on your wrists.” I give her an evil grin, then move back down her body. Before she can say anything, I grab her pants, pulling them down. She gasps as I yank them from her body, dragging her down the bed with them. Stopping to slip her sneakers off, I pull them the rest of the way from her, watching her breasts move up and down from the breaths that heave from her lungs.

I gently trace my fingers over the muscles and silky flesh of her legs, watching her flail and twist from the way I tease her.

Spreading her legs wider, I rub my hands over her cotton panties. She whimpers when I slide my hands back down her legs, making my smirk widen.

Gliding my hands back up her legs, I move to the band of her panties and yank, hearing the fabric tear. She moans, arching up toward my mouth.

Tossing the underwear to the floor, I spread her legs as wide as they will go, dipping my head low. She glistens for me, soaked with her desire, just like I knew she'd be. I gently blow over her pussy, laughing as she bites her lip, but her long sigh of pleasure escapes anyway. Her hips arch toward me, beckoning me to her.

I push her back down on the bed, and she moans, frustration making her squeeze her eyes closed as she tugs again on the belt that restrains her. She shakes her head, pinching her lips together, her muscles rigid from frustration.

“Will,” she says through gritted teeth. “Please...” Her voice trails off as I lightly rub my fingers over her pussy, from her clit down to her slit, trailing over her teasingly.

“Please, what, gorgeous? Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me. Lick me.” She speaks through her teeth with forced restraint, knowing damn well I know what she wants.

I know her body as well as I know my own.

Continuing to tease her, I smirk as I watch her head thrash from side to side, her jaw clenched, as I continue my delicious torment, running my fingers teasingly over her pussy. She lets out a huge sigh of frustration, squeezing her eyes closed.

Deciding to give her what she wants, I dive into her, my mouth pressing against her pussy frantically, my tongue swirling around her clit, making her eyes pop open from shock, then turn into pools of desire. Moving lower, I fuck her pussy with my tongue, swirling my thumb over her clit, watching her writhe and moan on the bed, arching her hips up toward me.

Pulling back slightly, I growl, “Fuck, baby, I missed this. You taste so damned good.” Then I dive back in, devouring her pussy, watching her back peel off the mattress as she arches from the pleasure I’m giving her.

“Oh my God, Will, please, don’t stop.” She tugs against the belt, desperate to remove the restraints. “Fuck, that feels amazing.”

Smiling against her, I remove my thumb from her clit, causing her to let out a frustrated groan. I chuckle against her, my breaths hitting her skin. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of this pussy.”

My lips seal over her clit and she lets out a long moan. “Fuck, your tongue is amazing.”

Her legs shake slightly as I suck harder. “Did you miss my tongue devouring this pussy, love?”

She lets out a moan, tugging at the belt again. “So damn much.”

I insert a finger into her pussy, and she moans again. “Did you think of me when you touched yourself?”

Her breath hitches. “Always.” She bites her lip as I move my finger faster, then suck her clit hard inside my mouth.

Inserting a second finger, she moans again, and I move them faster inside her, feeling her tight walls clinging to me. “Fuck, baby. You’re so tight. I’m gonna have to loosen you up.”

She gasps as I suck on her clit harder, not able to form words. I can’t help but chuckle against her as she arches her hips, moving in rhythm with my fingers.

“You like that, don’t you, love? You’ve missed me eating and fingering you, didn’t you?” I resume sucking on her clit, watching her head roll back and forth on the mattress.

Her legs shake harder, and she tightens around my fingers. “So damn much.”

“Are you ever gonna fucking leave me again?” I seal my mouth around her clit once more, my fingers fucking her faster, making her moan so loud and long she’s unable to speak.

Finally, she licks her lips, whimpering as I slow down my movements, waiting for her to speak. “I promise I won’t ever leave you again, Will.”

I pull my fingers from her, removing my mouth from her clit. Shoving her hips down into the mattress, I crawl up her body, her arousal all over my lips. I know she can smell herself as I hover close to her lips, my eyes turning colder. Her brow is wrinkled in confusion as her wide eyes blink up at me.

“That’s fucking right, Everleigh. You are mine and you won’t ever fucking leave me again.” I grab her hair, tugging slightly. “Do you hear me?”

Her eyes water and then fill with tears that fall down her cheeks. “I never wanted to leave you, dammit. Why don’t you fucking believe me?” A sob rips from her lips and she tries to turn her head, but I refuse to let her.

My eyes soften and I press my forehead against hers. “I just want you to know how much you fucking destroyed me when you left. Because I know you and there’s still a part of you that doesn’t believe how fucking much I love you. You believe you’re not enough for me because you were never enough for your father, who chose Ainsley over you. And though your

mom and Mrs. Johnston never wanted to leave you, they still left you alone when they died, forcing you to be alone again. As an only child, you hated being left and abandoned, even when you knew it was irrational to be angry at your mom and Mrs. Johnston because they didn't have a choice in the matter. And then your first boyfriend, who you gave everything to, including your virginity... Well, you weren't enough for him either, right? He cheated on you, then left you." I pull back slightly, seeing the hurt and pain in her eyes and it guts me.

My voice softens. "I'm not them, Everleigh. Since the day you literally crashed into my life, you are the *only* woman I've seen. You are everything I've ever wanted and *everything* I didn't know I needed." I lean closer, rubbing my nose against hers as her tears decrease. I know it hurts, but she needs to hear it. I have to break her apart so she can put herself back together, stronger than ever. And so she'll truly believe the words I'm speaking from my heart.

"I love you more than *anyone* I've ever fucking loved in my entire life. No one can replace you. I'd rather die than live without you again." My voice lowers, a sob choking me into silence before the strength rises inside me again.

Not gonna fucking happen. I'll fucking kill everyone and turn the streets red with blood to protect her.

Her expression changes, her eyes harden, and then soften. I relax my tight grip on her hair, basking in the knowledge she's rising up again.

She believes me.

“I love you so damn much, Will,” she chokes out, tears flowing down her cheeks. “I’m so damn sorry I left and hurt you. I’ll never leave you again. Fuck Ainsley. If she gets near you, I’ll rip her to pieces, then slit her throat.”

A wide smile splits my face. “That’s my girl. But she won’t fucking get near you. I won’t let her.” Then I lean down, capturing her lips with mine, devouring her. I know she can taste herself on me, but she’s never minded that. She once told me tasting her on my tongue only reminded her that we belong together.

And we do. I firmly believe fate brought us together when we needed each other the most. And the intense love and connection we share brought us back together.

Of course, the fact that I refused to give up searching for her brought us here.

I’d never give up on her. Not as long as there is breath in my body.

She is my entire fucking universe.

When I finally pull back, we are both breathing heavily. I wipe the tears from her face, then move to her hands, undoing the belt. She looks surprised when I release her hands.

I can’t keep the smile off my face when I see the deep red marks from her tugging against it.

My hands stroke her hair and I rest my forehead against hers. “I’m going to suck, lick, and then fuck you. And I want those hands free when I do.” I kiss the tip of her nose, then

hover my lips close to hers. Her hands wrap around the back of my neck, gripping the short strands and tugging.

I close my eyes, a thrill running down my spine from the pain. When I open my eyes, she's grinning at me.

"Now where were we?" Before she can utter a word, I slide from her grasp, moving down her body. Spreading her legs wide, I suck her clit hard into my mouth. She gasps, her hands moving to my head, fisting the strands. I pull back slightly, a wicked grin covering my lips when I see the anger flare across her face. "Oh yeah. I was about to make you come all over my tongue and fingers." I dive back in, lick her clit, then suck it into my mouth, causing her to moan, her head thrashing back and forth on the mattress. I move lower, sticking my tongue deep inside her, spreading her legs as wide as they will go. She tugs on my hair harder, and a deep groan of approval vibrates my chest.

Moving my tongue back to her clit, I slide two fingers inside her, then a third, licking and sucking on her clit as she moans and whispers my name over and over again. Curling her fingers into my hair, her nails dig into my scalp as she rides my face.

Fuck! This woman is every damn thing. I'd give her anything she wants.

I finger her faster, my tongue swirling around her clit, her pussy drenched from her arousal. Like a storm that grows in intensity, her legs shake and I know she's ready to explode. I say the final words that will make her detonate. "Come on my

fingers and tongue, baby.” Then I dive back in, fingering her faster, sucking on her clit, feeling her tighten around me as she explodes, arching against my face and screaming my name. I stay with her, riding out her aftershocks until she finally stops shaking.

Then I pull my fingers out, licking every drop of her orgasm from her pussy.

Her fingers loosen from my scalp as she lays there in a sweaty heap, her chest moving up and down from her heavy breathing.

My eyes rake from her head to her toes. “Gorgeous.”

I rain kisses all over her body, slowly moving my way up to her lips. “I want to taste you on my tongue every day for the rest of my life.”

She blinks, her eyes filling with tears. She opens her mouth to speak, but a sob comes out. I patiently wait until she regains her composure, raining kisses over her face.

“I want you, every day, for the rest of my life. You are my entire world, William Alexander Anderson.” She wraps her arms and legs around me, holding me tightly.

I smile, not just from her words, but from the use of my full name. The last time I heard it was from my mom, just days before she was murdered.

Choking back a sob, I rub my nose with hers. “You are everything to me, Everleigh Renee Morrison.” My smile widens as I pull away slightly. “I’m going to put a ring on your

finger and change your last name to Anderson as soon as possible.”

She tightens her grip on me, her entire face lighting up. A radiant smile is on her pink lips as she says, “I’d like nothing more.”

“Good. Because you don’t have a choice.” Crashing my mouth against hers, I don’t give her a chance to say anything further.

Chapter 18

Everleigh

My heart is so damn full it's about to burst.

It's almost hard to believe that a short time ago, I was full of fury, stealing my best friend's car so I could come home and gather some supplies, then head off to watch Irelynn from afar, hoping I didn't need to swoop in and beat her ass if she put her hands on William.

Instead, Will found my cabin and tracked me down, lying in wait for my return. Although it wasn't a smart move to shove me into the door like that, with Ainsley on the loose. He's lucky I know his touch and scent so well I realized it was him and didn't kick his ass.

Will's phone beeps and I groan, clinging to him with my arms wrapped around his neck as he shifts his weight. His deep laugh is a melody to my ears as he rolls to grab his phone, and I roll with him. My entire body warms like the sun is beaming down on me.

Kissing his neck, I whisper against his skin, "I love hearing you laugh. It's the best sound in the world."

When I tilt my head, searching his handsome face, his expression makes me melt. His light blue eyes are soft, and his brilliant white smile makes my heart bang against my chest. “I think you’re just trying to distract me.” His hand slides lower, moving to my side, where he starts to tickle me. Squealing, I cling tighter, trying not to release my grip on him.

He wins, of course, as he keeps tickling me until I let go, dropping onto the mattress, giggling. He pins my wrists with one hand and quickly reads the text. “We’ve gotta get ready. Bryan and Savannah will be here soon.”

“Wait, what? But I wanted to give you a blowjob.” I pout, sticking my lower lip out.

He chuckles, leaning down and sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, making me dissolve in a fit of giggles.

He pulls away with a grin. “There’s plenty of time for that later. For now, I need you to get dressed. I’ll help you pack.”

His words register and I shake my head, confusion on my face. “Wait... pack? But you said you were going to fuck me.”

Will simply chuckles, amusement making his eyes dance.

His words finally sink in over my raging hormones. “Where are we going? And what about Savannah?”

He stops moving, his eyebrows lowering. “I’m taking the two of you out of here. It’s not safe, love.” Will slides off the bed, heading to my closet. “Come on, gorgeous. Get up and help me gather your things. We’ll grab Savannah’s stuff on the way out the door.”

Sitting up, I glare at him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Will, I can’t just leave—”

He whips around, his blue eyes icy, freezing the blood in my veins. “Everleigh, do as I say,” he snaps.

His tone and words piss me off, yet also turn me on. For a moment, I wonder if it’s odd that I’m turned on by his domineering side. When we were together after the accident, the only time I saw the intimidating side of him outside of the bedroom, or wherever we had sex, was when he conducted business.

I’ve never been submissive toward a man, but I will submit to him in bed. But he’s yielded to me, both in and out of the bedroom, so I thought it only fair.

But this... barging in and demanding I go somewhere with him, without being told any details, pisses me the hell off.

I stare him down, glaring at him with my arms crossed. His chin lowers, and he stares at me with his dead eyes, trying to intimidate me.

My control almost snaps, nearly giving into his intimidation. I know he wants me to be the one to break, but I refuse.

William sighs and comes over to the bed.

I struggle to keep my expression neutral and not give him a victorious smile.

He lowers himself to the mattress, grabbing my hands and uncrossing my arms, then pulls me into his chest. “Baby, I

don't want to frighten you. But you need to move your ass so we can go. I'm not leaving here without *you*. And you're *not* staying here."

Pulling back, I study his face, an uneasy feeling in my gut that he knows something he's not telling me.

Clearing his throat, his face softens. "Bryan disabled your security system within minutes. The camera feed you and Savannah have likely viewed today was from yesterday." He pauses, seeing the shock on my face. "We jammed your cameras, then took over your feed. Bryan watched you race up the road in Savannah's car."

I gasp, pulling back slightly. "But Savannah was the one who—"

"She's good, but not as good as we are, baby." He releases me from his embrace. "Now, come on. Get up and get ready. I need you with me, love. Either you go willingly, or I force you."

"Force, huh?" I lean closer to him, cocking an eyebrow. "I'd like to see you try."

Will smirks at me, moving so close to me that our noses almost touch.

Neither of us blinks, waiting for the other to make the first move.

With lightning fast movement, his arms reach to grab me, but I dodge him, shooting to my feet. He's not deterred and is on his feet, reaching out to grab my neck, but I block his

move. His hand shoots out, almost grabbing my arm, but I dodge it.

Spinning around, I sweep at his feet. He jumps out of the way and I take advantage, shoving him so he falls toward the mattress. Laughing, I take off running to the living room.

I get the sense he's holding back. *Well, so am I, love.*

I'm waiting as he rounds the corner, then I grab him, twisting him around, but he slides from my grip, his hands latching onto me and throwing me over his shoulder. I pretend to surrender and when he loosens his grip, I flip, landing on the floor, and running toward the bedroom. He's right behind me though and he scoops me up inside my room, throwing me on the bed. His body comes on top of mine as his hands pin my wrists together. My eyes sparkle with happiness and laughter.

"Impressive, love. You know I held back, though?" His grin is smug.

I lift my face closer to his. "So did I." I smirk back at him.

"I can tell you've been training. You're almost as good as me." He winks, covering my mouth with his to cut off my words before I get them out.

Surrendering to his kiss, I pull him closer, winding my legs around him. He groans as I grind against his hard cock.

Pulling away, he shakes his head. "That was all a ploy to get me to fuck you. But it won't work. We need to pack." His eyes soften as he takes in my disappointed expression. His hand

pushes a lock of hair from my face. “I promise, when we get to where we are going, I will fuck you until you’re too exhausted to move.”

My eyes sparkle. “I look forward to it.”

He gives me a quick kiss. “Not as much as I do.” Shoving back onto his knees, he pulls me to a sitting position with his arms still locked around my wrist. He releases my hands. “Come on, gorgeous. Let’s pack and get outta here.” He starts to turn away, but I stop him by placing my hand on his bicep.

Damn, he is ripped. I can’t wait to see him naked.

Shaking myself from my lustful thoughts, resolve is in my tone. “I’m aware nothing has changed yet, as Ainsley is still an issue. I left because she threatened you. I wasn’t ready to do what I needed to do back then, but I am now.” My muscles are taut as I hold my head high. “I’m prepared to do what it takes to eliminate her.”

Will stares at me, no judgment on his face from my words.

I’m aware there is darkness inside Will. I’ve witnessed his cruelty to get what he wanted before. But it’s never bothered me because I have the same urges inside me.

My voice becomes softer as I watch him, unconditional acceptance radiating from him.

He accepts me completely, just as I accept him.

My face softens and my hand slides to his face. “I’ll go wherever you go because I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live without you. It’s been too fucking miserable.”

His eyes glint with determination. “I can’t—and won’t—live without you. It nearly killed me the first time, and I sure as hell can’t handle not having you in my life. Not after seeing you again.” He grabs me and pulls me closer. “You’re stuck with me.”

“I can’t think of anything better in this entire world.”

“Even better than New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream?” There’s a teasing glint in his eyes. “We’re taking that with us, by the way.”

“So much better.” My other hand comes up and I cup his face. “And that’s why I love you so much. You enable my ice cream addiction.”

Grabbing my hand, he presses a kiss to my palm. “Is that the only reason you love me so much?”

“Hell no. But you wanna pack and get me outta here, so I don’t have time to list all the reasons right now.” Sighing, I drop my hands from his face. “I’ll get dressed.”

We both stand and as I bend over to retrieve my pants, he smacks my ass before heading to my closet.

“Where the hell are my panties?” Looking around the room, I don’t see them. Right as I spot them, I hear his triumphant voice.

“Torn in half, baby.” Turning to him, he smirks at me, then cocks his head, slowly perusing my body as I put my hands on my hips. “But I prefer you didn’t wear any.”

Rolling my eyes, I start to move to the dresser to retrieve a new pair, but he steps in front of me, blocking my path. “You’re serious?”

He steps into me, heat radiating from his body. “As soon as we get to my place, you won’t be wearing anything.” His lips move to my ear. “I’m gonna fuck you until you can barely move.”

Shit. That’s hot.

My breathing changes, becoming heavier, and my nipples harden from the desire that burns in his eyes.

He steps back slightly, then turns away dismissively.

Damn him for toying with me.

He opens my closet door and grabs my luggage and bags, hauling them from the closet. I can’t take my eyes from his body, watching his muscles flexing with his movements.

I bite my lip. *Goddamn, this man is fine!* I really want him naked right now.

He throws me an arrogant look as he sets my empty suitcases on the bed. “See anything you like?”

Releasing my lip, I thrust out my chest slightly, and his eyes move to my breasts. Trailing a finger toward my cleavage, he tilts his head, desire capitulating from him in waves, incinerating me.

I just needed to know he wants me as much as I want him.

Smirking, I say, “Hell yes. And I can’t wait to see it all soon.” My smile is salacious as I run my gaze slowly over his body, then back to his hooded blue eyes.

Waving my hand dismissively, I turn away, pulling on my running tights. “But I have to get ready to leave.” I’m barely able to contain my smile, hearing the groan of frustration he releases.

Pulling my bra down, I wonder how that wasn’t seriously uncomfortable, then realize I was too distracted to care. Grabbing my shirt, I pull it on, then pull my hair from it. Turning toward the dresser mirror, I comb my fingers through it, my expression horrified at the way my hair is mussed from being shoved under a wig and then fisted by William.

I look like hell.

He comes up behind me, his arms wrapping around me and resting on my stomach. “Stop it. You’re fucking gorgeous.”

I didn’t say that out loud.

My eyes flick up to his reflection, seeing the sincerity pouring from his ice-blue eyes. He’s taller than me, his mass dwarfing me. Our reflection shines back at me, and I can’t help but think how good we look together.

My gaze meets his in the mirror, and I smile. “You’re too sweet, Will.”

He spins me around so I’m facing him. “No, I’m honest.” His hands cup my face, tilting it so his eyes bore into mine.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever fucking seen. And I mean that.”

I practically melt in his hands, knowing he means every syllable he utters.

My smile is wide as I stare at him, my cheeks growing heated from my embarrassment. “Thank you, Will.”

His voice is low and soft. “You’re welcome, Everleigh.” His lips press against mine briefly and I feel his struggle to resist deepening the kiss and getting lost in it.

In me. In us. In the magic that surrounds us, making everything else disappear.

Holding onto his self-control, he pulls back, giving me a smile that makes my insides flip. Then he turns and heads to the pile of clothes he abandoned on my bed.

My breath hitches inside my chest as I turn away, grateful he came over and stopped the negative self-talk I was about to engage in.

It’s more like a mental beating I give myself. I’ve done it for years, being too hard on myself. It started when I watched my dad turn away from my mom when she needed him the most. I noticed her pain and said something to him, and he lashed out at me. It felt like he was blaming me, and I was too young to know any better to believe anything different.

My dad turned to someone else when my mom’s illness was at its peak. The three of us knew she was going to lose the war, and it was pure hell for me to plaster a smile on my face and

try to give her what little bit of happiness I could, when all I really wanted to do was throw myself on my bed and beat my fists against the mattress, yelling at the unfairness of it all. I was too young for my mom to be dying. I needed her. But death doesn't care how young or needed someone is. And my father sure as hell didn't seem to focus on that, either.

Instead, he focused on my mom's therapist, his hazel eyes following her around the room, lingering on her ass when she bent over, her short skirts or tight pants showcasing her perfect ass and legs.

I hated that bitch, though not because of her looks, or even my father's inappropriate attention to her.

I despised her because of how she was with my mom.

My mind travels back to the past, haunting me again.



It all started when I came home from school early one day. My mom didn't remember we had an early dismissal, her depression making it hard for her to focus on anything. I didn't realize Ainsley was going to be coming to our house, even though I heard my dad mention he was paying her extra, since my mom's cancer was making it almost impossible for her to get out of the house except for the doctor's appointments and treatments that she had to go to.

But therapy—forget it. My mom was too weak to go, even though her mental health was worsening.

I hurried to my mom's room and froze in the doorway when I saw Ainsley sitting in a chair at my mom's bedside, her back to me, telling her she should just give up the fight. That the cancer was going to win anyway, so what was the point?

My mom's chin quivered and then a loud sob filled the room as she processed Ainsley's words. I stood there, too stunned and horrified to move, for several beats as my heart broke. Not for me, but for my mom, who, in that moment, looked so heartbroken at the thought of dying.

And then the anger hit me. It felt like my blood was boiling like a pan of spaghetti sauce on the highest heat setting as the fury swirled through my body like a raging tornado, about to destroy everything in its path.

A snarl ripped from deep inside me, so loud it caused my mom to look at me with terror in her chocolate eyes as I stormed into the room and grabbed Ainsley by her long black hair, tugging her head backward and pulling her from the chair. Whipping her around, she was stunned as I leaned in so close I could feel her hot breaths on my face.

"Don't you ever say anything like that to my mom again, bitch."

My mom gasped, her sobs halting from my language. I was ten years old and had never even said the word hell, and I just called my mom's therapist a bitch.

But that's what she is. A conniving, heartless bitch.

Ainsley's expression changed. Her eyes narrowed before becoming devoid of anything except pure, unadulterated evil. A sinister smile curled her glossy red lips, even though I just yanked her by the hair.

She watched me like a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike. She sized me up, a venomous look on her face, like she was analyzing me, learning my weaknesses.

And I had just revealed my biggest one: my mom.

Before I could react, she lifted her arm and backhanded me so hard I went flying over the chair she had just occupied, my head slamming into the nightstand sitting beside my mom's bed.

My mom gasped and whimpered, "Please stop."

Through my disorientation and hazy vision, I slowly sat up, rubbing my head. Stars appeared in my vision from hitting the nightstand so hard. I heard my mom moving on the bed, the mattress protector sounding like someone crumpling a plastic water bottle. She shakily climbed to her feet, standing in front of me. "Leave my daughter alone. Don't you ever touch her again." Her hands clenched into fists as her body swayed.

I was so fucking proud of my mom. Sick as hell with stage four cancer, barely able to stand on her feet, and there she was, defending me.

My eyes filled with tears, gratitude and love replacing the pain and disorientation as I watched my badass mom try to protect me.

Just as quickly, fear struck me in the heart, my chest constricting from the pain as Ainsley threw her head back, the vilest, evil laugh I'd ever heard spilling from her lips. Terror made my body quake as I peeked around my mom at the ruthless villain, who had stopped laughing. Like a panther about to attack its prey, her high heels methodically tapped on the hardwood floor as she stopped in front of my mom, a sneer curling her lips.

My mom continued to stand in front of me, swaying slightly with her fists clenched, not fucking backing down. Even though I wanted to shout for her to move out of the way, terrified of what Ainsley might do to her, I couldn't utter a word. My mom was my hero, and how do you tell a hero to stand down and not take the hits for you?

I opened my mouth to do so, knowing she wouldn't listen to me when Ainsley's chilling voice stole my words.

"You pathetic, weak bitch. Do you really think you are a match for me?" Reaching out, she pushed my mom's shoulder lightly, watching my mom teeter and nearly fall. "You can barely stand and yet, here you are, trying to be some fucking hero? You must not have one fucking brain cell in your bald head."

I gasped, anger rising inside me at her words. How dare she insult my mom?

Before I can get to my feet, Ainsley backhanded my mom, watching her fly against the side of the bed, then slide to the floor. Adrenaline and concern pushed me to my feet, despite

the pounding in my head and my hazy vision, but Ainsley stalked over, wrapped her hands around my mom's throat, choking her.

Oh my God! She's going to kill my mother!

My eyes frantically searched the room, and I grabbed the first thing I saw I could use as a weapon: a pair of scissors hanging out of my mom's sewing kit.

Grabbing them, I ran over, stabbing them into Ainsley. I had enough force behind it that the blade sank into her arm, making her scream and release my mom, who fell over on her side, coughing and clutching her throat.

"Mom." I knelt beside her, trying to help her sit up, not knowing how to help her.

I'm yanked away from her as Ainsley's nails dig into my scalp, grabbing me by the hair and pulling me away from my mom.

Hearing the sound of the garage door going up, relief flowed through me.

Yay. My dad is home.

Ainsley threw me across the room, and I hit the dresser, sliding to the floor. Then she hurried to my mom, dragging her up onto the bed.

I'm shocked and unable to move as I watch Ainsley get my mom settled into bed, as though she's tucking her in, pulling the covers over her prone body. Reaching into the pocket of her dress pants, she pulled out a needle and uncapped it,

quickly jabbing my mom with it. My mom's panicky breaths and coughs began to subside, and then she was silent.

Pain ricocheted through my body as tears poured down my cheeks. I quaked from the terror filling my body, wondering what in the hell she had just done to my mom.

Ainsley dropped into the chair, holding her arm that still had the scissors jammed in it. The psycho never pulled them out. She gave me a wicked smile, her eyes gleaming, then she twisted the scissors in her arm, howling out in pain. Tears flowed down her cheeks as my dad's footsteps pounded up the steps.

"What is going on here?" My dad froze in the doorway, his gaze quickly surveying the room. "Oh, my God. Ainsley, what happened?" My father darted to her side, kneeling beside her, looking at her arm that still had a pair of scissors stuck in it.

"Everleigh, she flipped out. Your wife was having a really bad day, threatening to kill herself, saying she didn't want to live like this anymore. I tried to console her, and had given her new medication earlier, hoping it would help. But she was spiraling and said she wanted to die. So I had to sedate her, afraid she would harm herself if I didn't. Everleigh happened to come in when I was sedating her mom and... I-I-I guess she t-t-thought I was h-hurting her m-m-mom." She paused and my dad stroked her hand, his face full of concern. "Your daughter grabbed a pair of scissors and stabbed my arm. I had to defend myself because she was acting crazy, like a

rabid dog. I managed to shove her away, but not before she twisted the scissors deeper into my arm.”

My head spun as I listened to her twist every damn thing that had just happened.

“I’m so sorry, Ainsley. Let me call an ambulance.”

“No!” She shook her head. “I don’t want them asking questions and Everleigh getting into trouble. I know her mom’s illness is really affecting her, causing her to lash out.”

“What?” My voice shook as I tried to calm myself and tell my dad what had really happened. “That’s not true. You’re lying.” I pointed at her, my other hand rubbing my sore head.

“Everleigh! That’s enough,” my dad yelled. I shrank back against the dresser, terrified because he’d never screamed at me like that. “Stop calling Ainsley names. She is keeping you out of trouble. After all, you stabbed her with the scissors—”

“But dad, she—”

“Enough!” he roared, his face red from his anger. “I need to take Ainsley to the hospital.” His eyes darkened, making me cringe. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Without even glancing at my mom, he wrapped an arm around Ainsley, helping her stand. He let go of her briefly to head into the adjoining bathroom.

Her head swiveled in my direction, a smile of pure triumph on her face, her cold, black eyes glittering.

Hearing my dad's footsteps, she quickly rearranged her features, acting as though she's in terrible pain. She moaned as my dad wrapped the towel around her arm. With his arms around her, he guided Ainsley from the room.

When I heard the door close and the garage door going up, I stumbled to my feet, tears running down my face as I stared at my mom. I slowly moved toward her, dread filling my heart, afraid she would be cold and no longer breathing.

My friend Mandy told me that's how they knew her grandfather had died in their house.

My feet felt like they were traversing through quicksand as I finally stopped beside her bed, sweat trailing down the back of my shirt. My hands trembled and my stomach roiled, feeling like I was about to be sick. A wave of dizziness washed over me and I closed my eyes, breathing deeply until it passed.

Opening my eyes, I leaned over my mom, one hand reaching out to touch her. It felt like an eternity had passed when I do and find it warm. I leaned closer and felt her breath against my cheek.

Oh, thank God. She's still alive.

I couldn't fathom the thought of sitting in the same chair that Ainsley sat in, so I dropped to my knees on the floor beside her bed, clasping her hand in mine.

Bowing my head, I whispered, "I'm so sorry for what she's done to you, Mom. And yet, I'm so proud of you for being my protector, my hero."

I remained on my knees beside her bed for hours; the shadows settling around the room. The atmosphere became ominous. Despite how uncomfortable I was, and the waves of dizziness that came over me periodically, I didn't move.

When the door slammed, I jumped, raising my head from the mattress. I was disoriented, not sure where I was at first. My heart pounded inside my chest, terror gripping me so tight I couldn't move. I whimpered, my head turning toward my mom. But she still slept on the bed from whatever Ainsley had injected her with.

I braced myself for Ainsley's appearance in the doorway, fearful of what she'd do next. But my dread turned to relief when Mrs. Johnston appeared, her face lined with worry.

"Everleigh, sweetheart. Are you okay?"

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I shook my head. I tried to get to my feet to go to her, but my legs hurt so badly.

Mrs. Johnston wrapped her arms around me, helping me to my feet. Her calming presence soothed me as my world spun wildly out of control. "Let's get you downstairs and get you a drink and something to eat, okay?"

I nodded mutely, grateful that she was here. Turning my face up to hers, I opened my mouth to thank her when I saw her cast a worried look at my mom, then her eyes moved to the needle lying on the nightstand beside my mom's bed. She frowned, her brow wrinkling.

“Stand right here a second, please?” Mrs. Johnston waited until I nodded, then grabbed a tissue from the nightstand, wrapping it around the syringe and picking it up. Her eyes met mine. “Did Ainsley use this on your mother?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Her frown deepened as she gazed at my mom, then turned to me. “Come on, sugar. Let’s go downstairs and I’ll make dinner.” She pasted a smile on her face, but the worry wouldn’t leave her eyes.



Pulling myself from thoughts of the past, I raise my eyes to Will, who stands beside my luggage, his eyebrows drawn together.

He moves closer, gaze locked on mine, until he’s standing right in front of me. His hands reach up, cupping my face gently. “Where did you go, sweetheart?” His voice is low and soothing. He looks back and forth between my eyes, his brows wrinkled.

Releasing a long breath, I wrap my hands around his arms. “I started thinking I’m too hard on myself. Internally, I criticize myself far too often, seldom praising myself. And I started wondering how long I’ve been doing that.” I swallow hard, a lump in my throat. “I realized it started when my dad turned away from my mom when she was sick and needed him the most. I said something to him about it and he lashed out at

me. It felt like he was blaming me.” Closing my eyes, I fight back the tears.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” Will’s voice is gentle, causing me to open my eyes. “It wasn’t your fault.” His voice is deep and adamant.

I nod, and in a whisper, I say, “I know. But then he turned to Ainsley. And she... was so horrible.” Tears fill my eyes, and I can’t keep them in. “I’ve never told you about the time I caught Ainsley saying horrible things to my dying mom... then she hit me.”

Will’s eyes darken and his face tightens. His breathing becomes heavier, anger coloring his face. I know he’s angry with me, not at me. But his tone is sympathetic when he says, “Why don’t we sit on the bed, and you can tell me about it.”

I nod and he gently leads me to the bed, moving the suitcases out of the way so we can sit down. Turning my body toward him, I tuck one leg against the other, which hangs off the bed. Will’s hand moves to my thigh, gently squeezing, giving me the courage to speak.

After I’ve recanted the story, including how Mrs. Johnston gave me water and let me help her make dinner, Will’s hand tightens around my thigh, while the other reaches out, pulling me closer. “Fuck, Everleigh, I’m so damn sorry. For all of it.” Lifting his hand from my thigh, he gently strokes my cheek, as if he’s taking the sting of her slap away. His other hand moves to the fall of my hair, and then he gently begins moving his

hand, massaging the back of my head lightly, as though it just happened.

Even though that incident with Ainsley happened fourteen years ago, it left scars deep inside my heart and on my soul. Her words to my dying mother cut me like the sharp blade of a knife. And even though she hit me, pulled my hair, and threw me against the dresser, the insults and hits to my mom impacted me more. When she slid that needle into my mom's skin, I felt the pinch.

As William gently rubs over me, my pain dissipates. Focusing on him, I see the love and concern emanating from every fiber of his being as he tries to take away my pain.

“If that bitch tries to get anywhere near you, I’ll fucking rip her goddamn head from her shoulders with my bare hands.” He tightens his hands on me, his muscles flexing and bulging.

The look in his eye is positively frightening. His normally light blue eyes have darkened with a possessive air that floats in the room between us.

He looks like he’ll go to war for me, spilling the blood of anyone who gets in his way, the streets turning red from the bloodshed that would flow over them like thick sludge.

I like this possessive, domineering side of him. I’m not the slightest bit afraid.

Safety courses through me, relaxing my muscles, knowing he won’t let anyone hurt me.

Not even Ainsley.

Throwing myself in his embrace, he strokes my hair. It calms me, reminding me of my mom.

“You know something, Will?” I pull back slightly so I can see his face. “My mom used to stroke my hair, and it always made me feel so relaxed and safe. You have that same effect on me.”

He smiles, his eyes soft. “I’m glad. Because I mean it. I’d do anything to protect you.”

I nod, a soft smile pulling my lips up. “I know.” The smile fades as my thoughts turn darker. “My mom could barely stand because she was so weak from the cancer and the havoc the treatments wrecked on her body.” I pause, still remembering her swaying in front of me. “Yet she stood in front of me, protectively, like a complete badass, and faced the villain.” Pausing, my hand squeezes his leg. “You are just like her. You’d face the villain, no matter how weak you were.”

His smile fades and his expression darkens. “Maybe I am the villain, Everleigh.”

I shake my head. “No, Will, you are not the villain. Not in my story.” His eyes lock with mine. “You’re my hero.” Grabbing his hand that touches my face, I place it on my leg, squeezing gently. “But heroes are always stronger when someone has their back. And that person is me.” Raising my chin, my shoulders pull back and my spine straightens. “I’m not like most girls, Will. There’s a darkness in me that few, if any, could actually handle. They’ve always tried to push my darkness down and pull out my light.” I shake my head, my

smile growing. “But not you. You’ve always accepted me for the way I am, even though I’m not like other women.” I pause, leaning closer to him. “You have my back, just like I have yours. And though you are protective as hell, you’ll also let me do what I need to do in order to gain the closure I need.” I pull back slightly. “You’ll have my back, but you’ll let me be the one to kill her.”

His smile grows wider, and he raises my hand, pulling it to his lips and kissing it, his eyes never leaving mine. “Whatever you need, baby, I’ll give to you.” He kisses my hand again. “Always.”

Chapter 19

William

Bryan sends me a text right as Everleigh and I finished packing her things. She was preoccupied the entire time, and I knew the memories from her past were still swirling through her mind, making her heart bleed.

At the same time, memories of her mom being her hero when she wasn't in the position to do so considering the extent of her illness filled Everleigh with pride. What she doesn't realize is that she inherited her mother's strength. I know without a doubt that Everleigh would protect me with her life, even if she were injured or ill.

I saw the darkness swirling in Everleigh's eyes as she tried to bite back the rage from being too young and weak to protect her mother against Ainsley's violence. I'm also aware that Ainsley repeatedly found any way to inflict physical and mental torture on Everleigh from that point on. Until the day she blew up Everleigh's house and Ainsley ran away.

Everleigh isn't aware, but Bryan and I found evidence that connects Ainsley to the explosion. But those imbecile detectives have pretty much moved on from the case. We

could bring it to light, but how we obtained the evidence isn't exactly legal, either. Plus, the legal system is known for not dispensing justice the way it should.

I'd much rather show it to Everleigh and let her dispense true justice on Ainsley.

My woman has a thirst for vengeance running through her veins. She wants to get her hands on that bitch and torture her, inflicting as much pain as possible before Everleigh kills her.

And I know she will. That's the endgame for this.

Justifiable vengeance.

I can't say that I blame Everleigh for her hunger to destroy her. Ainsley has taken everything from her. And though she hasn't tried to kill me—yet—Everleigh ran from me because she knows what Ainsley is capable of and wanted to protect me.

Even I underestimated Everleigh, though. I thought she ran solely to protect me.

Instead, she ran away to train.

To prepare for war.

As I'm throwing her luggage, along with Savannah's, in the trunk of my BMW, I wonder if Everleigh would have run if she thought I could handle her darkness. If she knew I would have very willingly helped her train, preparing her for battle, rather than discouraging it.

I'd be a damned fool to stand in Everleigh's way. She needs this closure.

Although I plan to be there to watch her get it, my role is simple—have Everleigh's back. The actual kill will be done by my woman, not me.

I can't hold back the smirk when she looks at me, wide-eyed, while I hold the back door of my car open for her.

“You're not driving?”

“Nope. Bryan is. Now, slide your ass inside.”

“You're gonna sit in the back with me?” Her chocolate eyes fill with unease and she glances at the passenger window where Savannah sits, facing forward, not bothering to spare my woman a glance. Her body is taut, like a rubber band about to snap.

My gaze moves back to Everleigh's troubled eyes. Leaning forward, I press my lips against hers reassuringly. “Of course, love. Now get your little ass inside.”

She grins and turns, complying with my demands. I swat her ass as she does and she throws me a look over her shoulder, heat burning in her eyes.

Yeah, no fucking way I wouldn't be in the back seat beside her.

Dusk covers the woods, the shadows long, as foreboding swirls in the air. My gaze sweeps the forest surrounding the cabin where Everleigh has been staying, but I don't see anything.

Still, I always pay attention to my gut instincts. I'll talk to Bryan once we get the girls to my place.

Sliding beside Everleigh, I lean into her ear. "Where is your phone? And Savannah's?"

She reaches down, grabbing her purse. Pulling them from the outside pockets, she wordlessly hands them to me. I turn them off, then slide them into the pockets of my pants. Everleigh raises her eyebrows, not saying anything. I grin, putting an arm around her and pulling her close to me. "Don't worry, babe. I've got you and Savannah covered."

She nods, trusting me.

Everleigh faces forward, her hand squeezing my leg. I realize it's for courage when I hear her say, "Savannah. I'm really sorry. I—"

Savannah's sharp tone cuts her off. "Everleigh, I just can't right now, okay?"

My woman's voice is small. "Okay." She sags against me, and I tighten my arm around her.

My voice is low, meant only for her ears. "Just give her some time, love. She's hurting right now. But she'll forgive you."

She bites her lip. "I hope you're right."

Squeezing her tighter, I try to erase the hurt she's feeling. I hate when she aches because I feel every ounce of her pain. "I know I am." Raising my head, I project my voice to Bryan. "Turn up the music."

Bryan meets my eyes in the rearview mirror and nods, then turns up the volume.

Shifting my weight, I press my back against the side of my car, grabbing Everleigh and pulling her with me. She squeaks slightly, caught off guard until she realizes that I'm settling her between my legs, her back against my front. She immediately relaxes in my embrace.

My hands cover her stomach and she tilts her head up, looking at me. I give her a reassuring smile, kissing her forehead. "I love you, gorgeous."

Her smile grows wider. "I love you, handsome." She twists slightly and I capture her lips with mine, her pillowy lips soft and melding against mine. She tastes like strawberries and my entire fucking world.

Releasing her lips, I stroke her cheek, my gaze locked with hers. The hurt is gone, replaced by her love for me. Her big brown eyes resemble melted chocolate as she stares at me.

I wasn't looking for her when she literally crashed right in front of me, but she became mine the moment I looked into her terrified eyes and pulled her from the wreckage. Despite being on the run from a crazy psychopath who plans to kill her, we fell head-over-heels for one another fast, as though our souls instantly recognized that we were kindred spirits.

There could be no other woman for me.

Ever.

As she scrutinizes my expression, worry churns inside my gut, my mouth becoming dry. I've been keeping a huge secret from her, but I have no fucking idea how I'd reveal it without her going crazy with jealousy. My fear is that once I tell her, she'll lose her head, take foolish risks, and get herself killed.

Pushing the troublesome thoughts from my mind, I focus on her. She doesn't sense anything is amiss, or she would say something.

Relaxing, I bask in this moment, so damn grateful I got her back. As I lose myself in her beautiful eyes and her captivating smile, love swells inside me for her.

Everleigh belongs to me, and I'll do anything to ensure she's safe.

Even if it means withholding information to ensure she doesn't take any foolish risks.

It's for her protection, I reassure myself.

Everleigh sighs, turning her head toward the passenger seat in Savannah's direction. Even though she understands Savannah's anger, I can see how much it hurts her that her best friend is furious.

But she needs to let it go for now.

My lips curl up in a smile. *I know how to distract her.*

I'm glad for the cover of darkness as one of my hands slides up her shirt, while the other moves down, cupping her pussy through her running tights. She moans as I rub my hands over her.

Encouraged by her reaction, my hand moves inside her running tights and down to her clit. Her legs fall open, giving me more access.

I whisper into her ear. “I’m gonna make you come so hard you’ll want to scream. Your mouth needs to remain on mine, love. Understand?”

Breathing heavily, she nods frantically and does as I instruct, turning her head and pressing her lips against mine.

I love when she does what I ask with no resistance.



When the car pulls into the underground garage, Everleigh’s eyes flutter open, panic rising as she struggles to process where she is.

Of course, she doesn’t have any idea because I haven’t told her about it. I’ve owned it for a while, but after Everleigh’s mysterious disappearance, I set to work on renovating it and getting it ready for the day I located her and brought her here. It won’t be our permanent residence. Instead, it’s a safe house until we go to battle. Once the war is over, I’ll put a ring on her finger and take her to the house I built for her.

But this one will do for now.

Leaning into her ear, I whisper that she’s safe. Her body visibly relaxes, and she tilts her head, a small smile turning her lips up, trusting me completely.

Everleigh and Savannah will be completely isolated here. I'll give them access to whatever they need, along with their new burner phones. On the way here, I had Bryan drive thirty miles in the opposite direction of this place to dump their old phones in a lake. For added security, Bryan wiped them clean before he threw them in the water.

If Ainsley is tracking them, she can fucking dive into the lake and get them.

Climbing from the back seat, I extend my hand to Everleigh. Once she's climbed out of the car, I stoop down and lift her into my arms. She laughs, becoming more alert, as I carry her toward the elevator. Her face beams radiance as her eyes lock with mine.

Fuck! I'm ready to devour her.

Once inside the elevator, Bryan locks his gaze with mine, smiling at Everleigh in my arms. He winks and my smile grows, knowing he understands better than anyone how glad I am to have her in my arms again.

“Where are we, Will?” Her wide chocolate eyes blink at me.

“Home, baby. Somewhere safe.” Pressing my lips against her forehead, she utters the sweetest sigh, my dick growing hard.

A smile curls up my lips as the elevator begins to move. My woman has no idea how isolated she is now. Like an impassable canyon, I brought her here to ensure she's safe.

While Everleigh slept after I gave her an orgasm, I texted Max and told him I found Everleigh. I gave him instructions on how he and the rest of the gang can get here, knowing I can completely trust Max to get them here securely and without Ainsley being able to track them.

Then I texted Irelynn, telling her I had Everleigh and Max can ensure she gets to meet her soon. She texted me a GIF of a woman jumping up and down, clapping her hands excitedly. Then I deleted it, not wanting Everleigh to see it. Not until she meets Irelynn. Then she'll understand our friendship better and understand that she has *nothing* to worry about.

When the elevator doors open, I ask Bryan to show Savannah around, then tell Savannah if she needs anything, she can press the button that Bryan will show her and Emma will get her anything she requests. While we were waiting at the cabin, I texted Emma, telling her it was urgent she pack and get here.

Carrying Everleigh down the hallway, her jasmine and amber scent swirls around me. Her eyelids flutter against my neck, feeling like the gentle flapping of butterfly wings as she opens her eyes. I'm moving quickly, urgency rising inside me.

I fucking need her naked so I can fulfill my earlier promise.

“Where are we going?”

“To our bedroom.” I balance her in my arms as I pull the card from the pockets of my running pants, waving it in front of the doorknob. Hearing the click of the lock, I open the door, step inside, then kick it shut behind us.

Raising her brows, her gaze slowly peruses the enormous bedroom. The walls are white, but the furnishings are black, and the carpet is blood red.

“Wow. This is incredible, Will.” Her head turns to me, her jaw slack and her mouth hanging slightly open.

“I’m glad you like it. I did this all for you.”

Her eyes widen as she takes another look around. Chuckling, I lower her to her feet to give her a few beats to take it in. She slowly turns, her hands coming up to her face, then slowly sliding down her cheeks as she turns to me. “This is too much, Will. You didn’t need to go to all this trouble.”

Yes, I did. She has no idea the lengths I will go to in order to ensure her safety.

I don’t say that. Instead, I grab one of her hands, lift it to my lips, and kiss it softly. “I’d do anything in this world to see your face light up like that. The look on your face is priceless, my love.”

Goosebumps cover the exposed areas of her skin. She tilts her head, her expression soft. “I love you.” She steps closer, standing on her tiptoes as her hands wind around the back of my neck. She presses her lips against mine and that’s all it takes for the fire burning between us to explode into an inferno of lust and desire.

Our kiss changes, becoming frantic as we devour one another, making up for lost time. We are a tangle of fumbling hands that tremble as we tear at each other’s clothes. Our lips

break apart to pull them off, then collide together again. Her exhales become my inhaled as we cling to one another, desperate to be together.

I lift her naked body and move toward the bed as she wraps her legs around my waist. The wetness from her soaked pussy seeps onto my hard cock and makes me release a long moan into her mouth.

Gently laying her on the mattress, I fall on top of her, my mouth still fused with hers. She moans and grinds her pussy against me.

Pulling my lips from her, my breath heaves out of my lungs. “Do you trust me?”

“Unconditionally.”

Shifting my body, I grab the handcuffs from the drawer of the nightstand beside us. Her eyes blaze with fire as I handle them in front of her. “I want to cuff you while I explore your body with my hands and mouth.”

She nods, her tits being pushed up from the heavy breaths she’s expelling. She’s practically panting as she holds out her wrists to me. Grabbing them, I raise them over her head, clamping the cuffs around them.

“Permission to bind your ankles?” My eyes blaze from the inferno raging inside me, my cock so hard it almost hurts.

“Of course.”

Grabbing the spreader bar, I pull her legs wide, fastening them in place. My eyes are on her, watching her pant, licking

her lips.

“I’m going to devour every inch of you, then after you’ve come multiple times, I’m going to shove my cock in your mouth.”

She moans in response.

I crawl onto the bed, building anticipation for both of us. Capturing her mouth with mine, our lips and tongues tangle together, and despite how much I want to press my body against hers again, I don’t.

Breaking the kiss, my lips travel all over her face, even kissing her eyelids when she closed them during the forehead kiss I gave her. I start off gently, teasing her, building the anticipation. My hands run over her shoulders, then lower until I’m cupping her breasts. Her breath hitches, so I change my movements, my thumbs flicking over her nipples, turning them into hard buds.

And then I pinch them, making her jerk slightly, her eyes opening as she gasps. Her breath quickens and I soothe it by rubbing lightly over her nipples. Then I pinch them again.

“Will.” Her voice is breathy, full of need, as I continue to torment her.

“Yeah, baby?”

“I need more.” She arches her back, her breasts rising into my hands.

“Patience, my love.” There’s a smile on my face as I watch her, and it grows when she lets out a frustrated moan.

Leaning my head down, I rain kisses over her face, then down her neck. She tilts her head, giving me access, her scent assaulting me. As my lips suck on her neck, she writhes beneath me, my hands continuing the assault on her breasts, then gently scrape my teeth over the sensitive skin, feeling the goosebumps spread over her skin.

My mouth continues moving down and my hands sweep over her taut stomach, feeling the muscles under the tips of my fingers, leaving a trail of goosebumps pebbling her skin everywhere I touch. Everleigh's head rolls from side to side as my tongue moves down her chest, then over to her breast. Pulling her nipple into my mouth, she releases a loud moan, arching her back off the bed.

My fingers continue their descent, moving to her pussy, already knowing she's soaked before I touch her. Rubbing my thumb over her clit in circles, she tries arching her hips up, but I press my other hand low on her stomach, pinning them down. She releases a groan of frustration and I chuckle around her nipple in my mouth.

Moving my thumb faster, her breathing becomes heavier, her body trembling slightly. Her tongue darts out, licking her lips, as she arches her back, shoving her nipple further into my mouth. I bite down on it and she lets out a strangled cry. Sliding my hand lower, I press one finger inside her.

"God, yes," she moans, moving her hips to the rhythm of my finger.

Releasing her breast from my mouth with a loud pop, I give her a smug smile. “God has nothing to do with this, baby. Your pleasure comes from me.” Inserting another finger, she moans louder.

Grabbing her chin with my other hand, I lean over her, staring into her eyes. “Tell me who’s giving you all this pleasure, Everleigh.”

“You are, Will.” Her answer is immediate, her voice raspy and needy as I fuck her faster with my fingers.

“That’s right. Who’s the only one who gives you pleasure like this?”

“You.” Her eyes are bright. “Kiss me, Will.”

“Say please.” My hand moves from her chin to her nipple, pinching it between my fingers as my hand moves rapidly against her pussy, feeling her walls tighten around my fingers.

“No, I won’t beg you for a kiss.” A moan escapes her lips as I fuck her faster with my fingers. “Now fucking kiss me.”

I pull my fingers out of her and she gasps, anger coloring her face. It only lasts a minute as my hands fist her hair, tugging her head away from the bed, my mouth covering hers, devouring her like I plan to devour her pussy soon. Her hands jerk against the restraints, but they are too tight for her to escape.

Nipping at her lips, I pull away, my face inches from hers. “Defiant, huh? I think you need to be punished.” Grabbing the

key, I unlock the cuffs and the spreader bar, pulling her into a sitting position.

Pulling her to her knees, my fingers fist her hair, our gazes locked together. Her eyes are like an inferno of desire, blazing at me.

Before she can blink, I flip her around, pushing her onto her stomach. Twisting her hands behind her back, I refasten them, tossing the key on the bed beside her. Smacking her ass, she jerks, moaning from the pleasure. “You like challenging me, baby?” With one hand, I grip her hair, pulling her head back as I smack her ass harder.

“Fuck, Will.” Her body jerks and I gently rub my hand over her ass as I lean over her, my lips beside her ear.

“That’s right, baby. Say my name.” Rubbing my tongue along her ear, my hand moves down, feeling her soaked pussy. “You’ll be screaming my name before I’m done with you, love.” Moving back, my hands grip her. “Up on your knees, ass in the air, your head on the mattress.”

She complies, her right cheek pressing into the mattress. Trailing my hand down her back, I adjust her, arching it more, her ass jutting into the air. My lips move over her ass, raining kisses over it, then my tongue runs over the round globes, listening to her heavy breathing.

“I’ll bet your pussy is drenched, wanting my mouth and tongue on it. Isn’t it, Everleigh?”

“Yes, Will. Please,” she chokes out, wiggling her hips.

“Please what baby?” I kneel between her legs, waiting for the words.

“Eat me, Will. Please put your mouth and tongue on me.”

Her words turn me on. Diving in, her loud moans circulate around the room. Sticking my tongue inside her walls, I fuck her with it, my thumb circling her clit.

She turns her head, pressing her face into the mattress, moaning and panting.

But I want more from her.

Turning my head, I suck her clit into my mouth hard, her hips jerking with the movement. My fingers move in and out of her faster and deeper, feeling her body tremble and shake. But I don't let up, continuing to torment and pleasure her, listening to her moans turn to whimpers as she calls out my name, her voice muffled from time to time as she twists her face around on the mattress.

Grabbing the lube from the nightstand, I pour some on my finger, then ease it into her asshole. I add a third finger inside her pussy, running my tongue over her clit, teasing her before sucking it into my mouth. She can't remain still, twisting her hips and writhing against my tongue. Her moans grow louder, turning to screams. “Will, I'm gonna come,” she yells, pulsing around my fingers as I suck her clit into my mouth, feeling her shake around me.

Releasing her clit, I continue to lick her through her orgasm, her juices running from my mouth.

She collapses into a sweaty, panting heap on the mattress when I pull my face away from her pussy, her weak legs no longer able to hold her.

Grabbing the key, I unlock the cuffs and remove them. Setting them on the dresser, I push her hair from her face. “Good girl. I’ll reward you by letting your hands free.”

She wiggles her fingers, trying to get the feeling back. Her head turns to mine and I roll her onto her back.

“Kiss me. Taste yourself on my lips.” I lower my mouth to hers and she does as I ask, opening her mouth for my tongue to slip inside. Her hands wrap around my neck, her fingers digging into my scalp as she fists the strands of my short hair.

God, I love when she does that.

Pulling away, I stare at this gorgeous woman whose strength and beauty are unmatched, my chest constricting from the love in her eyes.

“Don’t move.” My voice is commanding as I straddle her, her eyes brightening. She surrenders to me, and it makes me feel like a fucking king to have this strong and sexy woman relinquishing control. Outside the bedroom, she’d fight me tooth and nail.

My heart pounds as my thighs are on either side of her head, my hard cock in her face. She licks her lips as she stares at it.

“God, how the hell do you seem bigger than I remember?” Her gaze never moves from my dick as she asks, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“Cause it’s been too long, baby. Now, open your mouth and let me shove my cock inside.”

A moan escapes as her lips part.

Grasping the base of my dick, I guide it into her mouth. “Suck.” Thrusting inside her warm mouth, her moans vibrate against me, and I inhale a breath, cursing from the heavenly way she’s sucking me. Her lips wrap around my cock as I thrust in and out of her mouth.

“Fuck, gorgeous.” My hand strokes her cheek as she looks up at me, her mouth wrapped around me as I plunge in and out, my pace steady at first. “You suck my cock so good.”

She moans and I reach back, my fingers moving to her wet pussy. My fingers move through her folds as I stick one inside her, moving it to the rhythm of my cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

Damn, this woman can suck dick.

A thrill goes through my spine, tingles following down it, as I move faster and faster, her moans increasing, vibrating against my dick. I shove further inside her mouth, hitting the back of her throat, but my queen doesn’t even gag.

Feeling my balls tighten, I pull out of her mouth, needing to be inside her. Sliding down her body, I line my cock up with her opening and sink inside her.

“Fuck, Will,” she pants. Not moving, I let her adjust to my size, then I slowly thrust in and out of her.

“Goddamn, babe. Your pussy is tight.” I close my eyes, moving through her wetness. Her walls clench me like a vise, afraid I’m going to pull all the way out. As if she has to worry about that. There’s no way I’m leaving her wet pussy. She’s so tight and eager it practically makes me feral with lust.

“It’s been over a year,” she pants as I slowly increase my speed, her hands wrapping around my back, her nails curling and cutting my skin.

And fuck, does that feel good. Releasing a loud groan, I pound into her, unable to hold back any longer. I haven’t fucked anyone since the day she left. The only action my dick has seen since her has been my hand.

Sweat runs down my back as I thrust into her, harder and faster. “Goddamn, baby. Your pussy is incredible.” I can’t say anything else, my heart pounding inside my chest from the pleasure spreading through my body.

“Will, yes, fuck me harder.” She arches, her nails trying to dig into my back, but the sweat prevents her from getting a good grip.

“Fuck, baby.” My words are raspy and choppy from my movements as I continue pounding into her. “I wanna stay inside you forever.”

My words push her over the edge. She throws her head back, screaming my name as she clenches around me, squeezing my dick like a vise as she comes all over me.

I keep thrusting, my balls tightening, a shiver running down my spine. With one final thrust, I shove my cock as deep as I can inside her, filling her with my cum.

Collapsing against her neck, both of us are breathing like we just ran a marathon, our sweaty bodies sticking together. I bask in her warmth, the feeling of her petite muscular body around me, my heart beating like a drum during a Metallica concert.

Once I've calmed down and my breathing has evened out, I lift my head, trailing kisses over her neck and chin. Pulling away slightly, I stare into her chocolate eyes, my heart so full. "You're a fucking goddess, Everleigh. Do you know that?"

Her eyes fill with moisture, and she blinks a few times, shaking her head. My hands move to either side of her face, and my smile grows. Her breath hitches, and then she slowly expels it.

"I don't know how the hell I ever got so lucky to find someone as gorgeous as you, that accepts all of me, my darkness and my light, without trying to change a damn thing about me." Lowering my head, I softly kiss her lips. "I love you, Everleigh Renee. With every fucking piece of my dark soul."

She clears her throat. "Your darkness matches mine. Thank you for loving and accepting all of me, the way I am, without trying to change me." Her voice lowers, a tear rolling down her porcelain cheek. "But mostly, thank you for making me your entire world. For believing I'm enough..." Her voice trails off as more tears roll down her face.

“Everleigh, you’ve always been enough for me. I’m fucking sorry you weren’t for certain others. But I promise you, since the moment you entered my life, you have filled it with more love and light than anyone else has since my mom died.” I blink, fighting back tears. “You love and accept me completely, and I appreciate the hell out of you for it. And I hate that your father didn’t put your needs ahead of his own and refused to make you the center of his world.”

Pausing, the truth blazes from my eyes as I hold her tighter. “Everleigh, you’re every damn thing to me.” I kiss her softly as a tear rolls down my face, mixing with hers. When I pull back, my thumbs wipe away her tears while her fingers wipe away mine. “There could be no one else for me. You are it.” Turning my face, I kiss her hand, then turn back to her. “I want all of you. Forever.”

She smiles, her hands cupping my face. “I’m not sure if that’s a demand or an invitation, but I accept either way.”

Chuckling, I kiss her lips, then pull back. “It wasn’t a choice, but I’m glad you accept.” Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her as tightly as I can, feeling her heart beat against mine.

After several beats, I slowly pull out of her, moving down her body. My eyes lock on her pussy and a smug grin pulls my lips up.

“What is that smile about?”

“I love seeing my cum in your pussy. Although I hate that some of it is leaking out.”

Her smile falters, her brown eyes clouding over. “Um, Will. I’m not on birth control and—”

“I know.” I cock an eyebrow at her. “I knew that before I came inside you.” Unhooking the spreader bar, I look back up at her. “And I’m going to come inside you again before the night is over.”

Her eyes are still wary. “But what if I get pregnant?”

Climbing up her body on the mattress, I bring my lips close to hers, but don’t touch them. “I hope you do, love. I can’t think of anything sexier than you knocked up with my child.”

A smile tugs at her lips, but then slowly fades. “I need to take care of Ainsley first.”

“You will, babe. You’ll be pregnant for nine months and judging from the look in your eyes when you said her name, I don’t expect you to take longer than a month before you end her life.”

Her eyes grow brighter and she laughs, wrapping her arms around my neck. “This is an odd conversation, talking about pregnancy and Ainsley in the same breath. But you’re right, I’ll take that bitch out, then we can have all the babies we want.” Her face lights up, ethereal in her beauty.

“How about we practice some more?”

My lips cover hers, not giving her a chance to respond.

Chapter 20

William

What the hell is that annoying noise?

An incessant ringing pierces my ears, pulling me from my dreams. Groaning, I attempt to roll, but a warm body is wrapped around me.

Opening my eyes, I smile as I look down. Everleigh's silky brunette locks are tangled around me, her head on my chest. Her arm wrapped tightly around my waist and her leg thrown over mine.

She's dead to the world and no wonder. After the first round of sex, I regrouped for a short time. As soon as I got hard again, I slid my cock inside her, my movements slow and leisurely, enjoying the feel of her and not wanting it to end.

When we finally finished, I carried her tired body to the tub, filling it with bubbles and sinking into the warm water, settling her between my legs.

But as I washed her body with the loofah, my movements gentle over her tender pussy, things began to heat up again. She spun around, straddling me, her lips frantic against mine.

Then she lowered herself onto my cock, forgetting all about her soreness.

Not gonna lie, I feel like my dick is about ready to fall off from all the fucking we did.

And I don't regret one second of it.

Tightening my arms around my woman, I study her sleeping face. Her long lashes rest against her delicate porcelain cheek, and her rosy lips are still swollen from all the kissing.

With her dark hair splayed around her, she looks like an angel.

My dark angel.

The noise starts again, distracting me. I could stare at her all day, but my phone is going to wake her if I don't answer.

I roll slightly, reaching for it, Everleigh clinging to me like an octopus.

Wrapping my fingers around it, I lift it, peering at the screen.

"Hey, Emma." I keep my voice low, trying not to wake Everleigh.

"Hi, William. I'm so sorry to bother you."

"You can call me Will, Emma. And it's no bother. Anything for you. What's up?"

"I went to the farmer's market in Garrettsville, about twenty minutes away, so I could get fresh ingredients to make the girls a nice homecoming meal. But my car won't start now."

She sounds flustered as hell. “I’ve tried calling and texting Bryan, but he’s not answering.”

I pull my phone away, looking at the time. Putting it back against my ear, I say, “He’s probably running and can’t hear his phone over his music. I can come get you.”

“Thank you, Will. I appreciate it.” She releases a sigh. “Again, my apologies.”

I understand what she’s not saying. She’s sorry she’s pulling me away from Everleigh.

“No worries, Emma. I’ll throw on some clothes and head out. See you soon.” Hanging up the phone, regret fills me as I look at my girl. I hate leaving her and I know I could go find Bryan and have him get Emma, but I decide against it. He’s done more than enough for me.

It takes me a few seconds to untangle myself from Everleigh, who shifts and moans. Her tired eyes flutter open.

“Baby, I need to go pick up Emma. I’ll be right back, okay?”

She nods, her eyes heavy. “Okay. I’ll miss you.” Her voice is practically a whisper. “Hurry back.” She snuggles deeper into the comforter, her eyes already closing.

“You know it.” Leaning down, I give her a kiss.

Heading to my closet, I grab a pair of boxers, sweatpants, a t-shirt, and my sneakers, then stroll back into the bedroom. As I hurriedly dress, then shove my feet into my shoes, my gaze rakes over Everleigh.

Standing up, my eyes trail over her sleeping form, a long sigh escaping me.

God, I wish I didn't have to leave her.

My mind reassures me I won't be gone long and that I can make her breakfast when I return with Emma.

Satisfied, I grab a notepad I keep inside my nightstand in case I need to write anything down. Hastily, I scribble a note for her, leaving it under her new phone on the nightstand. She was so lost in me, she never even noticed her phone last night.

Smiling, I hope she doesn't wake before I return, because I want to see her face when she sees her brand new iPhone. Much better than that cheap burner phone she had before.

I turn the volume off on the new phone, planning to text her on my way to my car. That way, if she wakes while I'm gone, she'll have a note and a text from me.

Also, I'm completely obsessed with this gorgeous woman and plan to text her anytime I have to be away from her. Similar to what I used to do before she left, except this time, it's also to make sure she's okay.

And, if I'm honest, to ensure she won't run off again.

This time, I'm prepared. I've placed trackers on her phone, computer, and the new car I'm having delivered for her today.

There's also one in her. I'm not sure how she'll take it when I tell her. When she fell asleep, I numbed her ankle and inserted it, syncing it to my phone to ensure it was working.

I'm happy to have one put in me if she wants.

Pressing the button for the elevator to take me to the garage, I pull out my phone, already messaging her. I remind her I'm going to pick up Emma because her car won't start and that I'll return soon. I end it with, "I love you more than life itself, doll face."

I used to call her that before she left. But I haven't since she returned, still a little hurt that she left me in the first place.

But all is forgiven now. I can't stay mad at her.

I love her too damn much to waste time on my anger.

A smile curls up my lips.

Plus, I punished her enough last night.

I skim over a few emails I can deal with later or have Bryan handle. Noticing a text from Max, I read it, happiness filling me as he congratulates me on finding Everleigh. He says Irelynn is already bugging him about how soon they can meet her.

I text him back, asking if later today works.

When the elevator stops, I pocket my phone and head to my car. Starting it up, Metallica blares from my speakers. Setting my phone in the cupholder so it's easily visible and accessible, I open the garage door. Shifting into reverse, I back out, already anxious to return to her, even though I haven't left yet.

The sooner I get Emma, the sooner I can return to Everleigh.



I'm about ten minutes away from Emma, the song "Would" by Alice in Chains blaring from my speakers. Lifting my phone from the cupholder, I double-check it to see if I have any texts from Everleigh, even though I already know I don't.

My phone hasn't beeped or lit up to indicate that I did.

Still, I miss her already, even though I know she's probably still asleep.

I've barely set my phone down when I see another vehicle heading right for...

The impact is loud, the noise temporarily drowning out the music that plays as my body is jerked around like I'm inside a blender. Glass rains all around me. My car rolls, then stops.

My head and ears ring as I fight the darkness that threatens to overwhelm me. The metallic tang of my blood assaults my senses, but I have no idea where it's coming from.

Sharp pains in my chest and head hit me, nausea swirling inside.

Taking a deep breath, panic wells inside as a figure in my peripheral draws my attention. Slowly turning my head, I stare into ebony, emotionless eyes, terror clawing at me like a terrified animal desperate to escape the jaws of the predator.

She stoops down beside me. "Hello, William." Her smile is vile, predatory, and vicious and makes me want to puke.

“W-w-what do y-you w-want?” I choke out over the intense waves of pain that flow inside me like turbulent ocean water. Cold sweat drips down my body... or maybe it’s blood. I’m not entirely sure.

Dizziness hits me, making it hard to focus as my vision blurs.

Closing my eyes, I will it away, trying to remain awake.

You need to fight, Will. You have to protect Everleigh.

Opening my eyes, I see her cocking her head, glee on her face. She wets her lips before speaking, experiencing enjoyment from my pain. “I know what you are thinking. Poor Everleigh. But there’s no poor fucking Everleigh about this. She didn’t heed my warning. And now she’ll pay.” Ainsley’s smile is menacing. “I’m taking the last thing she has that she loves. *You.*”

Jesus Christ, this fucking bitch is insane.

Pure hatred for Everleigh glimmers in her eyes. The only emotion I’ve ever seen her exhibit.

My limbs are heavy and I’m unable to move them, despite my best efforts to do so.

I know I’m about to lose consciousness when my vision starts to darken at the edges, the world tilting even though I’m fairly certain I’m not moving.

Giving her my best arrogant smile considering the circumstances, I watch her brows draw together in confusion.

“You have no idea what you’ve done, Ainsley.” I can barely choke the words out. Struggling to maintain consciousness, I continue. “You have just waged a war with Everleigh. Make no mistake, she’s going to fucking torture you... then kill you.” I pause, pain filling my body. My head falls back against the seat, and I expel a pained hiss from the exertion. Sweat trickles down my face from the stabbing pains that shoot through my body. Or maybe it’s my blood.

Clenching my jaw, I turn my head toward hers, my lip pulling up in a smirk as I envision the pure delight on Everleigh’s face as she finally gets her revenge, knowing I’m the tipping point for her. “And I’ll enjoy watching every second of your death.”

A dark figure appears behind Ainsley. From the brief look I get before another wave of dizziness hits me; he’s wearing dark clothing. His muscles bulge and he stoops beside her wearing gloves.

The world spins as the darkness creeps over me.

Closing my eyes, images of Everleigh run rampant through my mind, so fast it’s like being on a rollercoaster.

Then it stops and I picture her laying in my bed, her eyes opening as she looks at me, groggy and disoriented. A small smile pulls her lips up. “Okay, I’ll miss you. Hurry back.”

Those were the last words she uttered to me.

I’m so fucking sorry I won’t be hurrying back, doll face. I made a big mistake underestimating Ainsley.

I love you.

Hands touch me, wrapping around my arm. The shot of intense pain drags me into the blissful darkness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 21

Everleigh

Confusion washes over me as my eyes flutter, the luxuriously soft sheets unfamiliar. Panic hits me, my breaths quick and shallow, as my hands pat the mattress beside me.

Where is Will?

My eyes fly open and I sit up, my palm over my frantically beating heart.

Reality presses into my consciousness as memories of hearing a ringing noise, and then the low murmurs of William's voice, slowly filter through me. "Baby, I need to go pick up Emma. I'll be right back, okay?"

My thundering heartbeat slows down, my panic ebbing as I look around the bedroom, sunlight filtering in from the large doors leading to a balcony.

I smile. He remembered that I've dreamed of having a balcony off my bedroom.

Stretching my arms overhead as I work the kinks from my neck, I spot a phone and a note tucked beneath it.

A smile curves my lips as I reach over, grabbing it.

I read the note first, shaking my head when he tells me he's already entered Emma, Bryan, Savannah, and, of course him, to my contacts. He reminds me that he went to pick up Emma because her car broke down and she couldn't reach Bryan, and that he'd return soon.

My heart hitches inside my chest when I read his next words. "I love you more than life itself, doll face."

Doll face. His nickname for me before I ran away.

It seems silly, but tears immediately spring to my eyes.

He's forgiven me for running.

I could tell it bothered him and I knew when he bound me last night, there was more to it than sexual pleasure. It was his way of punishing me for abandoning him. And it was his way of letting me know he's not above restraining me to ensure I don't run away from him again.

But that is not an option. It was fucking wretchedly miserable being without him. I know it's risky as hell ignoring Ainsley's threats, but I can't live without him.

Not anymore.

Grabbing the phone, I see he texted me twice.

The first one he tells me he'll make me breakfast when he returns and he's really sorry to have left me this morning.

His next text chokes me up, tears welling in my eyes.

Will: I know I'm hard to live with and even harder to love. But you do it so effortlessly. It's as though you were born to be mine. And I've always been, and will always be, yours.

Fuck! He's killing me here this morning.

His words twist my heart and I just want to hug him so tightly he understands I love every dark and broken piece of him.

I have since the day I met him, though I tried like hell to deny it.

I'd never known love before him. I thought I had, but quickly realized that nothing I'd felt before came close to what I feel for him.

Setting my phone on the nightstand, along with the note, I pull the covers back and climb from the huge bed, figuring I can brush my teeth before Will returns.

After I've used the restroom and made myself presentable, Will still hasn't returned. I grab my phone to see if he's texted me, but there are no new messages from him.

Going to my bags, I grab some clothing, dressing quickly. I decide to find Bryan and see if he's heard from him... and see if there's any coffee anywhere, needing a shot of some caffeine to wake me up.

Opening the door, I wander down the long hallway and finally find the kitchen. Bryan stands at the island, drinking a

cup of coffee and scrolling through his phone, his hair wet like he recently finished showering. Savannah sits across from him, sipping from her cup of coffee and scrolling through her phone. My lips pull up into a grin, noting she has a brand new phone, too.

“Morning.” I nod at Bryan, then turn wary eyes to Savannah, wondering if things will be tense between us.

“Morning,” Bryan answers. “There’s fresh coffee. Help yourself. Mugs are in the cabinet above the coffee machine.”

“Thank you.” I turn to Savannah, who gives me a faint grin, before I turn away, sighing, heading toward the coffee pot so she doesn’t see how hurt I am. I know I screwed up, but I wish we could talk about it.

But at least she gave me a small smile, so that’s something.

After pouring my coffee, I carry the mug to the large island. “Have you heard from Will?”

Bryan nods. “Yeah, he sent me a text saying he was going to pick up mom. I expect they’ll be back any minute.” He notices Savannah’s confused expression and smiles. “Emma is my mom.”

Her mouth makes an ‘O’ shape, and she darts a look at me. I guess I never told her that. It’s not like she’s ever spent a lot of time around Emma and Bryan.

An awkward silence falls across the room. I clear my throat and glance at Savannah, who lowers her head, her hair falling over her face.

She's clearly not ready to talk about yesterday.

Grabbing my phone, I decide to play with it and get used to having an iPhone again. The urge to text Will is almost overwhelming, but I don't want to be too clingy.

Clicking on the Facebook icon, I'm surprised when it immediately takes me to my newsfeed. I haven't had an account since the day I ran and I don't remember the password. As my eyes move over the page in stunned confusion, I look at my profile picture and laugh when I see a black-and-white picture of the back of me and Will.

As I click on the photo to enlarge it, my heart twists when I see my profile name. Doll face.

Obviously, he created a Facebook page for me and saved the login settings so I can access it. I only have one friend right now—William.

I'm distracted as out of my peripheral, I notice Bryan looking at his phone a few times, frowning, then looking at the clock on the stove. He meets my eyes, and I don't like what I see there.

Panic returns, only it's worse than what I felt this morning. My muscles tense as a sudden, overwhelming dread washes over me.

Bryan watches my reaction and hits a button on his phone. It rings and I hold my breath, waiting for Will to answer.

Instead, it goes to his voicemail.

Bryan immediately hangs up, then calls again. When Will doesn't answer and the voicemail picks up, he hits another button on his phone.

After one ring, Emma picks up. "Bryan. I was just getting ready to call you."

Bryan and I lock eyes, both of us exhaling. "Hey, mom. Are you and Will on your way home? Or did you send him into the store and, for once, he forgot his phone?"

There's a long pause before she says, "I thought you were calling to tell me you were coming to pick me up instead. I have no idea where Will is. I haven't heard from him since I called him earlier, telling him that my car wouldn't start."

Instantly, Bryan's body goes rigid, and he drops eye contact with me. Reaching for his laptop, he pulls it closer to him, opening the lid. "What exactly happened with your car, mom?"

"It's the strangest thing. It worked fine on the way to the farmer's market. No indication anything was wrong. I got the ingredients I wanted to make a nice meal for the girls, then carried it back to my car. But when I tried to start it, it wouldn't do anything."

Chills travel up my spine as an icy shot of fear grips my heart. Bryan's fingers are flying over his keyboard, and I see him frown.

His voice is calm when he speaks to his mom. "Just hold tight, Mom. He probably took a detour to surprise Everleigh

with something before he comes to get you. I'll call him and then call you back.”

“Okay, sweetie. Talk soon.”

They hang up, and as I lock eyes with Bryan, spots fill my vision. I grip the counter tightly as my extremities begin to tingle.

Something's wrong.

“There's a tracking device on Will's car. It stopped on Tacoma Street, about ten minutes away from my mom.” He pauses, typing a few commands into his computer.

“Can you tap into any cameras to see anything?” Savannah speaks up, coming over beside me. She puts a hand on my arm, squeezing reassuringly.

“Doing that now.” He types a few more commands, then sucks in a huge breath.

Despite the weakness coursing through me and the tingling of my limbs, I instantly move so I can see Bryan's screen.

Letting out a horrified gasp, my hands fly over my mouth as the tentacles of fear grip me tightly.

No, no, no, this isn't happening!

Will's car is all smashed up and flipped on its roof, much the same way mine was when Ainsley crashed into—

The thought is cut off as Bryan locks eyes with mine, knowing as well as I do who is responsible.

“I’m going with you.” I’m not giving Bryan a chance, nor any choice, in the matter.

He simply nods, then looks at Savannah, who has come up behind us. As I turn to her, I see her wide eyes as she unblinkingly takes in the horrific accident scene.

“Wait right here.” Before anyone can say anything, I’m running down the hallway, back to the bedroom. I grab the doorknob and turn, but it’s locked.

Fuck! I don’t have that key card Will waved.

Bryan’s voice yells down the hallway. “1215.”

I frantically punch in the code, hearing the door unlock. It’s only when I push the door open and run inside that I realize the code is my birthday.

My heart is soft for one moment, before it hardens again, images of Ainsley’s smug, victorious face filling my mind.

She played this too well. We underestimated her.

And now I have every-fucking-thing to lose.

Dropping to my knees, I open my duffle bag, pulling out my knife. Sliding it out of the sheath, I make sure the blade is nice and sharp, then put it back inside it.

Before I stand, I grab my cargo pants that offer easy storage and quick access to my knife, quickly changing into them. I can also fight well in them.

Shoving my feet into sneakers, I grab my cell phone, taking off at a sprint toward the elevator, where Bryan and Savannah

wait.

Stepping inside, I cross my arms over my chest. Bryan presses some buttons and the elevator begins moving.

“Ainsley is mine. If she’s there, I’m gonna be the one to kill her.”

Bryan studies me for a few beats, then nods his head. “And my role?”

“Savannah and you will help Will.” Determination and anger races through me and I clench my fists. “But that fucking bitch is mine.”

Bryan nods and nothing more is said. The elevator doors open and we rush through the garage, jumping into his vehicle with Bryan taking the wheel. I slide into the passenger seat while Savannah climbs into the backseat.

As Bryan starts the car, then roars out of the garage, slamming his foot to the floor once we are out, Savannah’s fingers are typing on the laptop.

“You and Will knew, didn’t you? You knew she fooled us, making us think she was in California.”

Bryan’s shoulders are tense and he shoots a look at me before answering. “Yes.”

It’s not surprising, since Will’s first concern is always me. What is surprising is that she fooled Savannah.

“But how?”

“I’ll explain it later, Savannah.” Bryan’s tone is biting, letting her know the conversation is over. His muscles are taut, stretched like a rubber band about to snap, as he shifts through the gears, his speed excessive, driving us closer to Will.

I’m certainly not one to complain about how fast he’s driving. Mentally, I’m urging him to go faster, my leg impatiently bouncing as I shift in the seat.

Biting my lip, images of every moment with Will since he found me in that small cabin run through my head. Tears burn behind my lids and a huge lump sits in my throat.

Why did I let my guard down? I should have woken up when I heard him talking on his phone.

“Why couldn’t Emma reach you?” I turn my head toward Bryan, studying him carefully.

Guilt washes over his face, turning his tan skin pale. He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Every morning, between 6:30 and 7:00, I go for a run, then lift weights. There’s a gym on the floor below us. I had the music blaring and was on the treadmill running. My phone was sitting on the weight bench behind me. Once I finished my run, I hopped off the treadmill and went over to it. I saw the missed calls and texts from my mom, but Will texted me at 7:20 saying mom was having car problems and he was going to pick her up. I texted him and asked if he wanted me to go instead, but he replied saying he was halfway there.” His chin quivers and he turns his head back to the road.

After a few beats, he turns back to me, his green eyes full of remorse. “I’m so fucking sorry, Everleigh. I’d rather it be me right now.”

I release a long sigh, feeling like an asshole. Reaching over, I squeeze his arm. “No, Bryan. Don’t say that.” I pause, waiting for his emotions to settle down a bit. “Besides, she would have known the difference between you and Will and wouldn’t have crashed into you.” My voice lowers. “It’s not your fault.”

He nods, but I can tell he’s not entirely convinced.

Pulling my hand away, I look out the window at the deserted road ahead. She planned this attack out well, from the looks of things.

Glimpsing William’s wrecked car ahead, I lean forward, my lungs constricting. As we get closer to the wreckage, my body stills. My head slowly swivels, taking in the crumpled car.

Bryan stops the car, leaving it running. Without saying a word, both he and I exit his vehicle. My gut tells me Ainsley isn’t here, but I unsheathe my knife anyway.

It feels like time stands still as I run to the driver’s side and kneel. Glass covers the ground and the inside of the vehicle, but William isn’t there.

My eyes dart around, roving over the crumpled wreckage. Bryan’s scent, which reminds me of an ocean breeze, wafts around me as he crouches on his heels beside me, searching every inch of the car.

Savannah's feet pound on the pavement behind us. "Should I call an ambulance?"

Bryan shakes his head and finally chokes out a sound. "No." His voice is raspy as he leans forward, not caring about the glass that is surely cutting his hands and his knees. His thin running pants are no match for the sharp shards of glass surrounding us.

I don't pay it any attention as I lean forward, my hands touching the twisted metal. Tears of frustration course down my cheek.

"What... what's going on?" Savannah's soft voice wavers from her nerves.

Bryan slowly turns, still crouching beside me. "He's not here."

"W-what?" Her voice becomes louder, full of disbelief.

Slowly getting to my feet, my hand throbs from the death grip I have on the handle of my knife. Turning on my heel, I face her. "Will isn't here. She took him."

All the color drains from Savannah's face as she stares at me, wide-eyed.

I think she says something else, but I can't hear her from the pounding in my ears. Violent, uncontrollable rage builds inside me, like a volcano exhibiting signs of an eruption. My throat is dry from my rushed breathing as adrenaline courses through my body.

A loud, guttural roar comes from me, causing Bryan to jump to his feet. He reaches a hand out to me, but after taking in my face, he drops it by his side.

“She wants a fight; I’ll give that bitch a fucking war.” My left hand clenches and unclenches as rage fills me. Like the ominous, fast moving storm clouds, my anger swirls around me, filling me with an edgy, twitchy feeling.

The thirst for vengeance consumes me, along with visions of her blood flowing from her body as I torture and maim her, putting her through excruciating pain before I finally slit her throat from ear to ear, watching the life drain from her eyes.

“I’m going to get Will back.” A maniacal gleam is in my eyes. “And I promise you, I won’t rest until I fucking kill Ainsley.”

Bryan and Savannah watch me, not saying a word. They exchange a glance, then turn back to me.

“Search the car.” My voice is cold and emotionless.

Savannah nods, looking at me. “What are you going to do?”

Her eyes widen as she studies me, her breathing rapid.

Raising my knife, I reverently stroke the blade. “Prepare for war.”

To Be Continued

The Flames Within, book 2 of the Fated Vengeance duet,
coming October 2022.

Acknowledgments

As always, I'm incredibly grateful for the supportive team of people that surround me that are an instrumental part of my journey.

To my alpha readers, Echo and Christy: You helped shape this book into what it is. From the bottom of my heart, I appreciate how excited and willing you were to read this, especially when the characters were demanding that I tell their story and I was cranking out massive word counts to keep up with them as they spun the story inside my head. Your critique is invaluable and I always look forward to your messages about how the chapters made you feel. I know both of you are very busy but I appreciate you always taking the time for me, and putting other stuff on hold in order to read my chapters. I appreciate you so much!

To my beta readers: Thank you for taking the time to read this novel and giving me your incredible feedback on the overall story. You are instrumental in helping to shape this as well and I appreciate all of you.

To my ARC readers: Thank you for being so excited and wanting this book. Your enthusiasm and feedback, along with your early reviews, are instrumental to indie authors like me. I love reading your reviews!

As always, my husband, Jeremy, endless appreciation for you stepping in and doing anything and everything to help me write and publish. Your unwavering support and encouragement are so appreciated. There are times this journey is arduous and I've buckled under some of the negativity that goes along with it. You're always there to pick me up, advising me to drown out the noise and keep writing. I appreciate you and your support more than you'll ever know!

To my readers: Thank you for taking a chance on me and reading this book. I hope you enjoy it and most importantly, I hope I make you feel when you're reading this. That is my goal – to have you feel what my characters are feeling, as though you are immersed in their world. I'd love it if you would leave an honest review on [Goodreads](#) and [Amazon](#).

Also By Jennifer Rose

THE FATED VENGEANCE duet is a continuation duet following the same couple, William and Everleigh, in their fight to be together against everything that stands between them. Both books are full-length novels and consist of two books in the duet, with a third, standalone novel that is set between the last chapter and the epilogue of *The Flames Within*. This duet is a spin-off of the Fractured series and many of the same characters from that series appear in this one.

Series Order

The Fractured Series: Max and Irelynn

1. Tremors of Desire (ends on a cliffhanger)
2. Riding the Aftershocks (ends on a cliffhanger)
3. Casualty of Devotion (ends with a HEA)

The Fated Vengeance Duet: William and Everleigh

1. The Scars Within (ends with a cliffhanger)
2. The Flames Within (ends with a HEA) – Coming October 2022
3. The Light Within (set between the last chapter and the epilogues of The Flames Within during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Ends with a HEA) – Coming November 2022

About Author

Jennifer Hahn is the author of romantic suspense and dark romance novels. At the core of all her books is a soul-deep love that, even when things appear dark and hopeless, love persists and guides the way.

Jennifer resides in Pennsylvania with her husband, two spoiled senior Dachshund/Basset hound mix dogs, and a feisty rex rabbit. She enjoys long walks, lounging by the pool with a good romance book, writing, and listening to a variety of music. In addition, she loves horror movies and Halloween, and all things autumn.

Her favorite book characters are of the morally grey variety, and she devours dark, stalker, and/or taboo novels and novellas.

Please feel free to follow her on social media:

[Facebook](#)

[Thorns to Roses Jennifer Rose Reading Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Bookbub](#)

[Amazon](#)

Email: jenrose.author@gmail.com