

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE



UNTAMED  
VIXEN

TESSA JAMES

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# playlist

JOKE'S ON YOU - CHARLOTTE LAWRENCE

SILENCE - MARSHMELLO, KHALID

THE BEGINNING OF THE END - KLERGY, VALERIE  
BROUSSARD

PANIC ROOM - AU/RA

WAR OF HEARTS (ACOUSTIC) - RUELLE

FEEL SOMETHING - JAYMES YOUNG

HATE U LOVE U - OLIVIA O'BRIEN

COUPLE OF KIDS - MAGGIE LINDEMANN

CASTLE - HALSEY

SO BAD - BRANDON COLBEIN

SHADOW PREACHERS - ZELLA DAY

YOU SHOULD KNOW WHERE I'M COMING FROM -  
BANKS

HEARTBREAK - MDWS

MY HEART I SURRENDER - I PREVAIL

SKIN - RIHANNA

DEVIL SIDE - FOXES

PLAYGROUND - BEA MILLER

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Book Cover Design by Kate Hall

Proofing by Tiffany Hernandez

*First Edition 2021*

*ISBN 978-1-957238-00-5 (paperback)*

*ASIN B099X6MGH8 (ebook)*

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*“They say all’s well that ends well, but I’m in a new Hell,  
every time you double-cross my mind.” — Taylor Swift*

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## JUNE



The paper-thin walls of my shared apartment provide me no shelter from the blaring noise coming from my roommates. At any given time, someone is either arguing, fucking, or playing video games. Right now is no exception. I yank my pillow out from under my head and shove it across my face, muffling an exaggerated groan.

“June, keep it down in there.” Carter bangs what I can only assume is his fist against the meager drywall between us.

Out of all of them, I hate him the most. He’s not even on our lease, but for no good reason, he’s here every single fucking day.

The no good reason is Heather, his girlfriend. One of the four names signed to the piece of paper legally binding us to this dump of a unit.

Desperation is the only excuse for why I’m here. And no matter what I do, there seems to be no escaping this shit hole and the people that live in it. Hell, I can’t even escape myself.

I can’t afford to leave, and if I could, there aren’t many other options available. Finding a landlord that’ll rent to a single, twenty-one-year-old with a spotty job record is next to impossible. Plus, it’s not like I’ll be coming into a large sum of money anytime soon, either.

So, for the foreseeable future, I’m stuck here, unless I can find a crossroads demon to sell my soul to for a little peace and fucking quiet.

I toss the pillow to the side and drag my legs off the edge of my bed, dramatically slamming my feet onto the cold, hard floor, and storming toward the door. I swing it wide and glare at my target.

He flinches at my sudden appearance.

“One fucking hour,” I say through gritted teeth. “That’s all I asked. You can’t give me that?”

Carter glances at his bare wrist. “Sorry J, the boys are playing a live match.”

Because apparently, his gaming sessions are more important than me getting any sleep before pulling another night shift at the bar.

“You’re an asshole.”

Carter shrugs and continues thumbing the buttons on his controller. “I can’t keep track of your schedule. It’s not my fault you have two jobs.”

“Three,” I correct him.

If I stand any chance of ever making enough cash to get out of this dump, I had to take a semester off from school and focus on working, hence the additional gig I picked up. I keep telling myself it’s only the one skipped term, but at the rate I’m going, I have no clue when I’ll be able to go back to college. Most of my waking hours are devoted to various income-earning endeavors with slivers of sleep in between. But with the increased workload, I can’t remember the last time I actually got any rest.

Carter flits his attention from the flat screen to me. “Oh, you’re still here.” He slides his gaze up and down my body. “Listen, if you want me to give you something to whine about...”

I cut him off. “Eat shit and die.” Turning on my heel, I go back into my room and slam the door shut behind me, wishing like hell it would rattle the TV off the fucking wall.

He mumbles a few choice words but I tune them out, not letting him have another second of my time.



What Heather sees in him, I'll never fucking understand. He's a man-child, sitting around playing video games and having her wait on him hand and foot. She even went so far as to tell me he's a bad fuck. The whole situation makes no sense. She's a grown-ass woman, and who she chooses to keep around is on her, but with each passing day, it becomes more and more my problem, too.

The only reason I come to this place is to sleep and shower, so I might as well do one since I can't do the other. Maybe if I'm lucky, I can start my shift early and make a few extra bucks.

I rifle through a stack of clothes piled on a chair in the corner of my room and do a sniff test to make sure they're clean. Once I've managed to find a decent outfit, I grab my shower caddy from my dresser. My reflection stares back at me as I consider how long it's been since I've washed my jet-black hair.

Was that yesterday? Maybe the day before? Each day blurs into the next.

I run my fingers along my scalp to reveal that it doesn't seem that greasy. With a little dry shampoo, I'll be good as new. It's just my bar shift anyway. Those guys are too drunk to take their eyes off my tits long enough to notice my hair anyway.

Which reminds me, if I want tips tonight, I need to swap out my shirt for something a bit more revealing. It's not the noblest of career paths, but it pays the bills, and right now, that's all that matters.

After a quick shower, a pinch of blush and mascara, and enough eyeliner to make me look more dangerous than I really am, I slide into my sexy but practical combat boots.

I pass through the common room, ignoring the seething eyes of my roommate's creepy boyfriend, and make my way out the front door, not bothering to tell anyone where I'm going. Not like any of them care anyway.

At one point, what seems like forever ago, we were all friends. High schoolers who couldn't wait to graduate, get our own place, and do the whole college thing together. Since then, though, we've all grown apart. *Drastically*. Whether it was booze, drugs, or bad choices, none of us have much of anything in common anymore, and other than the occasional rent check drop off, or forced small-talk coming or going, we don't really speak.

If I'm being honest, I'm not bothered by it one bit. They're not my people. They're just the humans I'm currently stuck living with. I've made other friends here and there—Cora being the only one that doesn't annoy the shit out of me—but I typically spend most of my time outside of work and school either alone or fulfilling my need for physical contact with a stranger. All of which I'm totally okay with. It suits me. And I've learned that if you're the one who does the leaving, you can't be left. Not that I've ever felt the need to stay. No one has ever caught my attention long enough for me to even consider it.

I make my way the few blocks to the shitty dive bar I've worked most of my evenings at lately. It's run down, and the pay sucks, but on occasion, a high roller comes in and makes it worth my while in tips. I scan the patrons upon entering the smoke-filled establishment, noting the few regulars and the new faces littering the place.

"You're early," Jack says from his spot behind the bar. He stops counting the till and cranes his neck to get a look at the clock near the shelf of booze.

I bite my lip and tilt my head in my weak attempt to feign sweetness. "Thought you could use the help?"

"I could give you something to do," a sloppy drunk man slurs from his spot at the bar.

Jack ignores him, rolling his eyes at me. "Right." He sighs and nods to the drink Sarah had just set next to him when I walked in. "Corner booth."

"Thanks, Jack." I let out a breath and grab the glass from the counter, immediately noticing the aroma of the top-shelf

bourbon in my grasp, meaning only one thing.

I settle my sights on the person it belongs to. The same guy who has spent countless hours in here the last couple of weeks. Drinking the same expensive liquor. Always alone. Not speaking to anyone. Just brooding in his own little zone, not bothered by the world around him.

I approach, taking in his broad shoulders and pressed black suit, the jacket folded neatly and resting on the table. His cuffs unbuttoned, his sleeves the most haphazard thing about him. His salt-and-pepper hair is neatly swooped back, with that long on the top, but short on the sides thing going on. His scruffy but well-kept beard matches him perfectly.

He's significantly older than me, but there is no denying that he's a sight for sore eyes.

The man drains what's left of his dark-honey-colored drink and holds it out to me to replace with the fresh one. I do my best not to stare at his lips as he licks the remaining liquid off them.

"Can I get you anything else?" I know damn well not to make small talk with him.

He's been coming in here long enough for me to realize he's a hell of a lot different than the rest of the people who frequent this place. He doesn't fuck around. He doesn't treat me the way every single other douche in this bar does. His gaze doesn't linger on my tits and I don't feel his stare when I walk away. He's just...him. We co-exist. I do my job, he pays his tab, always leaving way more than I deserve. And that's that. I enjoy his presence because it's nothing like what I deal with daily.

Maybe I should take offense to that, because I do make it a point to put my body on display for the extra cash, but I don't. Not with him. He comes in here to escape and that's what I allow him to do.

Sarah told me a few days ago that I'm his favorite but I laughed and said she was out of her mind. He hardly speaks to

me. According to her, it's somehow much more attention than he gives anyone else who's served him.

"You can get me something, sweetheart," the drunk guy calls out from behind me.

I ignore him and focus on the dark and mysterious older man in front of me, paying close attention to the way his jaw tensed slightly when the guy spoke.

Mystery man slowly tilts his head toward me, his dark brown eyes piercing through me. "That'll be all. Thank you." His gaze doesn't falter, doesn't slide down my body, but yet stays directly on mine.

This should be the part where I feel intimidated, break eye contact, anything other than match the intensity of his stare. But I don't. I let the wave of adrenaline rush over me and revel in the blissful decadence of it.

It's him that looks away first, turning his focus back on the empty seat across from him.

I hide the smirk that wants to creep its way across my face and head toward Jack to see if there's anything else he wants me to do before taking up my usual post behind the bar.

A loud group of college-aged guys walk in and steal everyone's attention.

"Gonna need to see some IDs," Jack spits out the second they get close enough.

The guys laugh, slapping each other and making the simple task much more drawn out and dramatic than it needs to be. Two of them drop their wallets, burst into laughter, and bang their heads together when they both reach down at the same time.

It's hard to tell whether they're all drunk or just really fucking stupid.

I let out a sigh, waiting for them to get the show on the road.

"It's my buddy's twenty-first," one of the guys tells us. He grabs the birthday boy on the shoulder and shakes him. "A

round of shots for the bar on me.”

This seems to shift everyone from being annoyed to intrigued by the newcomers. Everyone loves free booze. Well, everyone except you know who.

Mister tall-dark-and-handsome doesn't give so much as a blip of interest their way. All the while, most of the other patrons crowd around and wait for their hand-out to be served.

I slip behind the bar, doing my best to help Jack and Sarah maintain order to the newly introduced chaos erupting around us. I count the heads that appear, reaching under and pulling out glasses to go with each one.

“Cash or card?” Jack asks the guy standing in front of him.

The dude pulls out his wallet and flashes a few hundred-dollar bills. “I'm good for it, don't worry.”

The tension in Jack's shoulders loosens and he steps out of the way to let me and Sarah do our thing.

I extend a shot toward the obnoxious drunk who called me sweetheart.

Somehow, probably with the liquid courage, he has the audacity to grab onto my hand and hold it in place. He forces me to look at him, his eyes red and glassy. “Do one with me.”

“I'll pass. I don't drink on the job.” It's everything I can do to not deck him right here, right now. But I can't exactly afford to get fired for punching a customer.

One of the wild younger guys latches onto the drunk dude's shoulders, stealing his focus from me, resulting in him loosening his grip enough for me to pull away.

“Come on man, join us,” the birthday boy says.

The drunk guy eyes me but decides to go along with the fun, probably realizing I'm not worth the trouble.

I catch a glimpse of one of the group members approaching the loner mystery man, a second later he raises his hands and backs away like he might actually be afraid of

him. I smirk at the endless possibilities of what could have been said.

Jack leans down and whispers into my ear. “Hey, when they settle down, can you service the ladies’ room? The machine is out of plugs.”

I shake my head and elbow him gently. “Tampons, Jack, they’re called tampons.”

After a few noisy minutes of celebrating, everyone floats back to their respective booths and tables and the guys find a corner of their own.

I make quick work of helping Sarah clean up the giant mess that was made from the sloshing of booze all over the countertop. Once I’m confident she’s got everything under control, I pop around the side and head toward the storage closet.

I fumble around for far too long to find the box of *plugs*, tucked on the highest shelf where I can barely reach. I stand on my tiptoes and use a random pencil to drag the thing closer for me to grab.

“Let me get that for you.”

My skin crawls at hearing the drunk guy’s voice, to feel his breath so very close to the back of my neck.

The volume to the jukebox gets turned up, and a small crowd forms around the make-shift dance floor.

“I’ve got it.” I snatch them off the ledge and shut the door. I stroll away from him, turning down the dimly lit hallway where the bathrooms are located, hoping for the millionth time that he’ll get the hint and leave me alone.

Guys like him are a bit dull though, and no matter how many “no thanks” vibes you put out, they don’t fucking get it.

I disregard his words and go straight to the women’s restroom in a desperate attempt to get the hell away from him.

Only, a second later, he follows me inside, twisting the lock and positioning his body in the way to block the exit.

“Listen, if you needed a tampon, you could have just asked.” I attempt to make light of the situation, unsure of which direction he’s going to take things.

He steps forward, giving me a better look at his build. He’s wide, but in an *I go to the gym way too much* kind of way. The steroid-induced testosterone flowing off him with his arrogance. “I’d fuck you on your period, baby.”

“Um, no thanks.”

“Grant, you can call me Grant.” The words slip off his tongue lazily.

“Grant.” I crack open the box and try to go back to my job. “I’m all for gender fluidity, but I’m not sure you should be in the women’s restroom.”

Grant reaches over and latches onto my arm, pulling me toward him. “I’m all man, baby.” He jerks me toward his groin and tries to place my hand on him.

“Get your fucking grimy hands off me.” I jerk my arm to no avail.

His grip tightens and he bores his hazy stare into me. The stench of booze pours out of him as his words slur together. “You know you want it.”

I swallow and try to figure a way out of this.

Grant takes his free hand and runs his fingers up my thigh, tracing under the hem of my skirt. “You wouldn’t dress like this if you didn’t.”

If only he knew I dress like this for his money, not his repulsive cock.

The door rattles, a knock following. Sarah must be coming to check in and see what’s taking me so long. But her voice doesn’t follow to ask if everything is okay.

Grant brings his hand up to my face and steps closer. “Such porcelain skin.” He trails my bottom lip. “And a fuckable mouth.”

It was probably the worst thing I could think of doing, but the second he brought his digit near me, I knew I had to do something. And that's why I latch my jaw around his finger and bite down as hard as I can, using my hand to punch him in the throat, too.

At the same fucking time, the door to the bathroom flies open with force, a tall man appearing from the shadows. He turns toward me and Grant, his eyes focusing on me for only a second before stalking forward, grabbing Grant by the collar and away from me.

He doesn't say a word, he just throws Grant across the room and into the door, slamming it back shut.

I stand there, frozen in place, watching this completely cryptic man toss this semi-buff dude around like a ragdoll.

Grant groans. "Ah, come on man, I'll share her. We can take turns." He brings himself to his feet. "I'm sure her pussy is..."

But my savior doesn't allow him to finish. Instead, he slides his large hand around Grant's throat, tugging him toward him. His other hand forms a fist, and within a second, it lands across Grant's stupid fucking face.

Over and over and over again.

So many times that blood ricochets with every punch. Until he finally stops and lets Grant's limp body drop to the dirty bathroom floor.

Slowly, he turns toward me, red covering his face and somehow making him look sexier than he ever has.

I finally step away from the wall, careful not to move too quickly. Not because I'm afraid, but because I don't want to startle him.

His dark gaze narrows, as if he's trying to read my mind, figure out what the fuck I must be thinking after watching him beat the shit out of this stranger who tried to force himself on me.



The only thing I'm certain of is that I want this man standing in front of me.

I have from the moment he stepped foot in this bar weeks ago.

So, I do what I do any time I see something I want, I take it.

And unlike the man lying here beaten senseless, I only force myself on willing participants. The look in this mystery man's eyes is enough to tell me exactly what I need to know.

I bridge the gap, reaching down and taking his hand in mine, studying his bloodied and swollen knuckles, and then looking up at his stern face.

I should be scared. I know I should. This is one of those deer walking into the lion's den kind of moments, but no matter how dangerous and terrifying this man in front of me is, I feel it in my gut that he wouldn't hurt me. Not unless I wanted him to. And damn do I want him to.

His lips part, like he's going to say something, probably a warning to stay away, that I'm safer that way, but I've never been the kind of girl to stray from a little danger, especially when it's this good-looking.

Instead of letting him talk his way out of this, I stand taller, reaching around his neck and dragging him down to press his lips onto mine, completely disregarding his blood-soaked face. The second our mouths touch, his resolve completely shatters, his body melting into mine like we've done this dance a million times before.

His palm spreads across my back, gripping me closer to him, our tongues gliding feverishly against each other, telling me that he might need this release as badly as I do. A second later, he wraps his arm around my waist, lifting me from the ground and pulling me to his body.

I wrap my legs around his strong torso, and run my fingers along his neck, and into his once well-kept hair.

His hands grasp my ass, which is practically out by now considering I'm wearing a short skirt.

He slams me against the wall, and I use the extra support to reach down and glide my hand over his growing erection.

He stifles a moan against my lips, pulling away and breathing heavily. “We can’t.”

I tighten my grip around his cock and stare at him. The red splatter on his cheeks only makes his dark eyes even darker. “Do you want to?”

His jaw clenches and he sighs. “Yes.”

“Then fuck me.” I give him the smallest window to back out, but he surprises me by forcing his lips onto mine and greedily kissing me.

“What about a...”

Before he can continue, I cut him off with my mouth on his.

I dig into my pocket, pulling out the handy-dandy condom I keep in case of emergencies like this. Never know when you’ll want to bone down, and getting knocked up is not something on my to-do list.

With one of his hands holding me up, we work together to unbutton his pants and wiggle them over his throbbing erection. It springs free and I nearly gasp at the size of it, quite possibly the biggest I’ve ever been with. I slide my hand down the length of it, circling up and spreading the bit of precum from the tip. Oh what I would give to drop to my knees and take him into my mouth right now, but at the rate we’re progressing, getting down to business is our main priority.

He continues kissing me, somehow multi-tasking like a mother fucker as he takes the condom I open for him and secures it in place, then drags his hand up my waist and quite literally rips my panties off of me and tosses them onto the floor next to the beaten body.

He pauses, his hand around his cock, gliding it up and down my wet and eager slit. “Are you sure?”

And that’s all it takes, ladies and gentlemen. Three fucking words to confirm consent. If this brutal as fuck man can do it,

when I'm practically begging to be fucked, any man can.

I grab hold of him and guide him toward my entrance.

He stops me from going any further. "Say it." His stare turns serious, his voice a bit gravelly.

"I'm sure."

The slightest hint of satisfaction rolls over his face. "Good girl."

Little does he know, I'm the furthest thing from it.

He positions himself to enter, slow at first, filling me with ease, until the length of him completely stuffs me full. Then he rocks his hips and thrusts me up and down on his shaft. My tits bounce, nearly freeing themselves from my revealing top.

Pleasure and pain consume me at the sheer thickness of him opening me in ways I've never felt before. I continue on this rollercoaster ride wherever it takes me.

He backs us away from the wall, and a bit of disappointment washes over me as I worry that this is about to be over all too soon. He plops my ass down onto the cold countertop and props my feet up on the edges, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me toward him, continuing to thrust through every bit of this.

When I instinctually move my legs, he grunts, grasping both of my ankles and spreading me wide.

My head tilts back, slamming into the mirror, my eyes rolling with the control he has over me.

He pivots his hips in the best ways, hitting every single nerve like he's a pro at fucking. It's when he slows and pulls out that I nearly lose all my calm.

"Fuck, man."

"Shh." He replaces his dick with his hand, sliding three digits along my slit and then shoving them inside of me. Kneeling down, he brings his face to my pussy, gliding his tongue around my clit.

“Don’t tell me to *shh*.” I rear up my foot and gently but firmly shove him away from me, hopping off the counter and turning around to face the mirror. I bend at the waist, resting my elbows in front of me and arching my ass toward him. “Come on.”

He narrows his gaze, almost in disbelief at me regaining that control. He takes his overpriced shoe and nudges each of my legs apart, dropping down between them once more to get a taste of me from behind. He rolls his tongue from the front, all the way to the back, using his hands to pry me apart with each inch he moves. He teases me with his thumbs, both on each side, caressing and massaging my hole.

I rock my body toward him, desperate to feel him fill me once more.

He obliges, standing and sparing no kindness when he shoves his cock into me with a force that drops me from my elbows.

I spread my arms across the counter to steady and pivot myself for him.

He runs his large hand along my ass, up my back, and into my hair, raking his fingers along my scalp and grabbing a fistful of my hair. He yanks my head up, but in a way that is almost all pleasure, no pain.

“Harder,” I say through gritted teeth, feeling my climax rise with each pump of his cock.

Most guys, when they hear the word harder, they think *faster*, but no, this man with no name knows *exactly* what I mean when he starts thrusting deeper and to a different tempo, sending me spiraling over the edge and into oblivion.

“That’s it,” he moans, slamming into me and blowing his own load into my pulsating hole.

My body shakes from the insane rush of pleasure, my pussy tightening around his throbbing cock as our orgasms wind down together. I lay there, against the cold counter, panting and trying to catch my breath. I close my eyes and

revel in the pure fucking bliss, knowing damn well that reality is about to set in.

Slowly, he pulls out of me, and from the sound of it, he tugs the condom off his dick and tosses it into the trash can to my left. It's his zipper I hear next, but then, something I don't expect. Him stooping behind me to blow cool air on my exposed area.

I don't dare open my eyes, hoping like hell I can keep this dream lasting for as long as possible.

He continues to surprise me by reaching up and rubbing the palm of his hand against my clit. He nips at the back of my thigh with his teeth, leaving a trail with his tongue up to my crease. He presses his lips against mine, sucking and biting and teasing me once again.

I let out a moan and arch myself in his direction, ready for whatever he's willing to give me.

How is it possible to be so incredibly fulfilled, but want even more?

*Need more.*

He slides a couple digits inside me, while keeping another rocking gently against my clit, his thumb resting near my asshole. Wasting no time, he picks up his pace, paying close attention to the way my body reacts to him, heightening my pleasure like he can read my fucking mind.

His beard bristles up against my leg and he blows more air on me, then dives back in for another taste. "Now," is all he says.

The way the vibration of his voice rattles against me, and the sheer power he has over my body, I succumb to his beautiful torment, climaxing for the second time.

I bring my hand to my mouth to suppress the whimper that threatens to leave my lips and continue to shake against his grasp.

He steadies his grip until he's certain I'm done, and pulls away, standing and washing his hands in the sink beside me.

It's then that I remember he's covered in blood. Luckily, he finger fucked me with the cleanish hand.

“Are you ambidextrous?” I ask him.

He shuts the faucet off, grabs a paper towel from the holder, dries his hands, and faces me. “What?”

I step closer, take the semi-damp thing from him and blot the blood off his cheek. “You know, can you use your left and right—”

He cuts me off. “I know what it means.”

“Oh.” I continue to help clean his face. It's the least I could do after the mind-blowing double orgasm.

He grabs my hand, stopping me in place. He stares into my eyes with those seriously deep, dark orbs of his. “I've got this.” He nods behind me, toward the door. “You should get back to work.”

I glance over my shoulder at the limp body on the floor. “What about that?”

“I'll take care of it.”

“I can help.”

“You've done enough.” His resolve softens just barely, and he brings his hand to my face, thumbing my bottom lip softly. He scans my features, and I wonder what the hell he must be thinking. But in an instant, he hardens. “This can't happen again.”

I huff and grin. “Don't worry. I'm not that kind of girl.” I drop the used towel into the trash can and turn on my heel, fully prepared to do what I always do—not get attached.

## DOMINIC



“*D*ominic, hello, are you fucking listening?” Bryant waves his tattooed hand in front of my face.

I blink and look at him, snapping myself back to this dreadful reality. “Yes, you fucking idiot.” I smack him away and adjust the cuff of my shirt, pivoting my body toward him. “Shipments are running slower. Numbers are down. Total anarchy. I get it.” I take in an annoyed breath. “Tell me something I don’t already know. What can we do to fix this mess?”

Bryant looks to Hayes. Hayes raises his brows and shrugs.

I rub my temple. “What good are you two for anyway?”

Hayes speaks up. “You don’t know what it’s like out there. The guys are scared. They don’t know which side to choose.”

I cut him off. “Then draw a line in the sand. Force their hand. If they pick Beckett, put a bullet between their eyes.”

Bryant side-eyes Hayes, clearly skeptical of my order. “You want us to kill anyone who deflects?”

“Did I stutter?”

For someone covered in ink head to toe, appearing like a total badass, Bryant sure is a fucking softie. Had I known that from the get-go, I would have thought twice about hiring him. In our line of business, there is no room for weakness. Everything about right and wrong blurs, and suddenly, you understand, it’s a dog-eat-dog kind of world out there. And if

you want to survive, to thrive, you must be more ruthless than the other guy.

That alone is why I always come out on top—why I will win this war and claim the throne that is mine for the taking.

It should have been simple. An easy transition.

Our leader was taken out, and I was supposed to be named the successor by his wife, who no longer wants to oversee the operation. The obvious choice. It's what I've spent most of my adult years working toward. I sacrificed everything for this career. Gave up having any kind of life outside of this, and never once put my needs above it. But, with so many hungry up-and-comers, it's no surprise that the normal order was challenged. Not by one, but by many. Most have been handled, but there are still a few that threaten to take what is rightfully mine.

Simon Beckett is my biggest concern.

He's a child. Barely legal drinking age, and somehow, he dares to assume he should gain control over the largest criminal enterprise on the west coast instead of me.

I know the ins and outs of our organization better than anyone, hell, possibly better than our previous leader. I was his apprentice, often leading when he would be out of town on business. People know me, respect me.

What does Beckett know other than being an arrogant, spoiled little boy? He spends most of his time driving around his Lamborghini, flaunting his money, and buying bottle service. How could he possibly be better equipped for this position than I am? His status is based on his blood connection to some of our council members, not because of his management skills.

Why would anyone in their right mind want *him* to oversee things?

“If that's what boss wants, that's what boss gets.” Hayes finally speaks up.

I tip my head at him and bring my hand up to rest against my jaw. The same hand I had buried inside that woman from



the bar. It's a shame I've cleaned up numerous bodies since then, otherwise, I might be lucky enough to have her scent still on me.

I swallow the lump in my throat and replay the event through my mind.

I was certain she would have freaked out. Absolutely convinced that nearly beating that man to death would have terrified her, but instead, she walked straight into my arms and did something not a single person has ever done before. She saw me, for the brutal and sick man I am, and she didn't run away.

I shouldn't have intervened. I should have let things play out the way they were going to, but I couldn't bring myself to sit back and watch that piece of shit objectify her the way he was. I had watched it too many times. I've spent more nights than I can count in that dive bar the last few weeks, my meager attempt to escape the chaos and think with a clear head. I witnessed countless guys try to pick her up, but not once did she give in to their demeaning ways.

I could sense her confidence, and despite wanting to step in all the other times, I knew she could handle her own. It wasn't until that douche bag followed her into the bathroom that I was certain he was about to take things too far.

And I couldn't let that happen. Not to her.

I was sure it would ruin whatever image she had of me. That she would finally fear me for the twisted man I am. But that was the furthest from what actually happened.

I should have stopped there. Let her walk out of that bathroom and go about cleaning up the mess I had made, but no. I had to lose all my control and fuck her like there was no tomorrow. Even going so far as to make her climax a second time, just because I could.

God, what I would do to bury my face in her and smother myself to death with her tight little...

"Dom, buddy. Where the fuck do you keep going?" Bryant snaps his fingers in front of me.

“I’m going to chop that fucking hand off if you put it in my face one more time,” I snap at him.

He brings it to his chest and pouts. “Dude, this is a nice hand. Come on, now.”

Hayes leans back in his chair, folding his fingers together and propping them behind his head. “I’d like to see this happen. I’m thinking machete. What about you, Dom? What would be your weapon of choice?”

Leave it to Hayes to actually daydream about maiming someone.

“You’re both fucking psychos.” Bryant glances at both of us

Hayes grins his pretty-boy grin. “Thanks, appreciate that.”

Bryant slowly takes a step backward. “I’m sleeping with one eye open tonight.”

“Just tonight?” Hayes tilts his chin.

“I hate you so much right now.” Bryant bumps into the wall behind him. “I’m going to go hide all the weapons.”

Hayes exhales dramatically. “And I’ll find more. Trust me. I’ll get creative if I have to.”

“Can you two focus a little more on winning this war instead of fucking with each other? If we lose the lead to Beckett...” I trail off, thinking of the endless scenarios that would follow if he gained ultimate control. Things are rocky enough as it is, there’s no telling how quickly we would crumble in his hands. “Trust me, it’ll be bad.”

We’re being hit hard from all directions. The east is coming at us with immense pressure, given they took out our leader. The story is still a bit unclear on what the hell happened, but the second we got wind that he was down, complete mayhem ensued. Honestly, it’s a genius plan on their behalf. Sit back and watch our empire crumble, then swoop in as the dust is settling and take full and utter power. They’d rule the two biggest markets, the east, and the west, and have a solid foothold if they wanted to push in any other direction.

My only saving grace is that their leader was taken out, too. Causing issues on both sides with who will grab onto the reins and steer away from total annihilation. I'm not sure how dire things are going on their end, but if it's anything like what we're going through, it's enough to keep them busy while I regain my authority here.

I'd like to think I'm well equipped to overcome whatever is thrown my way, but I'd rather handle one massive problem at a time than two.

Both looking more and more like my demise with each passing day.

"They're afraid of you," Bryant adds from his spot far away from us.

"Your point?" I ask him.

Before he can elaborate, the buzzer to our front door goes off.

I immediately shift to Hayes and wait for him to tell me who it is.

He fumbles with his phone, nearly dropping it. "Sorry man, had it on silent."

I narrow my gaze at him. "You're the lead point on security, Hayes. Need I remind you that if you provide no value—"

Bryant pushes the button to our gate, letting whoever it was in. "Come on up." He turns to us. "It's just take-out. Chill."

I sigh, running my hand through my hair and seriously considering why I ever took either of these idiots in.

Loyalty, that's what I remind myself.

An impossible to find trait. Unfettered, absolute, loyalty.

They may get on my nerves, do the dumbest shit ever, but never once would I question whether they had my back. And in this line of work, that is a rarity to have. I am their boss, but we are a team. A dysfunctional one, but a highly effective unit

that has managed to climb the ranks and never once question each other.

I tap my fingers across the table and check the time on my watch.

Hayes jumps from his spot and rushes over to Bryant, stealing the bags from his grasp. “What did you get, dude? I’m starving.”

“You two are always hungry.”

Like toddlers. Or a pack of wild dogs.

Bryant reaches into the sack and pulls something out. “Heads up.” He tosses the thing to me. “Chicken wrap, extra bacon, hold the onion.”

At least he’s good for something.

My stomach growls quietly but I don’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that I haven’t had lunch yet. “Thanks.”

I stroll over to the first-floor kitchen a few feet away to wash my hands. I pop open the fridge, only to realize the drinks I had him stock for me are on the second-floor kitchen. The one downfall of living in such a massive house, you forget where you leave stuff. The price you pay to maintain privacy while keeping your closest associates around. The reason we work so well as a team is because we’re practically an extension of one another. We each have our roles and we stick to them to keep things running smoothly. Well, for the most part.

It wasn’t always this way, the living together. But a few years ago, it was the obvious choice if we wanted to continue on our path to the top. It’s not like any of us had other family or friends to be concerned with the shift in dynamic. We’re all loners, but even more, we’re all aware that those types of relationships only threaten to ruin what we’ve worked hard for.

The sound of feet clobbering the stairs steals my attention, and when I turn around, Bryant is setting three glass bottles on the table.

Okay, he's good for two things.

"You were saying." I pick up where we left off prior to the interruption.

We take our spots around the large oak dining room table.

"Face time," Hayes adds.

I raise my eyebrow at him, wishing one of them would just fucking elaborate already.

Hayes bites off a chunk of his hamburger, chewing it quickly and bobbing his head as if that will somehow make him finish quicker.

"Yeah," Bryant continues, popping a fry into his mouth. "If people see you out in the field, knocking heads and enforcing shit, I think it would get them on board. A fear-induced vote."

"I knock plenty of heads," I tell them. Two today, actually.

"Discreetly. Because that's your thing, you're like a shadow. A ghost. They're afraid of the *idea* of you, not necessarily you. Give them a reason to step back in line." Bryant reaches into the take-out bag and pulls out a packet of ketchup.

I hate to change things up. To be a different version of myself. To stray from the one that has proven effective for countless years. But if I don't do *something*, I may lose everything. And I can't afford to do that.

Hayes shrugs. "It's worth a shot."

"You think this will garner support?" I look between them, reading their energy and the smallest tells they give off. I might be the boss of us, but at the end of the day, I do value their input, because it's what's gotten us this far.

"If they *see* you in action, and word spreads, there's no doubt they will either run for the hills or bow down and pledge their allegiance." Bryant pitches a pretty good case.

"You said you wanted to draw the line in the sand," Hayes reminds me.

So that's what I will do. Step out from the darkness and show everyone just how brutal and ruthless I can be.

---

Hayes and I walk side by side into the dimly lit corridor of the packaging warehouse where today's shipment is being processed.

Security pinged a potential situation, and I figured, what better time than now to test the new theory.

Tension rises the second we enter the room. Heads turn our way, eyes widen, and stare, only to avert once they realize they've been spotted. Everyone falls into line, not wanting to draw any unwanted attention to themselves. Too afraid that what they've heard about me might come true.

They recognize me, and they've heard the stories about where I go, destruction and death follow. Only usually, it's from whispers told, no one ever really witnessing it firsthand. Because no one typically makes it out alive when I show up unexpectedly.

There must be thirty of them, in rows of five or so, weighing and bagging up product, placing them in cardboard boxes to be picked up from the workers waiting to double-check and seal them off for shipping.

Armed guards stand posted on the north and south wall; rifles slung over their shoulders.

I approach the man in charge of today's outfit. A chubby fellow with thick glasses and bags under his eyes. He reeks of coffee and nicotine. His face glistens and he does his best to wipe his brow with the handkerchief from his pocket.

Hayes exchanges a few discreet words with him while I scan the group of men at work before me. Ages ranging from barely legal to mid-sixties. Body shapes and sizes vary between each of them. The only thing they have in common is the look of terror they're all trying to hide.

One man sweats a bit more than the rest, and without hearing a bit of the conversation going on behind me, I know that's the guy I came here for. I lock my gaze on him, noting the way his jaw tenses, and his hands shake.

I wonder if people can sense when the end is near? When their time is almost up?

I unbutton my fitted jacket, sliding it off my arms and folding it in half. It cost me a pretty penny, and I refuse to allow it to suffer because of a little occupational hazard. That's how you keep nice things, you take care of them. No one appreciates genuine Italian craftsmanship anymore.

I keep my stare glued to my target as I hand off my jacket and glide across the room. I stop in front of his spot and roll up each of my sleeves. "Stand," I order him.

Silent tears roll down each of his cheeks, telling me everything I need to know about him being guilty.

"Empty your pockets."

He fumbles his hands around, flipping them inside out to show me.

When each of these workers arrive, they are to put all their belongings in an allocated bin, only to collect them after they have clocked out for the day. They are searched, then granted to do their job, then checked again before leaving. It's how we keep product loss to a minimum. But sometimes, things slip through the cracks. The workers get smarter, think up new places to stash their stolen goods to smuggle them out.

"Take off your pants," I say calmly. A bit too calm, considering.

The man's bottom lip drops. "What?"

Someone calls out from behind me. "You heard him."

The man flits his gaze as if to consider he has any other alternative than to comply. He chooses wisely, gripping the waistband of his cheap denim jeans, unbuttoning and dropping them to the floor. He trembles but remains firmly in place.

“And those.” I point to his boxers, not caring that we’re in a room full of people.

“I’m sorry?”

I let out an exasperated sigh, reaching into my own waistband and pulling out one of the handguns strategically placed on my person. I grip the slide, tugging it back and loading one into the chamber.

This seems to get the man to cooperate. The second his eyes land on my weapon, he starts blubbering and whining, a bit of his piss trickling onto the concrete floor.

The men around us tense but stay in place. For good reason, because with my rising annoyance, I’d shoot anything that moved at this point just for the thrill of it.

My suspicions are confirmed when the man exposes himself. His shriveled-up cock and balls covering the few small bags taped to his upper thigh.

We had been tipped off that someone had been exceptionally fidgety in their seat tonight. This man and his stolen goods no doubt being the person of interest.

“I—I can explain.”

I perk up my brows at him. “Oh, you can?” I fold my arms across my chest, waiting for him to tell me how the product got strategically placed in his nether region.

“Well, um...”

But if there was a legitimate reason, he would have already said it by now. So, I choose to waste no more time with this pathetic excuse for a human. Before he can spit out another word, I uncross my arms, extending the one holding my gun, point it at him, and pull the trigger.

His mud-colored eyes go wide, shock rattling his features as the bullet is expelled from my gun and impaled in his forehead.

Blood splatters and his body falls back into the table behind him. A collective gasp fills the room.



I tuck the barrel into the holster on the back of my tailored suit. “Someone clean that up.”

People move in my peripheral and begin the job that I have assigned.

Making my way to the front of the group, I clear my throat to silence the mild disorder. I steal a glance at Hayes, a sadistic grin across his cheeks.

“Thievery will not be tolerated. Dishonesty. Disloyalty. Not a part of our business motto.” I turn, facing the remaining terrified faces. “The pay is generous. Isn’t it?” I tilt my head at a young man in the front row.

He avoids eye contact like I might have the power to kill him with one look. “Yes, sir.”

“I am not an unreasonable man. If needs arise, I expect you to come to me. But I will not take to this...” I wave my hand toward the scene that’s being tended to. “Treachery.”

Hayes comes to stand at my flank, as if to show his support of my words.

I continue. “If you do not agree with my ways.” I point to the door and keep my hand held in place. “If you wish to join the opposing side. Go. No one is stopping you.” I flit my gaze at them, sensing a small shift in energy.

A man from the third row moves, stepping around his line-mates and mumbling under his breath. “Fuck this shit. Beckett doesn’t...”

I don’t quite catch what he says, but it doesn’t matter either way. He crossed that line in the sand and sealed his own fate.

In one swift motion, I yank my weapon back out and plant a bullet in his dome before he can even comprehend what hit him.

His body hits the concrete with a thud, and the second the gasps from the men conclude, a pin drop could be heard from how quiet the room becomes.

I put my gun away once again. “Have I made myself clear?”

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## JUNE



*H*ave you ever been fucked so good that all you can think about is getting it again? I'm talking instead of cloud nine, you're riding the cloud dick train. Dick that makes you ache between the legs, both from the experience itself, and wanting it badly again. It turns everything you do into a potential fucking. Do the dishes? What about getting railed from behind? Take a shower? Slam me against the wall. Check the mail? How about a little exhibitionism? I wake up thinking about that thick, juicy cock, and I go to sleep wishing I could manifest it into my ravenous hole.

I swipe through the matches on my phone, none of the guys putting off the type of vibes I'm fiending for. I even up the age parameters, hoping like hell I'll come across the guy from the bar. Not that I've ever been the type to chase down a lay like that, but desperate times call for desperate measures. And just imagining the adrenaline I felt that night, laced with the insane pleasure, it has me doing nearly anything to track that thrill down again.

It's been a week. Seven days of working multiple jobs and dealing with my idiot roommates, and I haven't seen the mystery man once. Every night, I wipe the tables down and glance over at the corner booth he would usually reside in and wonder where the hell he is. Not because I caught feelings or anything like that. I'm game with keeping things strictly professional, in an X-rated kind of way. It's clear that he doesn't want to be found. He went from being in the bar a few times a week to nothing at all.

I don't even have to know his name. I'm good with anonymity.

Does he regret hooking up with me? What if he's in jail for beating up that guy?

But instead, I'll settle for trying to match with someone random and hope that it's enough to satiate my desire.

"You want to leave early?" Jack asks me. He props his elbow up on the counter. "Pretty slow and doesn't look like it's going to pick up anytime soon."

I straighten up and glance around. "I mean, you're the boss." Forty-five minutes isn't going to make or break my already depleted bank account and there's a slim to none chance that any of the people in here will tip me anyway.

"Yeah, get out of here." He nods to the kitchen area. "I can pull help from there if I need it."

"Thanks." I slide off the stool, grabbing the bottle of well vodka nearby and putting it back in its place on the shelf with its brothers and sisters.

"See you tomorrow, June." Jack tosses the rag he was using to clean the counter over his shoulder.

He's a decent man. A bit awkward when it comes to menstruation, but what guy isn't? He was kind enough to take me on when I needed another job, and he's been considerate to let me flex my hours when my other two jobs demand more of my time. This shitty dive bar is exactly that, a shit hole, but it's my favorite place to work, and trust me, I've been around the block.

Literally.

I make my way out the front door, sidestepping a couple that drunkenly walks by and almost knocks me down.

The two hang on each other, slurring gooey sweetness about loving each other.

I shake my head and turn in the direction they came from. The Haven District.

AKA, a fuck ton of bars jam-packed in a side of town where booze can be carried to and from in open containers.

Stay in the Haven, you're good to go. Leave the Haven, bye-bye alcohol.

I pull out my phone and send a quick message to my potential date for tonight, letting him know that I got off work early and can meet him sooner, rather than later.

Fingers crossed that it works out, because I'm ready to bang my last lay out of my system and hopefully get his cock out of my mind.

I could text Cora, see if she wants to hang out in the meantime, but considering I have a one-track thought process lately, I don't want to bother her just to ditch her for a dude. I'm planning on seeing her tomorrow night anyway, so I should just ride solo tonight.

"Excuse me," I tell a group of guys standing near the entrance of the bar I'm trying to get to. When they don't move, I speak up louder. "Get the fuck out of my way."

Their eyes widen and they collectively stare at me. A murmur of, "Sorry," then the shuffling of feet as they comply with my demand.

"Bitch," one of them says.

I stop in my tracks, a few different scenarios playing out in my head.

There are five of them. One of me. They're piss drunk. I'm too sober.

I could easily throat punch one or two of them before the others get involved. But then that would cause chaos, potentially ruining any chances I have of getting laid tonight. I sigh, settling for the safest option.

I grip the handle and swing the door wide, smacking it into one of them. "Oops," I say, as if it was an innocent accident. I don't bother listening to the rest of what they spit out, yet continue into the booming bar.

I weave my body through the crowd, putting those douchebags in the past and silently praying the guy I'm meeting isn't that big of a tool.

It takes me fucking forever to wiggle up to the bar, finally squeezing myself into an open section and attempting to draw the attention of the nearest bartender.

A person bumps into me from behind, sending me into a patron sitting at the bar. "Shit, I'm sorry." A legitimate accident this time.

I put my hands out to steady myself, and my victim reaches over to stop me from tumbling over completely.

"Are you okay?" His cobalt blue eyes glance up at me through his dark lashes, something so fucking familiar about them. About him.

My gaze trails down to his lips, to the freckle just barely visible above his chin.

No, it can't be. It isn't possible.

My memory flashes back to the summer before seventh grade. I was maybe twelve years old. I couldn't fathom the idea of starting junior high school without having my first kiss. I thought people would somehow be able to tell. See me as the girl who had never been kissed. In comes the sweetest, most thoughtful boy I'd ever met. We had been best friends since childhood before that, but upon telling him about my virgin lip worries, we crossed that boundary together, taking our friendship to the next level. I was infatuated. Completely in puppy love with him. That entire summer was full of sneaking out of the house, stolen smooches under the night sky, breaking into the local ice cream shop for a midnight cup of java chip, and dancing in the rain.

It was the shit you see in movies. Raw. Real. Innocent.

And it was over in the blink of an eye.

One day, we were holding hands on the rooftop of our favorite pizza shop, the next, we were saying goodbye through the window of his dad's run-down truck as it drove away.

I'll never forget that moment. Watching that stupid pickup sputter and kick up gravel and dirt with each inch it got further from me. I could feel the pull of my heart, the connection I had with him being severed the bigger the space between us grew.

He hung out the passenger window and once it became no longer safe to do, his dad pulled him inside and he pressed his hand against the back glass.

I never heard from him again. And with each passing day, my heart grew cold to the love that had been lost. I had always heard stories of heartbreak. Whispers of a pain unlike no other. But I never knew what it meant to have a broken heart until that moment. It was swift, ruthless, and unforgiving. It came with no warning, and forced itself with no regard. That was the first and last time I would ever allow myself to be vulnerable enough to feel that way. I knew the only way to overcome that horrible feeling was to flip the switch and power through. And that's exactly what I did. I got myself to the other side, and I haven't looked back since.

I hadn't even thought of him in years. Not until now, as I trace the shape of his features with my gaze, wondering if any time had passed at all.

"Cohen?" His name rolls off my tongue like a question, despite being certain that it really is him holding onto my shoulder to steady me.

His brows pull together. "J?" He calls me by the nickname he used all those years ago.

It's then that I snap out of the stupor, shaking his hand off me and standing firmly on both feet. "June."

He is not the same person I kissed on the beach at night under the stars. Because I am not the same girl who wept for days when he disappeared from her life.

That Cohen and June died almost ten years ago, and I refuse to ever resurrect those pieces of me.

It made it all that much easier when I went back to school that fall and everyone was certain I lost way more than my first kiss to that boy a few years older than me. I went from

being worried they would think I was inexperienced, to defending that I still had my virginity intact. It became a fruitless effort, and eventually, I decided I might as well embrace the girl that everyone accused me of being.

It wasn't that difficult, considering all the boys paid much more attention to me than the other girls. Not to mention, I quickly realized how damn enjoyable sex could be. Trust me, I've had my fair share of lousy experiences, but I discovered quickly just how much I liked exploring my sexuality. And as long as partners are consenting, and safety is being practiced, there's not a thing wrong with getting in touch with your wild side.

"You look good," Cohen says.

Of course I do. I have my *please tip me well* outfit on.

"You, too," I try to reply with as little intrigue as possible.

Clearly, he's still gorgeous. With that surfer boy long shaggy blonde hair and stupidly blue eyes. His features are more defined, obviously, given all the time that's passed. Despite being in the sitting position, I can tell he's taller, wider, with a healthy layer of muscle on his body making his plain navy tee hug him in the best of ways.

If we didn't have a past, I'd definitely consider putting him in the queue of prospects for my bang therapy. But we do, so I need to keep my game face on, and not let him see how rattled I am by his existence.

His gaze flicks to his glass, then to me. "Have a drink with me."

I swallow, a bit surprised by his invitation. By this whole fucking interaction. "I'm meeting someone."

"Then just until they arrive." He pauses then adds. "Please."

I fall right into his trap, unable to resist that alluring appeal. It's not like I've heard back from my date yet, and I could really, really, really use a bit of booze running through my system. Maybe he'll have better luck flagging down the



bartender than I will on my own. It's only a drink. I'm free to walk away whenever.

What's the worst that could happen? Famous last words of many, and somehow, I let them float through my head and convince me this will be totally harmless.

"Fine, but good luck getting the—"

The second his fingers raise in the air, the cheery red-faced woman glides over. "Ready for another?"

I tilt my head at him, sizing him up and wondering if he somehow developed magical powers during all these years apart.

"Not yet." He grins and focuses on me. "Whatever she's having."

Oh, right. Duh. "Bourbon. Two fingers. Neat. Something cheap."

Cohen holds out his hand to stop the woman from reaching toward the bottle she's already grabbing. "No. Give her what I'm having."

The older lady raises a brow at him. "If you say so." She pulls a bottle out from under the counter, a short but wide bottle with a golden fluid sloshing around inside.

I spot the black label, eyeing the name, my heart nearly stuttering at the recognition of the insignia.

Double Hawks Mark. Easily a thousand dollars for a bottle alone. Coming in around one hundred per shot.

We have the same kind at our shitty dive bar, just in a different shaped bottle, reserved for one very elusive and exclusive client.

"No, really, I'm good with the well stuff." I point toward the shelf of liquor behind her.

Cohen rests his hand on my forearm. "I insist. Really. It's the least I could do."

For leaving me and completely breaking my heart? Yeah. You're right. A two-hundred-dollar drink is definitely the least

you could do.

I stop resisting and pull the glass toward me after she sets it on the counter. “Thanks,” I tell her. I bring the thing to my nose to waft in the glorious aroma. Thick and strong and somehow a bit sweet.

A girl screams from behind me, almost like she’s being attacked.

Only when I turn, she’s yelling at her friend, “This is my jam.”

Cohen picks his own glass up, pivoting in his chair to face me partially. “Cheers?”

I let out a chuckle. “Yeah? What are we cheersing?”

Cohen sighs, a weird weight seeming to lift and lower on his shoulders all at once. “Is it too cliché to say ‘fate’?”

Fate—that sick bitch.

“Definitely,” I tell him. “But I have a feeling that won’t stop you.”

“You know me too well.” Cohen extends his glass. “To fate.”

At one point, I thought I did know him, but when he left and never once reached out again, he proved that theory wrong, reinforcing the belief that the only person I could count on was myself.

“To fate,” I say anyway, clinking my glass against his. “Did you know if you break eye contact during a cheers, you’ll be cursed to seven years of bad sex?”

Cohen grins, his gaze locking onto mine. “Can’t have that now, can we?”

We both take a sip of our bourbon and I pause to let the flavor wash over me. A hint of vanilla with a pinch of something else.

“Nutmeg,” Cohen tells me as though he can read my mind.

“It’s delicious.” And expensive.

He pats the empty seat next to him. “Sit.”

I pivot, glancing into the thick crowd of rowdy people. My phone still hasn't buzzed, so there's no real reason I can't join him for a little while. I sigh and comply, climbing onto the stool and settling in.

Cohen doesn't take his eyes off me, almost like he's afraid I'll disappear into thin air.

“So.” I twirl my glass and wait for him to say something, anything. Maybe apologize for disappearing from my life. But even then, what good would it do? I don't think I have it in me to forgive him anyway.

“Sorry, I'm just...” He brings his hand to his neck and rubs it. “I can't believe it's you.”

I shrug, taking another slow swig of the decadent liquid. “Surprise,” I mutter unenthusiastically.

“Tell me about you.” He snaps his fingers. “You're an actress, right?”

I chuckle and turn to him. “I was twelve when I said that.”

“Yeah, but you were so passionate about it. I was certain you'd make it happen.”

And I was certain about things, too. But time proved us both wrong.

“Nope, business major.” I omit the *drop-out* part. He doesn't need to know my struggles.

“Gross. That sounds horrible. Practical, but horrible.”

“And you? You don't exactly strike me as living out of a van, traveling the country kind of guy.”

Cohen exhales. “I guess we both missed the mark on what we wanted to be when we grew up.”

I reposition myself on my seat and prop my boots onto the metal wrung around the bottom. “What are you doing then?”

“Security.”

“What, for like the mall?” How can he afford this bourbon on that kind of salary?

Cohen shakes his head. “No, private security.”

Sweet, innocent Cohen is doing a potentially dangerous job? I find that hard to believe.

If my experience with the past Cohen has taught me anything, it’s that he’s not telling me the whole truth. Luckily for him, I’m not in the mood to pry. If he wanted me to know, he’d say whatever he isn’t saying.

Cohen slides his phone out of his pocket, pushes a sequence of buttons, then shoves it back inside. “Sorry about that, work thing.”

“Right.” This awkward small talk is getting more difficult by the moment. “How’s your dad?”

He doesn’t skip a beat. “Dead.”

“Wait, what?” Did I hear him wrong over the loud music?

“Yeah, not long after we moved.”

All those years ago?

“Christ, Co, I’m sorry.” If I knew I would have never brought him up.

Cohen picks up his glass and brings it to his lips. “It’s fine, really.”

Another lie.

He cautiously sets the cup down, his voice barely audible. “I think I was so mad at him, for...” Cohen flits his gaze over at me. “You know.” He sighs. “That it was difficult for me to be sad about it. To properly grieve him.”

Finally, a truth. One that eats away at my soul.

He shoves his wall back in place, his entire demeanor changing in an instant. “But, that’s a thing of the past. Where are you going to school?”

“Co...”

Suddenly, it's not the now version of him sitting in front of me, it's the ten-year-old boy that I met at the cemetery, picking dandelions to put on his mom's grave.

"Don't do that," he tells me.

"Do what?"

"Pretend like I didn't ruin everything."

"Hey," a new person calls out, their hand gripping my shoulder and nudging me away from Cohen.

Before my mind can fully wrap around what has happened, Cohen is on his feet. He grabs the guy by the arm, twisting it behind his back and slamming his face into the counter.

"Fuck man, what the hell," the guy calls out. "Let me go."

Cohen, his eyes wild, like nothing I remember of him, turns to me. "You know this guy?"

I squint to get a better look at the dude with the smashed face. I nod slowly, baffled by his knee-jerk reaction. "Yeah. He's my date."

"Oh." Cohen releases the guy immediately. "My bad." He smooths out the folds in his victim's shirt. "Sorry. Honest mistake."

The guy rubs his wrist and side-eyes Cohen for good reason. "Psycho." He focuses on me. "Is he your boyfriend or something? I'm not into being a third."

"No," I reassure him, despite the strange defensiveness rising. "He's an old friend. We were just catching up."

"Are you done, or should I give you a minute?"

Jason, I think his name is. I'll have to double-check my messages.

Cohen speaks up. "No, that won't be necessary." He reaches over and grabs his drink, tossing it down his hatch and leaving the empty cup on the counter. He raises his finger at the bartender. "Whatever they're having, on me. Give yourself the usual tip."

“That isn’t necessary,” Jason interjects.

The flushed lady nods and smiles. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Of course.” Cohen sidesteps Jason and plants his feet in front of me. He grips my shoulders, looking deeply into my eyes before pulling me into an unexpected hug.

I stand there like a statue, in complete disbelief of having his warm body wrapped around me; a chest locked and shoved deep inside of me rattling, threatening to break open at his touch.

Cohen presses his lips to my cheek briefly. “Enjoy yourself, J, you deserve it.”

And without even letting me gather my thoughts and form a proper response, he turns around and disappears into the crowd, my heart aching like I was back on that road ten years ago watching that old pickup drive away, never to be seen again.

“June,” Jason waves his hand in front of me.

I blink and look at him. “Jason.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Jeremy.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I knew that. Sorry.” That’s what I get for not double-checking prior to opening my mouth. “Weird night.”

“I’d say.” He points to the two open seats. “Shall we sit?”

“Sure.” I run my fingers through my hair and tuck it behind my ears, glancing over at the place Cohen vanished into.

How is it possible that with all the time that has passed, he was able to stir up so many emotions with such ease?

A strong part of me wants to hate him, because that’s how I’ve felt for a while now, but there’s also this lingering sadness, a dull ache that tells me there’s more to the story than I could even begin to imagine.

I take a long swallow of the bourbon Cohen ordered for me, noting just how strange it is that both of the men I can't seem to get off my mind drink the same damn thing. That can't be a coincidence, can it? What are the odds they know each other though? Cohen is a few years older than me, and the mystery guy that fucked me in the bathroom was easily twice my age.

“So, are you a student or...?” Jeremy picks up his bottle of cheap beer, I must have missed him ordering, tipping it back, and looking around us.

His features are soft. Attractive. But a bit boring. And if I'm being honest, I'm not sure why I swiped on him. Maybe because he looked nice. That maybe I was subconsciously seeking the direct opposite of the mystery man, in hopes that it would get him out of my system.

Whatever I was thinking, it's not working, because my mind is anywhere but on the decent guy sitting beside me.

“Yeah,” I answer him. “Well, no. I'm taking a semester off.”

“Right on.” He nods. “What are you going for?”

“Business.”

This conversation is as dry as the spot between my legs.

“Sick, I'm a business major, too.”

I grip my glass, spinning it around and realizing how pointless this is. “Listen, Ja—Jeremy.” That was almost too close. I turn to him. “You seem nice and all, but this,” I motion to the space between us. “Isn't going to work.” I down the remaining bourbon in one fell swoop.

Jeremy opens his mouth to speak but stops himself, like he's accepting his defeat.

I hop off the stool and pause. “Good luck.”

And with those parting words, I leave him behind, making my way through the crowd and out the door, not for a second regretting my decision to put a fork in tonight's quest to bang a stranger to help me forget another stranger.

It takes a couple minutes of walking to get out of The Haven, my lungs grateful to breathe in the fresh crisp night air once I'm far enough away from the chaos.

I sigh, checking my phone for the time and wishing like hell I didn't have an apartment full of roommates to go home to. I was banking on the ability to crash at my random hookups tonight, freeing me from having to deal with those idiots for at least a few hours. Maybe sleep sound somewhere else and recharge my batteries enough to get me through the weekend.

It's pathetic, really, that I dread going home, but they make living there pretty much unbearable. They're slobs. Loud. Obnoxious. Inconsiderate. It's impossible to have any level of privacy or quiet with them around. And with the way my mind is right now, I can't afford to be near that chaotic energy.

Which brings me to where I am now, a small park on the outskirts of town, peaceful enough to give me a little bit of calm in this crazy storm called life. I probably shouldn't come here this late, in the dark, considering I'm basically painting the setting for a horror movie to unfold. But I do it anyway. And I do it often. About once a week I come and sit here, alone. I drown in the serenity of it. Listen to the music that nature provides, and relish in the fact that not a single other person is around to bother me.

I sit on the same bench I've sat on many times before, and tilt my head back, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath in and out, grounding myself to the here and now.

Maybe if I can think clearly, the universe will provide me some guidance on what the hell is going on with my life.

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## JUNE



“*M*aybe she’s dead,” someone whispers.  
“Here, use this stick,” another person chimes in.

I peek through one lid, squinting through the blaring sunlight. How did I not notice that already?

A teenage girl gasps and steps back. “Sorry, we...”

I rub my eyes and sit up, stretching and yawning. “What time is it?”

The boy with the stick in his hand points at the bench I’m on. “Did you sleep out here all night?”

“No, I woke up really early to come out here and take a nap.” I stand, pulling my phone out of my pocket and pushing the touchscreen. *Great.* It’s dead. “What does it look like?”

The two of them exchange a cautious glance.

“Are you...homeless?” He says the last word like it might give him cooties.

“Do I look homeless?” I motion to my body and then at the overpriced phone in my hand.

“I mean, you slept on a bench...in a park...” He crosses his arms. “Are you on drugs?”

“Yep. The shit that makes you kill stupid ass kids that won’t tell you what time it is.” I flit my gaze toward the trail. “No one is around to hear your screams for help.”

“Tommy,” the girl tugs the boy’s arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Chill, Lizzy.” He shrugs her off and checks his smartwatch. “Ten after seven.”

“Shit,” I mutter. My shift at the diner starts in less than an hour and my likelihood of having time to take a shower beforehand is decreasing with each passing second.

How the flying fuck did I manage to sleep all night on this hard ass bench? And how was I not murdered by some weirdo who preys upon dumb girls who pass out in parks? Don’t get me wrong, I’m pretty reckless, but this takes my carelessness to a whole new level.

With all that aside, if I knew it was this easy to get some rest, I’d have brought my pillow and blanket a long time ago.

---

I shove my key into the lock, dreading the impending doom of stepping foot into my apartment. It’s half-past seven and there’s already music playing inside. Homemade rock garbage by Carter and his lame buddies. I’m all for creativity and following your dreams, but the stuff they produce sounds like raccoons were attacking them and they were using their instruments to scare them away. At first, I thought that maybe I was being overly critical, that I hated Carter too much and it was blocking my ability to listen without an overly biased ear. But no, the only people who ever pretend to enjoy the sad excuse for music are Heather, and Carter’s dirtbag friends.

The water valve to the shower shuts off, and someone fumbles around in the bathroom.

I continue on my path to my bedroom to grab my supplies and hope whoever it is hurries the hell up.

A second later, my door is shoved open, Carter standing there with his towel clinging loosely around his waist. Water beads all over his body like he didn’t bother drying off at all.

Knowing him, he probably didn't. I doubt he cleans behind his ears, let alone his balls.

I turn my nose up at the thought of his nasty man parts.

"What do you want, Carter?" I shuffle through my pile of clothes, snatching a clean tank off the top.

He leans against the frame, eyeing me up and down. "You and me." Carter flits his gaze behind him briefly, like he gives the slightest shit if someone—aka Heather—hears him. "What do you think? I have needs. You have needs." He sighs and licks his lips.

"You're disgusting if you think I would ever consider having sex with you."

"Don't be so harsh, J." Carter crosses his arms over his chest. "I know that's where you spend most of your nights. In the bed with a random stranger."

"What I do and who I do it with is none of your business." I gather my last remaining items and make my way toward him.

He stands in my path, blocking me from going any further. "Think about it."

"No. Now get the fuck out of my way before I'm late for work."

"June," Heather calls out from behind him.

And with that, he changes his demeanor and steps aside.

"Yeah?" I ask her while pushing past him.

She rubs her sleepy eyes and yawns. "I need your portion of the rent."

I stop dead in my tracks, turning to face her. "What?"

Heather tugs her brown cardigan around her tighter. "It was due a few days ago. You're late."

I blink, replaying the memory of putting my money in the same envelope I do every month, and setting it in the same spot it always goes in. "No. I paid it last week."

She sighs and shakes her head. “You must have forgot, the money wasn’t in there.” Heather pauses then adds, “You’ve been late before.”

“One fucking time, because I was sick with food poisoning.”

Carter strolls around me and goes to Heather’s side, putting his arm across her shoulders.

She shrugs him off. “Stop, you’re wet.”

“If you need me to spot you some cash,” Carter suggests.

I narrow my gaze at him, knowing damn well his klepto hands were the ones who took my rent money in the first place. Unfortunately for me, there’s no proving it. Only his word against mine, and with him wrapped around Heather’s stupid little finger, she’d never believe me over him. I’d be wasting my breath even trying.

I’ll get even with Carter, but for now, the bigger issue at hand is how am I going to come up with six hundred dollars in a day, when I barely make enough to feed myself.

“No, Carter, I’ll figure it out.” I go into the bathroom and close the door, making sure to lock it behind me.

“I need it by tomorrow to avoid the late fee,” Heather says loud enough for me to hear.

“Got it.” But do I? How in the hell will I pull this off? It was hard enough to scrape the money up the first time, let alone once again. And even if I do, there’s next month’s rent I need to scrounge up, too.

I’m working my ass off, barely having any time between jobs as it is. There has to be something I can do that pays a little better than the part-time gigs I have now.

Maybe I could ask Cora to loan me some cash, just until I get paid. She lives at home with her parents and from what she’s told me, she has a hefty nest egg she’s been nurturing since she was a kid. I hate to bring it up, but unless a grand opportunity presents itself in the next twelve hours, I’m not

sure I'll be able to come up with that kind of money that quickly.

I shouldn't have to. Mister sticky fingers out there should fess up to his crime, but I'd be better off taming a wild cheetah than getting him to take responsibility for anything he's ever done.

I'll figure it out, it's what I always do. For now, I need to focus on taking the quickest shower of my life and getting my ass to my first job of the day.

I turn the faucet, stripping down and waiting impatiently for the water to warm. But it never does. Instead, it runs cold, barely lukewarm, telling me that Carter probably used what was left of the hot water. Because why would he do anything other than ruin every aspect of my life?

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*Y*ou're late," Rosco says, not bothering to glance up from his morning paper.

"I'm sorry, sir. There was an..."

He holds up his hand to stop me. "I don't want your excuses. I want you to show up on time."

"I understand. It won't happen again." The same line I've given him a handful of other times. It's not that I mean to be such a shit employee, it's just hard to juggle closing at the bar at night and opening at a bakery the next morning.

Although, randomly sleeping in a park and dealing with an idiot roommate didn't necessarily add to my punctuality. Plus, the occasional night out with friends. Is it a crime to have a social life?

"You're right. It won't." Rosco finally looks at me, staring dead into my eyes. "You're fired."

It's as if I was punched in the gut, the wind being knocked out of me and the likelihood of me making enough money in time being stripped away completely.

I step forward, my mind half telling me that I should drop down on my knees and beg for forgiveness. “Sir, please. One more chance. I need this.”

“If you needed it you would have been here ten minutes ago instead of showing up late.” He flips his hand toward me. “Looking like that.” He exhales. “Now go, before you waste any more of my time.”

My mouth hangs open, words unable to form properly.

Could this day get any fucking worse?

I step out into the morning air, swallowing the lump in my throat and glancing both ways, wondering where the fuck I should go now. The pizza shop I work the day shift at doesn't open for a few more hours, and the bar doesn't open until this evening. It would be pointless to go home, given how badly I fucking hate that place and how the idea of spending the rest of my life in prison for murdering Carter doesn't sound too appealing either.

So, I wander, letting my feet take me west in hopes that the universe will stop being such a cruel bitch and throw me a bone for once. In only a few minutes, I pass the university I should be attending, watching the students pass between the buildings, and carry on with their college lives.

It's not that I enjoy school, because who in their right mind does, but I was working toward something. A goal. A purpose. A potential opportunity to advance myself and get the fuck out of this shit situation I'm in. But no one really prepares you for how expensive being on your own is. And trying to cover living expenses and tuition without anyone else's help, it's fucking hard.

Some people have parents, partners, scholarships, or even government assistance. Me? I have nothing other than what I'm able to provide. And boy am I spread pretty fucking thin.

To the point where I'm concerned I may have to start being a little more like Carter if I'm going to make it through these dark days.

I walk a couple more blocks, scoping out the windows for help-wanted signs in my desperate attempt to save myself from petty theft or selling drugs. Both of which I'm certain Carter does when he's not slumming it on the thrifted couch in our shared living room. Leave it to him to have his hand shoved into a criminal cookie jar.

An older man climbs off a ladder and stares up at the building. He glances over at me and smiles kindly. "You look lost." His hair is mostly salt and pepper, but nothing like my mystery guy from the other night.

Lost might be the understatement of the year. But I'm not about to tell this stranger that.

"I was just..." But instead of finishing my sentence, I blank.

The guy nods, folding his ladder and putting it over his shoulder. "I've had plenty a morning like that in my time." He tips his head toward the diner we're standing in front of. "You want a cup of coffee?" And like he can sense I'm about to protest, he adds, "On the house."

Honestly, it's not a terrible proposition. I could use a minute to catch my breath and figure out what the fuck I'm going to do next. And a free cup of coffee sounds divine. But what's the catch? People don't do nice things without expecting something in return.

Something in my gut urges me to take him up on his offer though. Like the universe might actually be throwing me that bone I had asked for.

"Yeah, that would be nice," I finally say.

The man grins and opens the door, the bell on it chiming as he holds it for me to step through. Immediately, I'm graced with the heavenly aroma of freshly baked donuts and brewed coffee. I've been in here a couple times before, but I don't recall it smelling this damn good. Maybe it's the lack of having had breakfast and the desperation of needing a little bit of caffeine in my system for this chaotic day.

Claire used to work here, part-time, before her boyfriend was gunned down in the alley next door and she packed everything up and moved back to the east coast. I hadn't known her long, she was only here a handful of months but in that time, Cora and I had become decent friends with her.

It was tragic, what happened to her man, Johnny, especially after everything Claire had gone through with her toxic as fuck ex-boyfriend prior to him. I guess the dude went psycho and tried to kill her, and ended up falling down a flight of stairs. I had only heard that story once she was gone, rumors spread around school like wildfire when not only Johnny, but a couple other students were found dead from apparent gunshot wounds in a short period.

It smelled gang-related, but common folk know better than to put their noses into mafia business unless they want to meet the same fate as the fallen.

“Do you take cream or sugar?” The old man asks me.

I shake my head and climb onto an open stool at the counter. “Black is fine, thank you.”

He points to the glass case full of bakery items. “Donut?”

“Coffee is plenty. I appreciate it.” Not to mention if I still plan on going out with Cora tonight, I have to save every penny I can to drown myself in booze.

“I insist,” he says. “Blueberry or plain?”

I try not to narrow my gaze at him, but his kindness feels incredibly unfamiliar and suspicious.

He lets out a chuckle. “I'm harmless, I promise. I've been around the block long enough to see someone in need, that's all.”

So what, he's like my fairy freaking godfather?

I soften my demeanor. “Surprise me.”

He plucks one from the cabinet and places it on a plate next to my steaming cup of coffee. He extends his hand toward me. “Bram.”



I blink at him, then let my gaze wander to the branding all around the diner, letting the puzzle pieces fall into place. “Oh.” I give him a firm shake. “You’re like *the* Bram.”

Bram rolls his eyes. “You make it sound like I’m famous.”

“Sorry, it just makes a bit more sense now.” I realize I never gave him my name. “June.” I bring the mug to my lips and inhale the boldness before taking a careful sip.

“Nice to meet you, June.” Bram grabs the towel draped over his shoulder and wipes up a bit of orange juice off the counter at the spot two seats down from me. “What has you wandering around aimlessly this morning?”

I set the cup down and spin it around. “Um, well. I just got fired.”

Bram nods like he understands completely, which makes no sense at all. “I see.”

“I’m sort of in a pinch, financially, so that definitely threw a wrench into my day. It’s not like I blame the guy, though. I was late, and it wasn’t the first time. I have two other jobs, but they don’t start until later, and I don’t exactly want to go home and deal with my roommates.” I sigh and break off a chunk of the donut this man offered me. “Which brings us to where you found me, looking for anyone hiring.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “You have three jobs?”

I bob my head and pop the chunk of donut into my mouth. “Trying to save enough to move out. At this rate though, it’s not looking great.” Especially when Carter is stealing my hard-earned rent money when no one is watching.

“That’s tough.” Bram crosses his arms. “It’s no wonder you were late. When do you sleep?”

“Here and there.” I don’t mention the random park bench from last night.

“Are you a student, too?”

I bite at my lip, a bit of shame rising up at admitting the truth. “No. I’m taking a semester off.”

Why am I telling all of this to a complete stranger?

“Sounds like you need a job that understands the lengths you’re going through to overcome this situation you’re in.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be nice?” The closest I have to that is Jack, but even then, he’s still a selfish asshole at times.

A girl about my age walks up to the register, pulling Bram’s attention to her. “Can I get a large mocha to go?”

Bram pushes a couple buttons on the machine. “Anything else? Maybe a banana nut muffin?”

The girl flits her gaze at the plate in front of me. “What’s she having?”

I put on my best salesperson face. “Blueberry old-fashioned. It’s heavenly. Ten out of ten recommend.”

“I’ll have a half dozen of those, too. To-go. Please.” She hands Bram a piece of plastic and he inserts it into the card reader.

I sit in polite silence, eating the rest of my donut and sipping my coffee while Bram completes her order. It doesn’t take him long; working around the place like he could do it with his eyes closed.

The girl leaves and he tops off my mug. “Thanks for the assist there.”

“Happy to help.” It’s the least I could do after his generosity.

“I could use a hand around here.” He refills the sugar packets in the holder near the register. “If you’re looking to replace that job you lost this morning.”

“You’re kidding.” I stare at him, utter disbelief consuming me.

“Nope. I’m totally serious. Flexible hours. You could do deliveries if you want. There are some decent tips in it. I don’t usually offer delivery but when I do, it’s pretty popular.”

Why does it sound like he’s pitching me the job instead of me selling myself on the position?

“Um, yes. Absolutely yes. Whatever you need.” I hop off the stool, damn near ready to give this man a hug for potentially saving my day. “When can I start?”

He glances over at the clock behind him. “I mean...now?” Bram focuses back on me. “Unless you’re busy.”

I let out a laugh. “Not at all.” I point to the remaining packets that need to go in the holder, shifting to see the same kind at all the tables. “You want me to fill all of those?”

Bram nods, “Yeah.”

It’s then that I notice a sort of sadness about him. Like something is missing. Something silently torturing his soul and causing his heart to ache. For such a good man, I hate that for him. Granted I’ve known him for a total of twenty minutes, but in that short time, he’s already shown me more kindness than most other people have.

I make quick work of completing my first task, shuffling around the room and restocking the napkin holders, too. “Hey, hand me that broom,” I ask him when I’ve finished, taking it and cleaning up the mess under the booth in the corner.

“Your first delivery.” He sets a bag on the counter. “Can you ride a bike?”

“Yep.”

“Good. I’ll bring it around to you.” He points for me to go out the front door.

I latch onto the bag and meet him where he told me to. My gaze is drawn to the dark alley where many have died.

Bram appears from the shadows, pushing a bicycle beside him. He shifts his attention to the dimly lit area briefly like he’s looking for a ghost.

I want to ask him about that, but I don’t want to intrude. It seems like the deaths in this alley might be more personal than the fact that it’s just beside his place of business, and we haven’t really known each other long enough for me to pry.

“This one isn’t too far.” He presses his finger against the basket on the back. “You can put the order in here.” Bram

hands me a small device. “This has the tracking on it. It’s pretty self-explanatory. Just have the customer fill out the receipt section and sign off on it. You’ll make the full tip, whether it be cash or card. You can clip it on here for hands-free while you ride.” Bram scratches his chin. “I think that’s it.”

I climb onto the seat. “And you’re not worried about me stealing your bike and credit card machine thingy?”

Bram shrugs. “I guess if you’re that desperate, you probably need it more than me. We can work out the formalities later for payroll.”

I might be a morally grey person, but I don’t think I could ever bring myself to harm this man, not when he radiates such damn goodness.

“Okay then, wish me luck.” I grip the hand brake to get a feel for it and put my feet on the pedals, taking off the direction the GPS is telling me to go.

The breeze floats across my skin, careening my black hair behind me. A newfound sense of hope lingering in my core. A feeling I’m too afraid to cling to just yet, given my history with bad luck.

I pass a couple houses I’ve gone to parties at, dodging the other people on the sidewalks and stopping at all the red lights. I enter a neighborhood I’ve never been to before, with homes much larger and more expensive than I could ever imagine.

It doesn’t take me long to get there, a feat that would have sucked majorly on foot. I slow to a stop in front of the massive home. I glance down at the GPS again to verify I’m at the right place. It’s something out of a modern architecture catalog, with its sleek edges and crisp design. Big, beautiful windows with a large balcony wrapped around the entire second floor. The landscaping is lush, but well maintained, only continuing to confirm whoever owns this place is loaded. To maintain greenery like that in this west coast heat is a challenge in itself. A tall, black metal fence goes all the way around the property, making it difficult for anyone that’s unwelcomed to step foot inside.

I approach the entry, pushing the button to ring whoever is home. I climb off the bike and fumble with the kickstand while I wait.

A buzzer sounds, and a voice comes through the speaker. “Come on up.”

A man. But I’m not at all surprised by that.

Probably some rich doctor or lawyer who decided to let their in-home chef have the morning off.

I pull the bag from the basket and make my way into this uncharted territory. The closer I get, the larger the house becomes. It’s like I’m about to crash some reality TV show or an episode of MTV Cribs.

I raise my hand to knock on the front door, the one that’s twice the size of anyone else’s.

But instead of tapping my knuckles against it, the thing swings open, revealing nothing I would have ever imagined.

It’s a man, for sure. Covered in tattoos. Not too much older than me. A smile lighting up his face.

“I’ve never seen someone so happy to get their food,” I spit out without much of a filter.

“Well, when the delivery girl looks like you...”

I narrow my gaze and tilt my head. “Uh-huh.”

He leans against the large doorframe, his white tee bunching over his ink-covered biceps.

I guess we’re both enjoying the eye fucking.

He draws his bottom lip into his mouth and slowly lets it graze against his teeth before speaking. “You want to come in? I’ll share.”

And just like that, the impossible happens, my mind rearranging files and instead of getting the mystery man or Cohen out of my head, all three of these men consume my thoughts.

In an instant, I've already daydreamed about dropping this bag of food, latching onto his decadent lips with mine, and letting him ravish me on that fancy table behind him in his foyer.

But I can't. Not because I don't want to, but because I can't afford to lose this job if I stand any chance of making enough money today to cover rent.

So instead, I sigh, holding the take-out to him. "Maybe next time."

The smile drops from his face, but not completely. "Fair enough." He grabs hold of the bag, his fingers gliding along mine. "I had to try."

Where was he twelve hours ago when I was trying to bang the older man out of my system?

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## JUNE



“Two twenty-three,” Bram says from his spot behind the counter. “Plus, your hourly.”

“What?” There must be a mistake. There’s no way I made that much in the few hours I’ve been here.

He scrolls through the little device I took with me on my deliveries. “Five bucks here, six there, another five, another...” He pauses, his eyes widening. “There we go. Your first delivery. The customer tipped you two hundred.”

“Dollars?” My mouth drops open.

“Yep.”

“That can’t be right. He must have hit the wrong button.”

Bram holds the thing out for me to see. “He put a wink face next to his signature. I’d say he knew what he was doing.”

I settle my sights on the doodle, then shift to the name. *Magnus*.

It’s oddly fitting.

“Anyway.” Bram lifts the cash box out of the register and pulls a few bills out from underneath. “You did great work today.” He holds them out to me.

I eye the cash then him. “That’s more than what you owe me.”

“Not by much.” He adds, “Consider it a welcome bonus.”

“Are you sure?” Why does this all feel way too good to be true? Did I actually get murdered on that park bench last night and now I’m living some weird lucid dream?

“Positive.” He remains totally serious.

“Thank you.” Although those two words come up massively short on how thankful I really am.

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The rest of my workday went nothing like what I hoped for.

When I woke this morning, stiff and running late, I had a hunch shit would go bad. And with the rent money situation, Carter weirdly propositioning me, the cold ass shower I rushed through, and getting fired, my worries were confirmed.

But upon meeting Bram, and having that golden opportunity present itself, I thought the universe really was helping me out for a change. Not to mention the hot piece of tattooed eye candy.

Really, it was just teasing me with the idea that I might pull this miracle off, with no chance of making that happen.

My second gig of the day fell flat. Typically, I make decent tips, but it was crickets because of some stupid construction down the street making it nearly impossible for anyone to get in or out of there. Not to mention, customers probably thought we were closed. The only people that came in were the dirty workers, who tip like shit and get their fill on grossly checking out the waitresses.

At job number three, I wasn’t at all surprised when Jack let me go two hours into my bar shift, telling me that it was a slow night, and he could handle it on his own. At first, I was mad. But he has to pay his bills, too, and if the bar isn’t making money, neither of us are getting paid. I had hoped the mystery man would show up, if not to bang me in the bathroom, but to leave a fat tip like he normally does and get me a little closer to meeting my sizable goal.



That didn't happen. And now here I am, walking into the Haven to meet Cora and drink this shitty day away.

My problems will still be there tomorrow morning, that's for sure. Tonight, I will drown my sorrows and do my best to forget them, even temporarily.

"Hey, slut," Cora greets me from her tall table. She has a round of shots and a pitcher of beer ready, almost like she can read my mind on how fucked up I'd like to get this evening.

"Where's Steff?" I ask her, glancing around the noisy place to spot her fiery redhead.

"She said she'd be here later; she has a *thing*."

I raise my eyebrows. "Oh? Is she hot?"

Cora shrugs, her blonde hair rolling in waves off her shoulders. "She's being all secretive about this one. She must like her."

"About time." I climb onto the stool beside her and grip one of the shot glasses. "I need this."

"That's what you always say." Cora takes the other in her grasp, holding it out to me.

"Bottoms up." I clink mine against hers, making sure to maintain eye contact. Can't afford a curse of bad sex over here.

I down the contents of the cheap tequila, the burn tingling down my throat and chest. I push a mug over to the pitcher for Cora to fill. "How was your week?"

We're not always the best at it, but we try to meet once a week to catch up. We've grown apart a few times before, but after what happened with the random college students being killed around here, we started valuing our friendship a bit more.

Cora and I have only known each other since freshman year, but I've considered her one of my best friends, despite only a few years having gone by. She's one of the few people that don't judge me, or at least, make it obvious that they do. She accepts me how I am, and doesn't try to change me. It

definitely helps that she has a dark sense of humor that matches mine and on occasion can drink me under the table.

It's a beautifully broken dynamic that works well for us.

"Meh." Cora fills her own mug and takes a healthy swig. She wipes her lip and continues. "You're lucky you dropped classes this semester."

Luck had nothing to do with it.

I go along with it anyway. "I bet."

"How's the roommate thing?"

I shake my head. "Terrible. The dude tried to get me to sleep with him this morning."

Cora gasps and rests her head in her hand to focus on me. "Carter did?"

"Yep." I leave out the part about him stealing my money. Or at least that I think he did.

What other explanation could there be for it? That Heather did? Or my other roommates, Tommy and Sadie. Those two pretty much only leave their room long enough to shower, go to work, or grab take-out when it arrives. They keep to themselves, and while they're not exactly the ideal roomies, they're a hell of a lot better than Carter. Honestly, Heather wouldn't be that bad if she would just get rid of that douche.

"Gross," Cora bunches up her nose. "What a pig."

I refill what I've already drank from my mug and wish there was some way to magically refill our shot glasses. My tolerance to booze has changed the last few months, and it's going to take a lot more than this to remotely have any impact.

"I got fired this morning," I say nonchalantly.

"Holy shit, J. What happened?"

"Showed up late. It was my fault." I cross my legs and reposition myself. "You know that place Claire used to work? Bram's?"

Cora shifts her stare like she's recalling a memory. "Yeah. Over by..."

She doesn't finish her sentence, but I know what she's getting at. Where those people were gunned down.

"Yeah...I got a job there."

"Damn, girl. You move fast." She climbs off her chair. "Hold that thought, this calls for celebration, or something."

Cora leaves me behind as she rushes over to the bar, finding a spot between other customers and flagging down the bartender. It doesn't take her long before she's on her way back, one glass in each hand.

"More tequila?" She shoves one of them toward me.

I gratefully accept it, noting the weight of the contents. That's definitely more than a double.

"To...new beginnings," Cora says over the loud music that starts playing.

"When one door closes, drink tequila."

Cora laughs and taps her glass against mine. "Yeah, that."

I revel in the burn that floats down my throat, inviting it to numb my senses. "You want to play pool?" I dip my head at the newly opened table.

"Um, yes." Cora grabs the pitcher of beer. "Get our mugs."

I comply with her orders and follow her over to our new spot. Our old table being quickly taken by a couple that was looking for a spot to sit.

I dig in my pocket to pull out a single dollar and get change from the machine. It's not much, but at least I can provide us with a little entertainment on my limited income.

"Who's breaking?" I ask her as I shove the four quarters into the slot and release the balls from their restraints.

"Me if I stand any chance of winning."

I smile and roll my eyes, grabbing the rack and setting it up for her. "It's only because alcohol makes me better and you

worse.”

“Mmhm. Sure.” Cora fingers the sticks on the wall, deciding on a sleek red one. She dusts the tip of it with a bit of chalk and blows the debris away. Getting into position, she lowers her body and leans over the table, causing any dude with a pair of eyes to look her way.

I climb onto a stool and wait for her to do her thing.

Cora cracks the cue ball perfectly, sending balls spiraling all over the felt table and landing one in each of the far corners. “Solids,” she announces, and then sizes up her next target. She pockets one more and misses the next, giving me a chance to catch up.

“Thought you were about to clean house on me,” I tell her when we pass.

I eye the table and quickly strategize my plan. There are three easy shots available, but those can be sunk anytime. People often lose at pool because they play the short game, not the long one. You have to be able to anticipate where the cue will land, and what you’ll do next. Failure to prepare often leads to piss poor performance. I decide on my mark, sinking it on the opposite end of the table and setting myself up perfectly for my next shot. I drop it into its home and clear one more of the stripes away. I put too much English on the cue, and it ends up in the wrong spot, setting me up for failure on my next play.

Now, my only move will be strictly defense, by placing the ball where Cora won’t have any openings and making it harder for her to advance. I tap my ball, barely moving it but technically having a legal shot.

“You bitch,” she says when she realizes I screwed her from having a decent move.

I laugh and raise my shoulders. “It was my only option.”

“My ass.”

“It’s a good one, I won’t deny that.” I smack her butt playfully on the way over to my seat. I drag my mug to my lips and drink it down while she stewes over what to do.

“You screwed me.” Cora pouts as she walks from one side of the table to the other. “Fine. I’ll do the same damn thing.” She nudges the white ball, hitting hers by a hair and putting me in a rather crappy spot.

But not crappy enough.

“Sorry, boo.” I tilt the stick toward the ceiling and jam it down, popping the ball off the table momentarily, up and over hers to crash into mine, sending it exactly where I want it to go. I lean across the edge, the stick behind my back, and softly knock my next one in, too. I clear the rest of the stripes, leaving the eight ball in the corner. I point at the pocket I’m aiming for and without hesitating, I sink it into its new home.

“You’re literally the worst.” Cora puts her hands on her hips and sighs.

I dig another dollar out of my pocket and hand it to her. “Beginner’s luck.”

She swipes it away and goes to work making change.

I slide onto my seat and gulp the beer in my glass.

A chill runs up my spine, like I’m being watched. But not in a bad way. I scan the crowd until my eyes land on him, that familiar smirk and ink-stained skin. I let out a sigh, the spot between my legs warming at just the sight of him.

He leans on his elbow against the bar, staring right at me.

“Do you know that guy?” Cora asks me.

I shake my head. “Nope, not really.”

“Looks like he knows you.” Her words slur a little.

I hop off the stool.

“Where are you going?” Cora calls out to me.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her. I point to the table. “Your turn to rack.”

I head straight toward him, not caring at all about the group of girls I have to push through that are trying to get his attention.

“Magnus.” His name rolls off my tongue like honey.

He grins wider. “You know my name.”

“Excuse me.” One of the groupies grabs at my arm.

I shake her off. “Don’t fucking touch me.” I might be intoxicated, but I will fuck a bitch up if they get too handsy.

“Rude,” she says under her breath, but not quiet enough.

I turn to her, taking in her minimal clothing choice and the thick layer of makeup on her face. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for female empowerment, but what’s happening here is sheer desperation and frankly, it’s pathetic.

“What’s rude is you practically begging for attention from someone who clearly isn’t interested in you. What is it, the bottle service you’re after? His money?” I point to a group of older men in the corner. “You’d have better luck over there, sweetheart.”

“I—I...” She frantically tries to come up with a response.

“Listen, I see girls like you every day—”

But she doesn’t let me finish. She huffs, turns on her heel, and storms away toward the bathroom.

“Feisty one,” Magnus says from behind me.

“Guess so.” I face him.

“I was talking about you, not her.” He continues leaning against the bar, his eyes not daring to look away from me. “Let me buy you a drink.”

I chuckle. “That’s not why I came over here.”

“Then why did you?” His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip, reminding me of just how badly I wanted to jump his bones earlier.

“To tell you, that you overpaid me earlier.”

A random patron bumps into me, nudging me closer to Magnus.

His hand reaches forward and lands on my waist, steadying me. His liquor-soaked breath dancing in my face.

“What are you drinking?” I step back and out of his grasp.

He picks up his cup and holds it out to me. “Here.”

I take the glass and bring it to my nose. “Hawks Mark?”  
What are the fucking chances?

“The girl knows her bourbon.” Magnus smiles, exposing those beautiful teeth of his.

How is it possible to be attracted to such a thing? There’s just something about the bubbling energy that pours out of him. There’s this darkness, this bad boy nature with all the tattoos, but then this giddy, happy layer that contradicts it all.

“You could say that.” Plus, the fact that the last two guys I’ve interacted with have drunk this same, very specific, incredibly expensive brand.

“Want one?” He raises a brow.

“Too rich for my blood.”

He holds his hand out to call for the bartender.

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

But it’s too late, he’s already ordered me a drink of the same thing he’s having.

“I insist.”

“That’s not why I came over here.” The last thing I want him to think is that I’m anything like the girls lurking around him.

There’s nothing wrong with having guys buy you drinks, but the way these chicks are going about it, it’s like they’re vultures waiting for their moment to strike.

“I know,” he says confidently.

“Do you?”

He changes the subject. “I didn’t get your name.”

“I didn’t offer it.”

Magnus beams. “Making me work for it. I like it.”

“I have to get back to my friend.”

“How about a wager?” Something wild sparks in his blue eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“Play me.” He nods where I came from. “I win, you tell me your name.”

I chuckle. “And when I win?”

“Solid choice of wording...” Magnus winks at me. “Name it. Your wish is my command.”

Oh, the endless things that I would love from this man.

I extend my hand. “You’re on.”

He grabs onto me, giving me a solid and firm shake. His touch is electric and has me ready to skip over the formalities and straight to the part where we rip each other’s clothes off.

“Your friend, does she have the same taste as you?”

It takes me a second to realize he’s referring to booze, not men.

Both of which vary from time to time.

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Cora might have more money than me, but we’re still broke college students who drink cheap alcohol.

“Very well.” Magnus signals for the bartender again. “Here,” he gives me the expensive drink he ordered for me. “I’ll meet you over there.”

I take it from him and make my way back through the crowd and to an eagerly waiting Cora.

“What the hell was that about?” she asks me the second I’m close enough. “What is that?”

“Um, so...” I hold the drink out to her. “He’s buying us a round. And he challenged me to a game of pool.”

“What’s the wager?” She takes the cup from me, sniffing the contents and sipping it. “Damn, this is smooth.”

Because it’s a hundred dollars a pour.



I glance over my shoulder at him, watching him approach. “He wins, I tell him my name.”

Cora laughs. “Seriously?” She climbs onto the chair and spins the cup around. “I am here for it.” She leans forward. “What do you get when he loses?”

I smile at her, having faith in me that I’ll beat him. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Oh, this is going to be interesting.”

“Princess.” Magnus advances, giving me my drink.

“I’m sorry, what?” I shake my head. “No.”

He reaches forward, twisting a strand of my hair around his finger. “You won’t tell me your name, what else should I call you?” He brushes his thumb against my cheek. “It’s fitting though. Don’t you think?”

“Hardly.” I glare at him through my lashes.

He turns to Cora. “Hi, princesses’ friend. I’m Magnus.”

“Cora.” She holds up her cup. “Thanks, for this. It’s delicious.”

“Of course.”

I eye the drink in my grasp. “How do I know you didn’t rooie this?”

“You don’t.” He takes it from me, pressing his lips against the rim and sipping it. “But, if I did, we’ll be drugged together.”

I shudder a sigh at his lush mouth on the glass, wishing it was pressed against my body instead.

“Shall we?” He points to the ready table.

“You in a hurry to get your ass kicked?” I grin at him and wait for his smart-ass reply I know damn well is coming.

“Cocky little shit, aren’t you?”

“You scared?” I savor the taste of the bourbon and set the glass next to Cora’s before I stride past him and pick up my pool stick.

“Never.”

And with that one word, it’s like he’s saying so much all at once. There’s a darkness about him, just hovering under the surface, and I am dying to explore it.

“Go ahead, princess.” He walks by me to get his own stick from the wall.

“You’re going to regret calling me that,” I whisper on my way around him.

“Don’t tempt me with a good time.” He plucks one from the selection and turns to watch me break.

I get into position, eyeing him for the slightest second before cracking the stick into the cue ball. It makes a thundering sound and sends balls all over the table, but none of them land in a pocket.

*Fuck.* That never happens.

Of course, when I actually need to win, I play a shit game.

I maintain my composure, going over to where Cora sits, and sipping my drink.

“What the hell, J?” she says quiet enough for only me to hear.

“It’s fine.” Although maybe the booze really is affecting my skills negatively.

Magnus raises an eyebrow at me, a stupid grin on his face like he’s eating this up. “I’ll go easy on you, princess.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” Oh wait, did I say that out loud?

He glides over to the side, sinking two solid balls back-to-back without much effort. I study the shape his ink-stained body takes with each move, wishing he’d work me like he is that table.

Magnus takes his time on the third but manages to land it, too, positioning himself perfectly for the fourth. Only, instead of knocking it in, the ball taps the edge of the pocket and bounces away from the hole. That’s what he gets for being overly confident.

His jaw tenses but he doesn't give much else away. "Your turn, princess."

His persistence with the pet name is a weak attempt at getting under my skin. It's annoying, just not enough to take away from my desire to beat him.

I analyze my options, playing through them in my mind, and coming up with the best strategy. The safest, most aggressive one I can manage.

Magnus comes up from behind me and places his hand on my waist, leaning down to whisper into my ear. "You need some help?"

I turn to look up at him, his gorgeous face only a breath away from mine. "I could ask you the same thing."

For the smallest second, it's me and him, and no one else. Not the loud music blaring in the background, or the wandering eyes of the drunk people. Not even Cora, who I know is watching us intently from her spot half-boozed up a few feet away. I'm weirdly drawn to him and I can't really explain it.

It's not like me to get hung up on a guy. Let alone three men. In a matter of a few days.

Magnus brushes his lips against my cheek. "Better do your worst, princess." He steps back, giving me space to take my shot.

And that I do.

He thought he would unravel me with his seduction, but all it did was focus me.

I sink the first ball with ease. Then the second. And the third. Each time, flicking my gaze at him. A silent reminder of who's in charge here. I float around the table, making sure to pause and think things through before I act. I pocket the fourth, noting the way he blinks from his spot sitting next to Cora, as if he's finally realizing he may have met his match.

Cora smiles like a proud mother would at watching her child win whatever it is that kids play. Or it could very well be

the copious amount of alcohol running through her veins, causing her cheeks to flush and a perma-grin to stick on her face.

I continue to clear my balls, not for a second doubting my ability. “Eightball, corner pocket.” It’s a bank shot, and a little riskier than I would usually try to manage, but I do it anyway just because I can. The black ball kerplunks into its designated pocket and I hold my breath as I watch the white one get dangerously close to falling into another.

Time slows and I wait for it to stop moving toward my sudden loss.

Magnus leans down and starts blowing on the ball dramatically.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” I grab his arm and pull him away.

“You want to talk about cheating?” He raises his brows. “That was some hoodoo shit if I’ve ever seen it.”

“I won fair and square, and you know it. Don’t be a sore loser.”

Magnus leans against the table and runs his fingers through his hair. Tattoos line the top of his hands and each digit.

I strain to make out what they are, but without him holding still, I can’t quite place them.

“I’m telling you, princess. You could make a pretty penny hustling pool.”

I point to the sign posted near the sticks, where it clearly states that monetary wagers aren’t allowed in here. Only friendly bets, like having to buy someone a beer or telling them their name.

Magnus rolls his eyes. “That doesn’t mean shit. Plenty of other places where people exchange wads of cash.”

Cora strolls over, staggering between us. “You two, are just...adorable. Here.” She shoves both of our drinks into our chests, nearly falling down in the process.

Magnus and I reach out to steady her at the same time.

“Whoa there, lightweight,” I tell her.

She leans her head on my shoulder. “I love you, Juney B.”

Magnus cocks his head sideways to look at me. “Juney B?”

I take a sip of my bourbon and pat Cora’s shoulder. “She’s drunk.”

“Am not,” Cora protests.

“Shh. There, there, sweet thing.” I notice a group of girls eyeing the pool table like they want to play. “Hey, let’s move her out of the way.”

Before I get my arm under her, Magnus takes control and steers her to the high-top we were at.

“I have a car,” he says. “I could have my driver get her home.”

“Sounds like the start to a horror flick where my best friend gets murdered and I’m the next victim.”

“You have trust issues, don’t you?”

“That obvious?” I spot the empty pitcher of beer and Cora’s equally dry glass. “Dude, did you drink all that yourself?”

She lifts her head, her eyes drooping. “I was thirsty.”

It’s no wonder she’s piss drunk.

“Cor,” I steady her to look at me. “Have you eaten today?”

She mumbles something unrecognizable.

“I need to get some food in her system, try to sober her up.”

Magnus nods. “Yeah, definitely. Pizza? We could order it from my place, there’s a good joint like a block away.”

I narrow my gaze at him.

He throws his tatted arms in the air. “Harmless, seriously. Just trying to help. You don’t even have to tell me your real name.”

I let out a breath. It's not like I don't already know where he lives. And the neighborhood is pretty respectable. What kind of friend would I be if I dropped her off at her parents' house in this condition? And bringing her to my apartment isn't in the cards, either. I wouldn't put it past Carter to try to make his move on her while she was inebriated. Fucking slimeball.

The best option is standing in front of me, six-foot-something, a total dreamboat with baby blue eyes, and that irresistible bad boy aesthetic who's actually a charming sweetheart.

"Fine," I finally say. "But I will shank you if you step out of line." It's not me that I worry about, it's Cora. If something happened to her, I'd never forgive myself.

Me on the other hand—I was born broken; nothing can break me.

"I expect no less from you." Magnus puts his arm around Cora and nudges her off the chair. "Can you walk?"

"Yep." Cora stands up straight, blinking wildly and glancing all around. "Did I hear someone say pizza?" She makes a beeline through a group of people, leaving us behind.

Magnus latches onto my hand, weaving his fingers around mine and tugging me in their wake.

It's like there's a collective gasp from the girls who were hoping to shoot their shot with him tonight. Does he realize he could have had his pick from any of the females, and probably some of the males in this bar? Why fixate on me?

I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm a hot piece of tail, but I'm nothing special in the grand scheme of things.

I follow the two of them out the front door and bask in the fresh air of being outside.

"Cora," Magnus lets go of me and stops her from going the wrong way. "Over here." He guides her gently back in the correct direction, to a waiting blacked-out SUV.

The engine roars to life the second we approach it.

“Uh, this isn’t creepy at all.” I glance between him and the vehicle. “What, are you in the mafia or something?”

Magnus laughs. “Something like that.”

He opens the back door and Cora climbs in without question.

“After you, princess,” he extends his hand for me.

I pause in front of him, peering up at his stupid gorgeous face. “I know what I want, for winning that game of pool.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “Anything.”

“Stop calling me princess.”

Magnus bunches up his nose like he’s wincing. “Anything but *that*.”

“What?”

“A car, a house, hell, a trip to the moon, but you’re not getting that.”

“You’re literally the worst.” I glare at him.

His lips turn into a grin. “And here you are, getting into an unmarked vehicle with me.”

I climb inside. “I’ve done stupider things.”

“Again, I would expect nothing less.” Magnus slides in next to me and shuts the door. “Home,” he tells the driver hidden behind a sheer wall. “Think she’s going to puke?”

I look at the beautiful blonde resting her head against the window. “I hope not.”

The sexy man sitting inches from me pulls his phone out of his pocket and pushes a few buttons. “What do you want on your pizza?”

“Pineapple,” Cora perks up and announces.

Magnus bobs his head while hovering his finger over the screen. “What else?”

“Pineapple,” she says again.

He elbows me, “What do you want?”

“Whatever you’re having.” I don’t mean for it to come out as sexual as it does, but the way his sapphire eyes meet mine, it’s enough to make a million erotic thoughts rush through my head at once.

A small part of me thinks he’s having the same damn thoughts.

We drive the short distance to the house I delivered food to this morning, only instead of going in the way I did, we go around the back, and enter through a gated area that leads to a garage under his mansion.

Yep, we’re definitely about to get murdered. But why go through the trouble of ordering us a late-night meal? Maybe it’s a ruse, or some sick game he plays before ending his victims.

Oh well, it was fun while it lasted. I guess if I’m going to die, full of expensive bourbon and greasy pizza, by his hands it doesn’t seem like a terrible way to go.

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## JUNE



“*I*’m not going to murder you.” Magnus pokes me in the ribs.

“What, you read minds now, too?”

“No, but I read people. And your cards are exposed.” He shifts in his seat. “Speaking of, you play poker?”

“Texas hold ‘em?”

“Yeah.”

I shrug. “A little bit.”

“Oh man, I’d love to take you some time. The guys wouldn’t know what hit them.”

Our SUV finally comes to a complete stop, the doors unlocking once it’s in park.

Did he just sort of ask me on a date? In the future? I don’t do dates, or the future. As friends, maybe. But nothing more. If he’s trying to make plans, I have to keep this strictly platonic. How the hell am I going to do that when he’s out here looking like he does?

He even smells sexy, with his cedar cologne and bourbon breath.

Magnus hops out the side and holds out his hand to me. “Princess.”

I smack it away and shake my sleeping friend. “Cora, wake up, we’re here.”

She sucks in a breath and glances around wildly. “Where’s here?”

“Magnus’ place. He’s going to feed and provide us shelter.”

“You make it sound like I picked up a pair of feral cats.” Magnus waits outside the door for us, his arm resting on the roof, exposing his tattooed skin.

*Friends, June. You can do this.*

My mind immediately goes to the gutter, thinking about stripping that t-shirt over his head and running my fingers down his chest, straight to unbutton his black jeans and revealing what he’s working with.

“Or maybe I have.” Magnus winks, reminding me about the whole reading people thing he mentioned.

*Whoops.*

“Wait, did someone say something about pizza?” Cora fumbles for the handle of her door, popping it open and stumbling out.

“Do you always bring home strays?” I ask Magnus while climbing out after Cora.

“Not usually, it’s actually against the HOA rules.” He steadies Cora and points her toward the entrance to his house.

*Rules were meant to be broken.*

Magnus places his hand on my lower back, guiding me, too. “Rules were meant to be broken.”

A chill runs up my spine, both from his touch and the repetition of the exact words I spoke in my head only seconds prior to his.

“Holy shit.” Cora’s mouth drops open and she turns to Magnus. “I think we’re in the wrong house.”

He chuckles and leads us through a hallway and into a massive open area. A gigantic living room, with a couch bigger than anything I’ve ever seen, and a flat-screen to match the overall theme of go-big-or-go-home.

I notice his nervous energy, almost like he's embarrassed, and become more in tune with that than the enormity of his place.

"This kitchen is..." Cora runs her finger along a giant slab of granite, or marble, I can't really tell the difference. "Any housewife's dream."

"Or househusband," I add.

"House-partner." She spins around to take it all in.

Magnus pauses next to me, his arm hovering barely against mine.

I lean into him gently and glance up at his face, all the alcohol from the night making my head spin just a bit.

Damn is he pretty, though. Like in a photoshopped kind of way.

A buzzer dings somewhere in the distance, snapping me back to reality.

"Be right back." Magnus points to Cora. "Don't let her touch any of the guns."

"Guns?" I call out after him.

Cora strolls over and plops down on one of the stools tucked under the counter. She leans her head on her hand and pats the spot next to her.

I join her, tucking her wild waves behind her ears. "You're a mess."

She smiles a toothless grin. "I know."

"What are we doing here, Cor?"

"Listen, J, if I wasn't this drunk, I'd probably be asking the same thing. But I am, and it seems like a pretty okay place to be." She pivots at the waist and looks around. "Please marry this man."

"Money isn't everything, Cora."

She turns to me, her gaze locked onto mine. "You're right, it isn't. But have you seen him? Heard him talk? Watch the

way he walks? Have you noticed how damn sweet on you he is? He's a fucking gentleman, J. Much better than all the other tool-bags you spend your time with."

"Touché."

"Yeah, yeah, you don't do relationships. Whatever. You're a lunatic if you don't at least give him a shot."

Footsteps tread against the hardwood floor, Magnus appearing a second later with two boxes in his grasp.

"That smells heavenly." Cora nearly drools at the sight of food.

"My ears were burning." Magnus plants them on the counter and goes across the kitchen to get a few plates.

"Can I help?" I offer.

"I've got it, princess. Just sit there and look pretty." He opens the door to the large refrigerator. "Water, tea, lemonade..." Magnus glances at Cora then at me. "Beer?"

"Water is fine, for both of us, thank you."

Cora side-eyes me but is more focused on pulling a slice of pizza out of the box than disagreeing with me about the drink I chose for her.

That girl needs to hydrate, not consume any more booze.

He slides the bottles across the counter toward me and claims the seat to my right. He grabs a plate, and points to the two open boxes. "Which do you want?"

"I can get my own."

"I'm aware. Would you like to decide, or should I?"

I narrow my gaze at him and reach for my plate.

"Both it is." Magnus places the largest pieces from both boxes on my plate and puts it in front of me. "That wasn't so hard."

"She hates when people do stuff for her," Cora says with a mouthful of pineapple pizza.

“I’ve noticed.” Magnus gives himself a slice of each and wipes his fingers on a napkin. “You going to eat, or do you want me to feed you, too?”

I sigh and take a bite, doing my best to hide the fact that it’s fucking delicious.

“Good girl.”

The same thing the mystery guy had said to me in the bathroom before he screwed me senseless.

What the hell is going on? Why are they all weirdly reminding me of each other? And why do I like it so much?

This isn’t going to end well. Not for me. Not for them. Not for any of us.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, the only sound aside from our chewing is faint music playing throughout the house.

“What is that?” I point to the ceiling. “That noise.”

Magnus swallows the bite in his mouth before speaking. “Instrumental. Mostly piano. You want me to change it?” He reaches for his phone.

I stop him, my hand resting on his arm. “No. It’s nice.”

“Peaceful.” His blue gaze meets mine.

“Yeah.”

Cora clears her throat. “I think I’ll leave you two to bone, now.” She hooks her thumb toward the living room. “Can I crash on the couch?”

Magnus stands, his chair scooting out behind him. “No, you can stay in one of the guest rooms.”

Of course, he would have *multiple*.

“I’ll be right back, princess.”

It’s starting to sound more like the actual name he has for me than it does a way to get under my skin. I should just tell him already, but that would mean giving him another piece of me that I can’t take back. I’m not sure if I’m ready to do that.

It's not that I have anything against admitting it to him. I mean, he already knows one of the places I work, which would make it relatively easy to locate me if he wanted to. I guess without much effort, I try to make it harder for people to find me once we've run our course. The little information I give them, the less likely they are to find my social media or track me down and attempt to stick around. I don't do long-term. I never have. And going through the trouble of blocking people repeatedly is exhausting when they refuse to stick to just being friends.

Ladies, if you want a boyfriend, act like you don't. Then they won't leave you alone.

It's some kind of weird science. They want what they can't have.

I guarantee the second I switched things up, they'd all run for the hills. I'm doing everyone involved a favor by keeping myself out of their reach.

"Miss me?" Magnus slides into the seat beside me again.

"You wish." I sip the water he had given me, glancing at the unfamiliar bottle, and setting it down.

Not at all surprised that he has fancy H<sub>2</sub>O.

"Cora is all set up, in *heaven* she says." He even uses air quotes to detail the word.

"She doesn't come from much, so she gets excited about shiny objects easily." Cora's only saving grace is that her parents are still together, meaning some stability in her life, despite their financial situation.

Her mom is a nurse, who works crazy hours at the hospital, and her dad recently got laid off from his corporate job doing who-knows-what. Their house is high stress, but it's still completely different than anything I've known.

My mom died when I was two, leaving my dad a blubbering mess, drowning his sorrows in whatever vice he could get his hands on. He wasn't a mean drunk, just a neglectful one. Home was never something I looked forward

to going to, which is funny considering my current living situation. I must be drawn to unsafe and volatile environments.

“Me, too,” Magnus says quietly. “I grew up without money, so this,” he points his slice of pizza at the room around us, “is strange to me. It’s nice and all, don’t get me wrong. But it’s weirdly uncomfortable, if that makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.” I push my plate forward, resting my napkin on top of it. I want to ask questions, figure out how he evolved into this version of himself, where his abundance came from. But I keep my mouth shut because that’s how feelings get caught. The more layers you peel back and expose, the higher the chance of connecting with someone on a deeper level.

The only way to avoid that is to keep those walls up and refuse to ever let them down.

“What about you?”

Shit, I knew this was coming, the whole him wanting to get to know me thing.

“What about me?”

“Why do you do that?” His question surprises me.

“Do what?”

“Deflect.”

“I don’t,” I lie, shifting a bit in my seat.

He rubs his finger under his chin. “You forget I can see straight through you.”

“Oh? Then tell me, what do you see?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“That, right there.” He points to what I just did. “A tell that you’re worried I might actually be on to something here. You’re blocking me out, even if it’s subconscious.”

I unfold and drop them onto my lap. “Am not.”

He stares into my eyes like he’s looking directly into my soul. “You have a tortured past that’s followed you into your

present. You don't trust anyone; you barely trust yourself. If I had to guess, I'd say because someone left you. Someone you opened up to. And that's why you refuse to ever let yourself feel that way again. It hurt. And you'd do anything to never experience that again. Even if that means keeping everyone at a distance and pushing people away."

My heart pounds wildly in my chest and I will it to stay still and not give him any more insight than he's already managed to figure out.

"I don't fault you for that." His features and voice soften. "It's commendable, really. To have the willpower to build and maintain those walls."

I don't say anything. Too afraid that would confirm what he's saying to be true. If I didn't know better, I'd wager he was speaking from experience, but maybe he's really that good at reading people.

"Not everyone will leave. Not everyone is a bad person."

"It's not you I'm worried about." I hate that I don't catch the words before they leave my mouth.

"Oh, princess. You are far from being bad."

Little does he know I've never been good a day in my life.

"You're wrong," I tell him with little conviction.

"Prove it, then."

How can I prove something that he is absolutely spot on about? Why should I let this complete stranger in when I have refused time and time again with everyone else?

"Or don't, that's okay, too." Magnus breaks eye contact, taking with him a little piece of me I didn't authorize.

What was that? The fleeting possibility of a connection hanging in the balance?

I clench my jaw, hating myself for making this so fucking difficult.

"June." I pause. "My name is June."



Magnus turns to me, bringing his hand with him to trace the side of my face.

*Fuck, what have I done?*

“June.” He tries it out on his tongue. “It’s nice to finally meet you.” He grazes his thumb against my bottom lip, tugging it softly. “I want to kiss you.”

I lean forward, not wasting any more time, and press my mouth to his. Something I wanted to do the second I saw him and only intensified with each passing moment.

Screw being friends, I want this man and I want him now.

He wraps his strong hands around my cheeks and deepens the kiss to match my intensity.

I climb off my chair and right onto his lap, straddling him and feeling just how badly he wants me, too. I sink into him, grinding my body against his growing member.

He moans into my mouth and pulls me closer, bringing his fingertips down my back and up under my shirt, his skin sparking every nerve ending in my body on fire.

I reach the hem of his tee, gripping and pulling it over his head in one swoop, only breaking contact long enough to strip him of his top, and notice that the ink covers his entire torso, too.

“Hold on, princess.” Magnus stands, backing us away from the counter, only for him to drop me on the edge of it and stay between my legs.

Our tongues dance in a frenzy of lust and passion.

He makes a path from my lips, down my neck, nibbling on my collarbone and tugging my shirt down to get a better vantage point on my nipple, freeing it before putting it between his teeth. Magnus sucks on the sensitive area and runs his hand up my thigh, dragging his thumb under the fabric of my shorts.

My body comes to life in a way I wasn’t sure I’d experience again after my last sexual encounter with the mystery man from the bar.

I unbutton my bottoms, frantic to feel him touch me with less clothes on.

“Lay back.” He grips the sides, pulling them down and over my ass along with my panties, leaving me completely exposed on the cold expensive stone.

I sit up on my elbows and watch him lick from my knee to where the faded line of last year’s tan barely remains.

“This,” he tugs on the triangle-shaped section of hair I left growing wild. “Is sexy.” Magnus swirls his tongue around it and slides over my clit.

My head and my eyes roll back at the pleasure, a moan escaping my lips.

He’s just getting started, and I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I want him inside me like yesterday.

“Magnus,” I breathe.

“Yes, princess?” He widens his tongue and dips it along my slit, taking his time to taste every bit of me that he can.

“Fuck me.”

“Patience, princess.” Magnus continues to lick and suck my entrance, even bringing a tattooed digit up to tease me that much more.

I rock my body against the single finger, wishing like hell it would turn into his cock, which must be throbbing with want by now. I ride the wave of pleasure that builds, desperate for release.

But it doesn’t come, and neither do I.

Magnus withdraws his hand and face. “Flip over.” He licks his lips, my desire all on him.

I comply, turning on the hard surface and bringing myself into the doggy position.

He grips my ass, running his thumb along the edge of my crease. “You taste better than I imagined you would.” He brings his mouth back down, hovering over my pussy and flicking his tongue against me.

I quiver at his touch, but he keeps going, sending me climbing that mountain once again.

This time, he slides not one, but two fingers inside of me, arching and rocking them back and forth.

I tighten around him, the end of this beautiful torment so very near.

But like he can sense the very moment of no return, he stops his movement and steps away. I'm about to protest, to get mad, and finish myself off, but I hear him unbuttoning his pants, and positioning a condom in place.

What a shame I didn't get to lick and suck and tease him the way he did me. Hell, I didn't even get a look.

"Off," he tells me.

I plant my hands firmly and climb down from the counter, my back still to him.

Magnus swipes the hair away from my neck, kissing the spot he cleared and stroking his cock against my ass.

I reach around, dying to grant it entry to my soaked hole. "Give it to me."

He presses on my back, leaning me forward to gain a better access point. Magnus dips his two fingers into my slit again and then replaces them with his sheathed member, filling me entirely without getting the whole thing in.

"Fuck," I moan at the fullness.

He rocks himself slowly to stretch me further.

Pain and pleasure dance dangerously between us.

We stay this way for a little while, a quiet tempo of labored breaths and soft whimpers. We're barely moving and yet I continue to climb the pleasure mountain once more.

I chase it, hoping he doesn't notice and stop me from climaxing, but he's more in tune with me than I realize, pulling out and flipping me around to face him.

“It’s not time yet,” he says against my lips. Magnus kisses me and rubs himself along me.

“You are so frustrating.”

He smiles, guiding our puzzle pieces back in place. “Now you know how you make me feel.”

I arch myself toward him and let him fill me.

His phone buzzes on the counter and he glances down at it. “Fuck.” Magnus wraps his arm around my waist, picking me up with his dick still inside me, and carrying me out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“Are you married?” My first thought blurts out of my mouth.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s a work thing.” His eyes meet mine. “I swear.”

And without another doubt, I believe him. Which is fucking strange.

Magnus presses his lips to mine and shoves us through the threshold of a room. “I wanted to make this last all night.” He lowers me onto a king-sized bed in what must be his bedroom. “I wanted to make you beg for it.”

Aren’t I already?

He pins my hands above my head with one of his, thrusting himself in and out of me. Magnus reaches up under my shirt, taking my nipple between his fingers and twisting it.

“Please,” I whimper.

He fucks me harder, deeper, bringing his face down to kiss me.

He releases me and I immediately drag my nails across his back, digging them in and pulling him closer. I widen my legs, an open invitation to give me all he has.

He grinds right up against my clit, the vibration of his body taking me higher and higher.

“I’m close,” I tell him, almost like I’m seeking the approval he’s yet to give me. Why I want it this time, I’ll never understand. Maybe I like the game he’s playing.

“I know.” Magnus wraps his hand around my neck, applying the softest pressure and then tilting my chin to look up at him. “Come for me.”

And with those three words and his steady rhythm, I climax harder than I ever have before, a moan escaping me as my pussy pulsates around him with the sweet release.

“Good girl.” He keeps his eyes trained on me, lengthening his pace and following my lead into his own orgasm. Magnus throbs inside of me, intensifying and prolonging my pleasure until we ride the wave to the end together.

I drop my arms to the side and relax into his bed. “Fuck, that was...”

Magnus grins and plants his lips on my sweaty cheek. “Incredible.”

“To say the least.”

“And to think, that could have happened this morning.” He climbs off me and strolls across the room and into another.

I notice the sound of a faucet being turned and water running.

Magnus pops his beautiful head out of the doorway. “You want a shower?”

I hop off the bed and go over to him. “Is this your subtle way of telling me I stink?”

“Far from it, princess.” He kisses my nose. “I have to run out, to do a work thing. Thought I better not go reeking of sex.”

“Oh right, you’re in the mafia.”

“Or something.” Magnus winks and goes over to the closet in the corner to grab towels. “There are clothes in here. Take whatever you want. The bed is comfortable, and if you can’t

sleep, the nightstand on the right side has a remote that will bring out the TV.”

I take in the large bathroom with a soaking tub and a shower big enough for a group of people to fit into. “Bring it out? Where is it?”

“Hidden.” Magnus steps under the running water.

“Wait, are you really leaving?” I strip the rest of my clothes off and follow him in.

He tilts his head back, letting the stream crash over his face and glisten along his tattooed skin. “I won’t be long.”

“Aren’t you worried I’ll rob you?”

Magnus chuckles and grabs my hand, pulling me closer to him. “That’s the least of my worries.” He presses our lips together briefly and rests his forehead against mine. “I do have to hurry though.” He finishes rinsing off and kisses me one last time before stepping out and drying himself off.

I crank the temperature up hotter and sit on the tiled floor, letting the water cascade over me. Cora was right, this is heaven, especially compared to the hell of a shower I had this morning. The muscles in my body relax and I savor the momentary relief they bring. This day may have started terribly, but at least it’s ending well.

And tomorrow will be another shit storm, considering I only have a little over half of the money I needed to make for rent. I’ll have to woman-up and ask Cora if she’d be willing to loan me the rest until I can pay her back. I wanted to avoid it at all costs, because then I’d have to either admit I’m bad with my finances or tell her that Carter stole the cash I had set aside. I don’t really have any other options available though, unless I find someone who wants to buy a kidney in the next twelve hours.

“Princess.” Magnus pokes his head into my steamy oasis. “Help yourself to whatever you need, in here, but don’t wander too much. I’m not hiding anything, but...well... consider it my occupational hazards.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I tell him. “But don’t worry. I’m probably going to pass out when I’m done here.”

“Okay,” he says with a sad smile. “I’ll join you soon.”

I stay in the water for longer than I probably should, but there’s no knowing when I’ll have another chance to bathe like a queen, so I bask in the glorious opportunity. I even use his fancy products, shampooing and conditioning my hair with something that smells like the angels themselves created it.

I dry off on a towel that must have been made of fluffy clouds, and moisturize with the lotion I found in the first drawer in his vanity. I peek into the closet he told me to get clothes from, my eyes widening at the size of it. I’m pretty sure my entire bedroom at my apartment could fit in there.

Rows of white, black, and grey tee-shirts hang on one side, with various shades of dark jeans under them. I open a drawer to find his boxers, and another with socks. It’s the next one where I locate a few pairs of sweatpants. I pull the first from the top and slip into them, grabbing a white shirt and putting that on, too. Hanging my towel on a hook in the bathroom, I finish and shut the light off.

His room is cozy, in a dark and neat kind of way. Lots of similar colors to those in his closet, but with a splash of green from a plant here or there. I climb into his plush bed and wiggle myself under the covers, only to realize I forgot to turn the bedroom light off. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has some nearby button or clapper for that, but considering he isn’t here to ask, I get up and settle for the switch near the door.

It only takes a second before I’m back in bed, letting out a breath and sinking into the high thread count sheets.

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*I* fell asleep hard, without much effort, only waking once when a warm body snuggled in behind me.

He was a little wet, like he had taken another shower, but because I was out of it, I didn’t put too much thought into it,

just melted into his embrace and conked back out.

I squint through my achy eyes and feel around the now empty bed. Light pours in through the window, telling me that it must be morning, or afternoon for all I know. I reach for my phone, but it's not there. I must have left it in the kitchen during our sex-capades.

Is Cora awake? She must be wondering where the hell we are, given how wasted she was last night. With the headache I have, she's probably in worse shape than I am.

I sit up on my elbows and blink a few times to clear up my vision, settling my sights on the tall glass of water sitting on the nightstand with a couple pills. I scoot over and down them both gratefully, and sigh at how thoughtful this seemingly hard exterior man is. I guess that saying really is true, don't judge a book by its cover. Graphic designers and marketing teams might think otherwise.

I snatch the small fuzzy throw blanket on the edge of the bed and put it over my shoulders, making my way to the door. I crack it open as quietly as possible, and peek out into the hallway.

For all I know, she could be behind any of those closed doors, and the one thing Magnus told me was not to wander around. I at least owe him that courtesy after how generous he's been to me.

I step into the hallway and try not to make a sound. If I listen carefully, maybe I can hear her rustling around and find her that way. Perhaps she's even waiting for me downstairs where we had pizza last night. I'll check there first prior to playing detective up here.

I tiptoe across the rug-covered floor and stop near the steps when I hear chatter float up to me.

"You have to stop ordering so much take out," a man, definitely not Magnus, says.

"Dude, it's fine. I have it under control. I'm not an idiot," Magnus tells the person.



“Do you?” The guy sighs. “These are trying times, Bryant. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

Bryant? Killed? Who and what the fuck are they talking about? He’s going to get offed by a delivery person?

I lean against the wall, clinging to the blanket wrapped around me. I try to listen closely and figure out what it is I’ve stepped into.

“Hayes agrees with me, you’re being careless.”

Who’s Hayes? And Bryant? And the dude who seems to be in charge? And why does his voice sound familiar?

I rack my brain, trying to place it to a memory to figure out how I know it. I deal with so many people daily that it could literally be anyone.

My foot slips and I don’t catch it in time before it thuds against the step.

“What the fuck was that?”

Bryant speaks up. “It’s fine, don’t wor—”

A golden blond-haired man appears around the corner in a flash, his hands out in front of him, a gun pointed directly at me. His expression shifts from a tight hardness to a softer look with bunched brows. “June?”

“Don’t shoot her.” Magnus rushes into my line of sight, skidding to a stop beside the man with a gun. “Wait, you know her?” He flits his gaze between us.

“Who’s June?” The other man calls out on his way over.

“Cohen?” I say to the man who I thought I once knew.

“Cohen?” Magnus continues to feign confusion.

The third guy finally steps around the corner and my stomach drops at the sight of him.

“Fuck.” The word slips out of both of our mouths at the same time.

It’s him, the mystery man from the bar, who fucked me so good I couldn’t think straight for days, standing next to the

tattooed hottie who kept me on the brink of orgasm last night, and the boy who stole my first kiss many, many years ago.

I shift my gaze to each of them and pinch my arm, hoping it'll wake me up from this strange fucking nightmare I just stepped into.

But it doesn't work, and I'm left here, gawking at these three completely gorgeous men who appear to be riddled with the same level of bewilderment I'm experiencing.

To add to it, a door creaks open behind me, sending Cohen's arms a little higher to aim at his new target.

"June?" Cora whispers.

"Down here," I respond while stepping forward to place my hand on Cohen's wrist. "Please don't shoot my best friend."

His blue eyes lock onto mine and it's like he's desperately trying to silently communicate to me, to tell me what the fuck is happening here. But like I had sensed it the other night when I ran into him, he's changed. Both of us have. The gun in his possession, confirming that the sweet boy from my childhood is no more.

Cohen tucks the thing into his waistband before Cora steps into view, joining us for this awkward reunion of sorts.

"I'm dying for some coffee," she says.

Oh, what choice words to use, Cor.

"Yeah, let's do that." I weave my fingers around hers, thankful for the escape from whatever reality this is.

"Hi." She smiles and nods politely at the men, she has no idea who they are.

I can't exactly admit I know them any better either. Other than the fact that I've slept with two of them and made out with the other. Okay, maybe I know them a tiny bit.

"We have coffee," Magnus offers.

"June," Cora whines. "Let's stay." She drops my hand and holds it out to Cohen. "Hi, I'm Cora."

Cohen takes a breath in, glancing at me and the rest of the guys. “Cohen Hayes.”

“And you are,” she turns to the mystery man with the sexy as hell salt and pepper beard.

His jaw tenses and if I’m certain of anything, it’s that he wishes she would just disappear.

Magnus smacks his shoulder. “Ah, come on Dom, don’t be rude.”

Dom?

“Bryant,” Dom sneers at Magnus.

“I thought your name was Magnus,” I add.

Magnus winks at me. “Magnus *Bryant*.”

Bryant. Hayes. I get it now. This whole time, they were using their last names.

“Dominic.” Mr. McDreamy shakes Cora’s hand and focuses on me. “*June*, a word please.”

My memory flashes to that night in the bar. The blood splatter all over his face. The danger, the adrenaline spiking through my veins that fueled me to step forward and boldly press myself against him in what was probably the best decision I’ve ever made.

But that was then, and this is now. And whatever this is, is way more than I bargained for.

“Sorry,” I mutter, latching onto Cora again. “We have to go...do a thing.” I slide the blanket off my shoulders and hand it to Magnus. “Thanks, um, for...you know.”

“Wait, don’t you—” Magnus calls out as I pull Cora around him and make our way into the large open main floor.

I spot my phone, snatching it and looking for a way out. “Where the fuck is the door?”

“Uh, J, are you okay?” Cora follows me anyway.

The men mumble things, but I don’t bother to try to listen to them. The only thing on my mind is getting the hell out of

here.

I recall Magnus disappearing to grab the pizza last night, and decide to go that direction, sighing when I spot the front door. The same one he stood and offered to share the take-out I had delivered to him.

I pull Cora with me through the massive entrance, hurrying down the steps and stopping at that stupid gate. “Fuck.” I turn back to the house but before I can ask to be granted exit, the thing buzzes and cracks open.

I don’t know which of them let me out, but I’m fucking grateful for it either way.

For a second, I thought I was going to have to go in there and have the most awkward conversation of my life.

“Dude, I am way too hungover to be rushing around like this.” Cora wiggles out of my grasp once we round the corner and are out of sight. “What the hell is going on? And what are you wearing?”

I glance down at the stolen sweatpants and t-shirt, laughing at how baggie they are on me. “I’ll explain everything, just come on.”

Hopefully, the walk to Bram’s will give me enough time to figure it out myself.

## MAGNUS



“*W*hat the fuck was that?” Dom raises his voice at me.

Which is never a good sign. Actually, with Dom, the raising or lowering are both equally bad news. Luckily for me, we have a strict *no killing each other* rule in the house.

Once I step outside though, that’s another story.

“Um, that was June.” I walk away from him and into the kitchen to refill my coffee. “And her friend Cora.” I stir some sugar into my cup. “Nice girl.”

“You let them *into* the house?” Dom follows me in, Hayes right on his tail, shadowing him in the weirdest way.

He’s got a *I want to kill you, too* look on his face that’s creeping me out a bit.

“It’s fine. Everything is fine. Why are you freaking out?” I bring the cup to my lips and take a drink.

Dominic’s big brown eyes widen. “Did you forget we’re in the middle of a fucking war?”

“A *fucking* war, that sounds fun.”

He exhales, clearly not appreciating my humor, but how could he with that stick shoved so far up his ass.

“Yes, Dom, I get it. But seriously, I was careful.” I point to Hayes. “How do you know her?”

And thank fuck he did, because I wouldn’t have put it past him to put a bullet in her and her friend just for being in our

home. I should have probably thought that one through, but I didn't expect them to arrive prior to her leaving, especially after the mess we made last night. Me and the guys, not me and June. That clean-up should have taken longer than it did. Our crew is getting it down to a science with the latest increase in casualties.

If I thought June had trust issues, Hayes would give her a run for her money. Sometimes I wonder if I'll wake up to him strangling me to death.

Psycho little shit.

Which is hilarious, because everyone thinks *I'm* the intimidating one, having most of my body covered in tattoos. Nope, it's the sweet, pretty surfer boy you have to worry about. Don't underestimate any of us though, our body counts are nothing to be proud of. But in our line of work, it comes with the territory. We've all seen more death than the inside of a funeral home.

Cohen shifts his attention to Dom. "You seemed pretty familiar with her, too."

Great, the girl of my dreams has already caught the attention of these two knuckleheads.

Which isn't all that surprising, given we share an exquisite taste for the finer things in life.

"It doesn't matter." Dom places his hand on the counter. "I forbid any of us from seeing her again."

I set my mug down and do my best to settle the rage building inside of me. "You can't do that."

Dom flares his nostrils. "I just did."

I shrug, trying to make light of the situation. "Well, I override your order."

He tilts his head and stares at me. "Hayes."

"Yes?"

Obedient lap dog, that one.

“If Bryant here so much as reaches out to June, I want you to put a bullet in her head.” Dom doesn’t take his eyes off me in his attempt to confirm just how serious he is. “None of us, and I repeat *none*, are to have any contact with her.” He turns to Hayes with that same intense look. “That goes for you, too.” He runs his hand through his hair, which is something he only does when his emotions are heightened. “Otherwise, that girl will be the end of us.”

But the thing about me, why they keep me around—aside from my handsome exterior, obviously—is because I can read people, and Dom...he’s fucking bluffing.

Whatever his experience with June is, he wants her as bad as Cohen and I both do.

He’s not wrong though, she very well could be the end of us.

Dom shoves a pizza box across the counter toward me. “And clean this fucking mess up.”

My gaze settles on the edge of the counter, where I pressed my face into her warm, tight, decadent pussy and tasted her sweet lust. If I would have known how short-lived that moment would have been, I would have stopped and savored her even more.

Hayes appears at my side, his eyes boring into me. “Did you fuck her?”

Oh, did I ever. And what I wouldn’t give to do it again. And again. And again.

If I keeled over with my cock buried inside her, I’d die a happy man.

“I’d never kiss and tell.” I reach for the box, but he grabs my wrist, turning it over and yanking me toward him.

“So help me god, I will—”

Dom steps between us, practically sandwiching himself in the small space. “Enough.”

Hayes, with his murderous stare, releases me.

“See. You’re proving my point right here.” Dom plants his palm on both of our chests and pushes us away from one another. “This is pathetic, over a girl, really?”

He knows damn well this isn’t *any* girl. It’s *the* girl.

I knew it the second I saw her, my heart practically leaping out of my chest to get closer to her. And it was confirmed that evening, watching her across the bar, simply existing. I wanted her. But more importantly, I needed her, like she was some lost limb, a piece of me that I could no longer live without. That I didn’t know I required until she stepped into my path. I could sense her soul—the darkness and the light dancing painfully as one, matching mine.

Love at first sight is a foolish sentiment until you experience it yourself. The way our lips melded perfectly together has me convinced I’ve kissed them in another life. That they belonged to me. And I would stop at nothing to make them mine once again.

Nothing will prevent that from happening.

Not Dominic. Not Hayes. Not a goddamn war.

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*W*e ride in silence to a warehouse on the outskirts of town. Dom in the front with the driver, me and Hayes on separate ends of the back seat, both peering out the window in an attempt to not have to look at each other.

I lean forward to readjust the pistol strapped to my ankle, one of the few weapons strategically placed around my body. A person can never be too prepared in times like these.

Our mission should be simple—interrogate and eliminate.

In a typical situation like this, we wouldn’t *all* need to be present. But with the war we’re currently waging, the only people we can really count on are each other.

Funny, considering the budding tension between us.



Hayes and I will stand guard, and Dom will have a chat with the rival member. Once he's sure he's got all he can get out of him, we finish the job and have a clean-up crew come in.

Easy peasy. Same shit different day.

Our main goal is to gain input on Beckett's attempt to claim control over our organization in our quest to eliminate him completely.

Why don't we just kill him, you might ask?

The exact reason he doesn't off us. We're smart. We've all been around the block long enough to have protection wider than what you see on the surface and we know how to wiggle around the grey areas and stay safe. There's this unspoken agreement about public executions, too, meaning waltzing up into a bar and shooting each other is off-limits.

We're ruthless, but we have some level of decency.

We have cops in our pockets and enough power to evade most trouble, except for a few things.

That's where the balance of our little trio comes in handy. I read people, and being able to suss out threats comes naturally to me. Hayes is strategy and lead of security, always keeping us in the loop on the latest and greatest new weaponry. And Dom, he's the brains of the entire operation, the level-headed one that terrifies every person he walks past because of his constant resting bitch face and the stories of how brutal he is.

We're a team, but Dom typically calls the shots, making him the one in charge. And to be honest, that's fine with me. I don't want that type of responsibility. Nor would I have any clue what the fuck to do with it if I did. Although, him attempting to tell me who I can date might be stepping on my toes a bit.

Since knowing either of these guys, which has been a long time, none of us have had a relationship longer than a few wild nights in the sack. Up until now, that's been working well. There's been no room for anything more. Our lifestyles are

dangerous and to bring someone into that would be selfish. But what if for once I want to be greedy.

Am I a fool for desiring a human connection that lasts more than a quick fuck?

With the uncertainty of this war we're in, I don't want to meet my maker without having pursued the aching in my chest to be with this woman.

But what if chasing this phantom feeling ends up bringing her into something she can't escape, and she meets a fate so many others have fallen to?

Maybe I should listen to Dom. Stay away. If not for me, but to keep her out of harm's way. If I care about her the way I think I do, I owe her that.

Will Dom and Cohen both be able to keep their distance though?

Our driver pulls into a narrow section between the industrial buildings behind a modest four-door sedan and cuts the engine.

Cohen and I hop out of the vehicle and draw our guns.

He points his weapon toward the side. "You check in, I'll check out."

I nod and go right to work on my task. One thing is for sure, we're all damn good at playing our parts, even if there is shit going on between us. That's how we've managed to advance ourselves the way we have and why we will win this war and gain control of the west coast sector. Staying alive is just an added bonus. Or a curse, depending on what way you look at it.

I keep one hand on my weapon and use the other to open the door to the building we've arrived at.

Two pistols greet me, trained right at my chest.

"Just you three?" I enter, not giving too much attention to the guns. I've had enough of them pointed at me to not sweat like most people would. It's not like they're a threat anyway; they're only doing their job.

“Yes, sir,” the taller one with a shaky hand says.

*Nerves.* It’s what’s going to get kids like him killed over.

He doesn’t appear much over the age of twenty, and clearly in over his head on his choice of occupation.

Most of us are, in the beginning. But then the weak are thinned out, either by a bullet in the head, a knife in the back, or simply biting off more than you could chew and crawling home with your tail tucked between your legs. That’s when the true colors are shown, and you commit yourself for life, or hope like hell you can make a clean exit.

These two guarding our hostage look like they’re still in the trial period of figuring out which direction they’ll take.

I do a quick, but thorough sweep of the contents of the building, checking behind containers and in any potential hiding spots. All points of entry are sealed, aside from the unlocked door I came in moments prior. I steady my gaze on the man tied to the chair, the single bulb above him swinging gently and casting a glow around the bloodied area.

His eyes focus on me, the vessels in them broken. His brow is split open and seeping a steady trickle of red that has dripped down the side of his face.

I approach and verify his restraints are tight.

The man sucks in a breath and attempts to spit on me, but I shift my body and avoid his pathetic effort, the gob landing on the concrete floor near my shoe.

A triple knock sounds on the metal side of the building—a signal from Cohen that the coast is clear.

I walk a few feet over, indicating from my end that we’re good to go, too.

“You’re excused,” I tell the guards, noting the way the one stays quiet and avoids eye contact with me.

It could very well be nothing but intimidation, but there’s *something* off about him.

“You,” I point at him.

He stops and glances from his co-worker to me. “Yes?”

It’s a damn good thing he’s talking to me and not Dom or Cohen. The lack of using the term *sir* would have been enough to end him right there. I’m all for respect, but those two are a bit extreme with their demands. This kid could easily be nervous and forget the formality of ranks.

I stroll over, stopping only a foot away. “Your name?”

“Frankie.”

The taller guy clears his throat and nudges him, his eyes bulging a bit as if he’s trying to communicate via telepathy.

“Oh, Frankie, *sir*. Sorry.” He blushes, something anyone else would deem embarrassment, but to me, it’s different. Almost like he’s faking the shame to cover his ass.

The door creaks open and I glance behind me to spot Cohen and Dom making their way inside. Cohen with his gun in hand, trained forward but low, ready to strike at a slight notice. Dom with his resting bitch face intact, practically gliding across the floor. That dude is deadly, but with an elegant grace.

“Leave,” Dom tells all of us. He pulls a shiny pair of brass knuckles out of his pocket and slides them in place.

I focus back on Frankie, my internal meter scanning him once more.

He takes Dom’s demand as a saving grace from whatever I was going to ask him next and goes straight toward the door.

Cohen and I follow them out, watching them intently while they climb into their burgundy car and drive away.

“What was that all about?” Cohen asks me.

“I’m not sure. Had a weird vibe.” One that I couldn’t quite pinpoint, especially with my shortened interrogation.

But we have more pressing issues at hand, and Dom needs to do his own questioning if we want to get in and out of here without one of Beckett’s teams coming after us. Beckett doesn’t exactly take kindly to us kidnapping and torturing his

men, but we do what we have to do to advance the likelihood of our win. These aren't really the type of situations you can dawdle in.

"Should we call it?" Cohen's gaze skims the close proximity.

"We should be fine."

"Should?"

"I don't fucking know, man. Christ. It was a *vibe* for fucks sake."

"Isn't that your specialty? To recognize threats?"

It could be very possible that I'm off my game. The tension between us boiling up and over into my professional life. The fact that I can't get June off my mind is not helping one bit at all. Separating the idea of her moaning my name and identifying if a couple of nervous kids are a risk or not is more difficult than I thought it would be.

I hate when Dom is actually right about shit.

Hardly any time has passed at all and I'm already slipping up at work.

A work that consumes my entire life and could easily determine if I live to see another day.

"It's nothing we can't handle." I straighten my posture and keep my eyes trained around us. My hand eagerly rests against my gun.

A scream pierces through the building and out to us.

Dom doing what he's best at, inflicting pain on people. It's no wonder he's a fucking natural in our professional world. He was bred to take control, to lead, to dominate. Half the time though, the dude really just needs a hug. He puts up a hell of a front, but he's as broken as the rest of us. Unlike everyone else, I notice it, given my specific expertise. He'd never admit it, and I'd never bring it up. He might have a hidden soft side, but I'm not the one to go poking around on that one.

Cohen glances over at me out of the corner of his eye. “You going to listen to him?”

“The fuck you talking about?” Although I know exactly what he means.

Cohen exhales. “Don’t make me say her name. Not here.”

There’s a piece to the puzzle I’m missing. A concern for her safety unlike anything I’ve ever seen from Cohen. On the outside, he’s the sweet and innocent one, but at the end of the day, he’s probably the deadliest out of us. The sleeper that everyone underestimates. Which makes him a great asset and one hell of a flight risk.

“Why does it matter?” I’m well aware he cares but I want to hear it from him.

“Because I don’t want to have to kill her.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“What makes you so fucking sure?” His jaw clenches, continuing to give away all his raging emotions.

Another scream from inside the building, then Dominic’s low laughter.

That sick fuck is enjoying himself, which in turn will hopefully reduce the stress at home.

“You already gave yourself away. A dozen times. I think you forget who you’re talking to right now. Even the simple statement of, *I don’t want to have to kill her*. When the fuck do you ever not *want* to kill someone?”

Cohen’s nostrils flare, and for a second, I worry he’ll shoot me just to end this conversation, but he keeps his arm lowered, his finger off the trigger.

I shouldn’t, but I continue. “You won’t hurt her, and neither will Dom.”

“Stay away from her.”

“I’m not going to hurt her either.”

“That’s not what I said. I said to stay away from her.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.” I turn to face him. “But why? Who is she to you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“It is when you make it my business.” I sigh and run my hand through my hair. “You and Dom think you own me. Control me. Get to call the shots. Get to dictate who I fuck.”

Cohen’s expression hardens. “You will *not* use that tone with her.”

“Yeah? And what are you going to do about it? You going to stop me? I was already all up in that sweet...sweet...”

But before I can finish pushing Hayes’ June button, he raises his arm, pointing his gun directly at me.

I stare down the barrel, a wicked grin forming on my face at having pushed him this far. “Do it, I dare you.” Hell, he’d be doing me a fucking favor. What’s the point anymore if all I am is some puppet in a game that’s out of my control? If I can’t even pursue one damn thing I want, then why go on? If I’m going to go out, I’d rather it be at Hayes’ hand than anyone else’s.

Hayes steadies his grip, and pulls the trigger on his exhale.

Like a coward, I flinch, closing my eyes and letting the loud vibration rattle through me. A slight wind passes my ear along with a cracking sound, then the brief groan of a person and a thud on the ground.

I peer through my lids at Cohen as he shoves past me to examine the lifeless body.

“Holy fuck, I thought you were going to kill me.” I chuckle despite the humor of the actual dead person nearby.

That’s when I notice the blur of a figure come around the side of the building. My muscles go into autopilot and retrieve my weapon, aiming it, and eliminating the target in one fell swoop.

“Two more, coming from the east.” Cohen rushes over, pressing his back against mine.

“And the west.”

“Protect the entrance, at all costs.”

“At all costs,” I confirm.

We’re stormed on both ends, more armed men running toward us in haste. My breathing steadies as the call of duty settles over me, knowing that other than Dom, I wouldn’t want anyone else with me than Hayes. He might be a total lunatic, but so am I, and we work well together. Almost like we’re one extension of the other, a deadly duo that even freaks me out from time to time to time.

We move gracefully, removing threat by threat, dodging bullets, and circling our way through this attack. The bodies keep coming, one by one, along with the reverberation of gunfire, filling the night sky with a smoky haze and the scent of gunpowder and death.

“Fuck,” Cohen shouts.

I take my eyes off the incoming men for a second to see the tiny blip of blood on his upper arm.

“Bastard nicked me.”

“You good?” I drop the magazine and reload quickly, not wanting to waste even a moment of time.

“I’ll be better when I kill the asshole.” Cohen shoves off from the spot and goes straight into the line of fire, emptying every single round into the man who shot him. He presses the release and shoves in more ammunition, turning it on the next victim in his rampage.

I drop two more, the herd thinning and retreating from where they came from.

“You think you can kill *us*?” Cohen shouts, spit flying from his mouth. “You’ll have to try harder than that.”

I rush to his flank, facing the opposite way of him to keep all our viewpoints covered.



Bodies litter the ground; blood splattered all over. A sight I'm all too familiar with. One that *should* bother me but doesn't. I'm well aware of how fucked up that is. Nothing I can do about it now other than embrace the darkness that has consumed me from within.

"We had to try," a voice calls out from behind me.

"Come out and face me like a man," Cohen calls back.

A shape appears in front of me. I flit my gaze to see one in front of Cohen, too.

The two dumbass kids that were guarding our hostage. They must have been working for Beckett this whole time, playing the role of double agent. What a foolish errand he had them on.

They stroll closer, taking their time, almost like they know they're walking into their demise.

"Why?" I ask the dude heading in my direction. The taller, more nervous of the two. The other was obvious with his disobedience, this kid though, gave me a different vibe altogether. Guilty for sure, with something else underlying.

"We had to." He keeps his gun to his side; his arm slack against him.

"Who cares why?" Cohen wastes no time, pulling the trigger and dropping the guy approaching him.

Frankie, I think is his name, muffles a cry.

Cohen continues forward and pops two more bullets in him, ending the poor sucker's life.

The kid in front of me flinches with each round. "I had no choice." His eyes water with tears ready to be shed.

"You could have come to us," I tell him, my gun still aimed at his chest. "We could have figured something out."

"I—I..." he struggles to find his words.

Anxiety, fear, and pure regret bubble out of him. He's aware he screwed up, that he picked the wrong side. That he

knows his chances of survival are slim to none. Because if it's not us, it'll be Beckett that ends him.

"You're getting soft." Cohen pushes past me, moving quicker than I have time to react, planting a bullet in the kid's chest, and one in his head for safe measure.

"Seriously?" Wide-eyed, I exhale. "You're such an asshole sometimes."

"Like I care what you think." Cohen walks a few feet to another body, nudging it with his foot to verify it's dead. He shifts his gaze around the quiet lot and settles on me. "Isn't it your job to anticipate this?"

"I told you it was nothing we couldn't handle."

And handle we did. Over a dozen bodies, their life force draining out and staining the ground around them.

Cohen pokes the wound on his arm. "I got fucking shot."

"It's just a flesh wound. Don't be such a baby."

The door to the building we were guarding creaks open. "What are you idiots doing?" Dom steps through, surveying the mess we made. "You two sure do know how to throw a party, don't you?"

I nod toward where he came from. "What about you? You have any fun?"

"Not as much as you did." Dom walks over to our SUV, leaning against the top of it and peering inside. "Really? Our driver?" He sighs and pulls his phone out of his suit pants pocket, turning to face us. "One of you move him while I call this in."

Hayes and I extend our fists, using our other hands as a table to rock-paper-scissors who gets to play clean-up duty. I throw paper; Hayes throws rock, only adding to how pissed off he is at me.

Whatever. Maybe if he'd grow up and learn how to communicate like a fucking adult, I'd be more considerate to the weird claim he's staked on June. But until then, she's fair game, and I will stop at nothing to make her mine.

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## JUNE



“*I* still can’t believe you slept with both of them,” Cora whispers from her spot at the bar. “Okay, no, I totally can. What I can’t believe is that they know each other. That they *live* with each other.” She pauses, her eyes going wide. “What if it’s a father son type situation. I would *so* not put it past you.”

I roll my eyes and dry off a glass, setting it in its respective home next to the other cups.

“Old-fashioned and a *whatever is on draft*,” a round-faced waitress barks off a table’s order.

“We have six beers on draft.” I point to the selection.

“They said to surprise them.”

“What am I, a fucking magician?” I pluck a sugar cube from the tray and swipe the bottle of bitters to get started on the first of the two. It doesn’t take me long until I finish, topping it with an orange slice and reaching for a mug. I decide on pouring them a Floki, mainly because it’s my personal favorite out of our collection. An international pilsner with a crisp hop flavor and well-balanced sweetness. A solid crowd pleaser for most palates.

And if there are any complaints, they can fuck off, considering they gave me nothing to go off of to help sway my decision.

I set the drinks on her tray and go to work cleaning up the small mess I made, preparing for the next order.

“Have you heard from them?” Cora reaches over and plucks a cherry out of the little holder.

I narrow my eyes at her. “You’re going to get me fired.”

Cora grins. “I’m the least of your worries, babe.”

She’s totally right. There are countless reasons why my employment should be terminated, specifically the brutal beating and the wild sex in the bathroom. Not exactly going to be winning employee of the month anytime soon.

“No. I haven’t,” I answer her.

“It’s been what, a week?”

“Mmhm.” Six days to be more precise.

And as much as I try, as hard as I push the thought of each of them away, they play on a steady loop in my head, not seeming to fade one damn bit.

It’s annoying, really. I haven’t thought this much about one man, let alone three, since...ever. Even years ago, when Cohen left me, it was this sad overwhelming loss I couldn’t comprehend. Now, it’s an untamed lust for a trio of guys who I can’t have. Because how the hell would I ever choose? I can’t pick just one, and I wouldn’t want to anyway. I don’t do long-term. That much is certain. So, I do what I do best, I move forward, move on, and push them into my past where they belong.

*Best* is a loose term, given I’m struggling to have a single thought without any of them in it.

“You know where they live.” Cora rests her chin on her hands, her elbows propped up on the counter.

“And they know where I work.”

“True, but maybe they’re waiting on *you* to make a move since you barged out of there like a madwoman.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

She smiles. “Let me live vicariously through you, please.”

The older man at the end of the bar clears his throat. "I'll be seeing ya, June." He pulls out his wallet, rifling through his bills until he finds the one he's looking for. "Keep the change."

"Thanks, have a good night." I smile politely and wait for him to walk away before going over to his spot.

"Damn, he left a twenty."

"Is that good or bad?" Cora asks me.

"He only owed seven-fifty for his drink."

I close out his bill on the register, make change, and hand Cora ten of it, pocketing the rest. "That makes one-forty that I owe you."

"You can wait until you have it all to pay me back."

I shake my head. "Makes me feel like I'm making progress if I do it this way." Not to mention, I don't trust that Carter won't break into my room and steal my money if I stash it in there. I don't exactly like to walk around with too much on me in case I get mugged. One can never be too sure. After losing what I did and having to scramble to recoup it, I can't afford to take any other unnecessary risks.

I hated having to ask Cora for a loan; the sooner I get the balance squared away the better. She's my friend, and I know she cares, but there's this weird, unsettling feeling about being in someone's debt that I can't seem to shake. I've gone my whole life without asking anyone for a damn thing, I don't want to start now.

Getting Carter to admit to taking my money is still on my to-do list, but I have more pressing matters. He'll get what's coming to him sooner or later if it's the last thing I do.

"When does your shift end?" Cora swirls the straw around the remnants of her vodka and diet.

I glance at the clock. "Another hour or so, depends on if it picks up at all."

She swivels around in her seat. "Not looking promising."

I scan the dying crowd, the likelihood of making more money tonight dwindling with each passing minute. Thank god for tippers like the last one. He was my ideal patron. Quiet, keeps to himself, doesn't eye-fuck me in an overly creepy way, and leaves me more than his spare change.

"I'll meet you there if you want to go ahead. I probably won't be much longer." I wipe the counter in front of Cora and take the almost empty cup from her. The only remains are the last few ice cubes that melted into a gross mess of soda flavored water with a hint of booze.

"Are you sure? I don't mind waiting." Cora hops off her chair at the first sign of me giving her approval to leave.

"No sense in both of us being stuck here." I swat at her with my towel. "Go before I change my mind."

The waitress from earlier approaches. "Booth six wants another round."

I glance at her nametag, never quite registering what the hell it is every time she pops up. Granted, she's only been here a week, you'd think I'd remember it by now. "Same thing?"

Jane nods. "Yep. And could I get a seltzer for the guy in the corner?"

My gaze darts across the room to the man she's referring to. An unfamiliar face, although that's not at all surprising around here. We have a handful of regulars, but typically there is a *type* that comes into this establishment. Random couples, rowdy college kids, the old grumpy men who like to sit at the counter, and the exception of the sexy as hell silver fox who fucked me silly in the bathroom.

This guy is none of those. Middle-aged. Not terrible to look at but nothing eye-catching. Very plain. But with an ex-cop vibe about him. Simple clothing, a dark t-shirt with a black jacket over it. No labels. A close haircut and a put-together without much effort aesthetic. He's alone which isn't a big deal, but he hasn't once checked his phone or gotten out a book or occupied his time more than sitting there, sipping his

drink at a snail's pace. He's in a bar. Drinking carbonated water.

It just doesn't fit.

But who am I to judge?

I make all three drinks and set them on Jane's tray, ignoring the watchful gaze of the questionable man and chalking it up to him checking me out like all the other straight dudes in here. Maybe I remind him of someone. Or there's the possibility that he's not looking my way at all, and I'm a little too self-absorbed for my own good. Whatever it is, it doesn't concern me. I'm not interested, nor do I have any room to even consider it anyway. I've got my mind full of three other men at the moment, and my failed attempt at banging the first one out of my system led to a complete and massive fail on my behalf.

If I'm going to shake my lust for them, I'm going to have to do it without climbing onto another cock.

Three is enough. I can't begin to imagine any more.

Jack lifts the partition and steps behind the bar with me. "Clean up and you can go. Things are getting pretty slow."

I knew that was coming. This place is a ghost town lately with the opening of a couple bars nearby. Popping nightlife is all the craze, and most investors have tailored their businesses to suit the booming college crowd. Jack hasn't adapted to the newest fads, meaning his old-fashioned tavern-style place with a beat-up jukebox in the corner isn't cutting it anymore. People want craft beer and artesian platters, but Jack refuses to succumb to the trends, insisting that going against the grain will eventually be the new thing.

He could easily get a few other beers on tap, hire an indie live band to come play, and serve some tacos and people would flock in to throw their cash around. It's not like I'm a business major or anything and have any formal education on how to properly adjust to the changing times.

Silly me.



I do as he asks, wiping down the counter and tidying up our station, making sure all the bottles have found their way back to their spots. Once I'm confident it looks better than when I arrived, I toss my towel into the bin with the other dirty ones.

"You want me to start a load of laundry?" I point to the nearly full crate.

"No, I'll have Jane get it before she leaves."

"Okay. Anything else you want me to do?"

"That'll do, June, that'll do."

"See you tomorrow night," I tell him while making my way to the customer side of the counter.

Jane waves at me from the booth in the corner she's clearing. The one my mystery man had staked claim to for weeks on end. Now he's less of a mystery and gone forever. I almost wish I could turn back time and enjoy those moments again when we were nothing more than a server and a customer. A bit of sexual tension between us in those few word interactions.

I make my way out the door, side-stepping an older couple that is entering Jack's place. "Excuse me." I force a customer service smile and continue on my path.

The night air is cool and refreshing, a welcomed change from the thick mustiness of the bar. Bright lights illuminate the sidewalk, leading me to my destination.

A tickling chill runs up my spine, a strange unsteady feeling coursing over me.

I turn, glancing behind me and studying the people going to and from, trying to find anything peculiar. Cars scurry by, one pulling into a parking spot a few buildings down, another across the street. I'm being paranoid, but why? I've walked through here more times than I can count; why am I suddenly tuning in to some strange sensation?

Maybe I'm hyper-fixating; my mind playing tricks on me in its weak attempt to distract me from all the issues popping

up in my life. That must be it. Because what else could it be? Someone following me? For what reason?

I shake it off and go the rest of the way into the Haven, spotting the place I'm supposed to meet Cora at for our night out together. I cross the street between two cars and dart into the bar without taking another look around. If someone really was trailing me, they're going to have to wait me out because I don't plan on leaving anytime soon.

I scan the crowd, my sights settling on the beautiful blonde chatting with a guy near the bathrooms. Her body language is telling me she's not interested, but his is showing that he's not quite ready to give up. Guys really can be oblivious at times.

I push through until I'm beside her, sliding my hand around her waist. "Hey, honey. Sorry, I'm late." I kiss her cheek and focus on the newly puzzled guy. "Thanks for keeping my girl company while I finished up at work."

He blinks a few times as if he can rid me from his vision if he tries hard enough. "Wait, you're..."

I cut him off. "In a committed relationship?" I nod and slap his shoulder. "Afraid so, bud. You'll have to try picking up a different chick tonight."

"I—I didn't realize." The rather boring guy struggles to find the words to say.

"Honest mistake." I grab her left hand and rub my thumb along her ring finger. "I really need to wife this one up."

The man takes a swig of his beer and steps away. "I guess so."

Once he's out of sight, Cora can no longer hold in her laugh. "That was incredible. You're my favorite human on the entire planet. He had me cornered for ten minutes telling me about his fantasy football league."

I wink at her and position the straw of her drink to have a sip. "Your taste in alcohol is really a deal-breaker though, sweetheart. Maybe I'll have to throw you back to the wolves."

“You wouldn’t.” She weaves her arm around mine and pulls me toward the bar. “Let’s get you something a little stronger, my hero. It’s the least I could do after you pretended to be my girlfriend.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” And with the monetary exchange, it’s almost like I’m her hooker, too.

Cora orders us each a double of tequila, our go-to to get wasted, and a pitcher of Floki.

“You going to pace yourself tonight or black out on me again?”

“You going to flirt with another tattooed hottie and make me the third wheel?” Cora grins and hands me the two tall shot glasses.

“Those days are behind me, I’m going celibate.”

Cora narrows her gaze and rolls her eyes. “Fat chance. Hell is likely to freeze over first.”

“You have no faith in me.” I slide onto a stool and set our drinks on the table, shoving one in her direction.

“Oh, I do. Just not in that department. Especially with those three on your radar.” She picks up the glass, holding it out in front of her. “To all of June’s sexy admirers. May she leave some for the rest of us.”

“I am not cheersing to that.”

“You will, and you’ll like it.” Cora reaches over and raises my arm for me, clinking the two shots together. “Down the hatch, girlfriend.”

I tip it back and swallow the golden liquid—the burn of it lacing down my chest and into my belly, spreading out through my body. Cheap, but efficient. Nothing at all like the stuff Dominic, Cohen, and Magnus drink. Now the strange coincidence makes sense, considering they know each other in such an intimate way.

*Roommates.* If I didn’t see it for myself, I’d never believe it. Those three couldn’t be any more different than they already are. Dominic, the salt-and-pepper man who could

easily kill someone with just one stare. He's serious and a total enigma. Magnus, the inked baddie with such a bubbly personality. Adorable with a hint of darkness about him. And Cohen, my blast from the past. Handsome surfer boy wielding a handgun and a darkness about him that is nothing like what I remember.

What the hell was that about anyway?

Never in a million years would I have imagined Cohen that way. Protective, sure, but not with a weapon. Not with something so...deadly. His sights were trained on me, ready to shoot first and maybe bother with questions later. The Cohen I remember was soft and gentle, and kissed me with such caution like I might break if he was too rough.

Cora sighs, resting her head in her hands. "Which one are you daydreaming about? The hot older dude? What was his name again?"

"Dominic."

"God, it's so fitting." She releases her hold on herself and drags an empty mug over to fill it with beer. "Wonder where I can find a trio of men that sexy?"

"You do realize they're not actually mine, right?" It's like Cora has made up this imaginary universe where I'm dating all three of these dudes.

"Shh. You're ruining my fantasy." Cora slides my full drink.

I take it gratefully and down half of it in one swig, muffling the burp that rises.

"Ladylike."

"You know me." I should have been born a dude, between my manners and insane sex drive, I can pretty much out drink and fuck any guy. Which makes for one hell of a first impression, not to mention the last, considering I don't stick around long.

"I was thinking..." Cora raises her brow, the figurative light bulb going off over her head.

“Yeah?” I glance around the noisy place and then focus on her.

“What if, when we finish with this,” she points to what’s left of the pitcher. “We go next door.”

She leaves out the last bit, but I know exactly what she’s alluding to. “To the Fox Hole?”

Cora presses her palms together and brings them close to her chest. “Please, please, please.” She even goes as far as jutting out her bottom lip.

I sigh and lean back in my chair. “I am not drunk enough for this.”

Her green eyes go wide. “Really? We can go?”

I shake my head. “How could I ever deprive you, especially when you pout like that?”

“You’re the best.” She reaches across the table and squeezes my forearm.

“That’s debatable.” I down my beer, while saying a silent prayer to the universe to lift my high tolerance and let me feel a little bit of a buzz.

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*T*he Fox Hole is packed, just as I expected. Loud music blares and bodies become one on the massive dance floor.

Cora practically squeals when we enter the place, making any reservations I had about coming in here go away. To see her smile, be happy, it’s enough to get me to do nearly anything. She’s a hell of a good friend, and accompanying her to dance her little heart out is the least I could do. We’ve been there for each other through some dark times, so it only makes sense to let some light in for once.

“I’ll get us drinks,” Cora yells over the chaotic noise.

“You sure?” I shove my hand into my pocket. “I can pay for this round.”

But before I can give her the twenty I pull out, she takes off toward the bar, leaving me standing here looking like I’m talking to myself.

The song ends, another one picking up where it left off. The throng of people jump to the beat, the DJ doing his best to pump up the crowd.

I mentally prepare myself to join them. To become one of the many thrusting myself like a wild person.

I’ll fuck a stranger in a bathroom, but dancing in public is what throws me for a loop.

It’s not that I don’t enjoy it, either thing actually, I just prefer to be inebriated when I’m doing it. The fact that I always seem to make questionable choices when I get drunk enough to dance is why it happens on a more selective basis.

Cora reappears beside me, two of our usual in her grasp. “Here.”

“To bad decisions.” I clink mine against hers, keeping eye contact with her the whole time.

We down them and leave the empty glasses on the nearby table with other discarded drinkware.

Cora weaves her fingers around mine and tugs me toward the gathering of tipsy folk.

My head swims, the alcohol finally starting to take effect. An alternate cool and warm feeling taking over me in the best way. Like a temporary weight is lifted from my shoulders, the worries of my life being carried away on a train that will hit me full force with a hangover tomorrow morning. But for now, I’ll embrace the freedom and the carelessness it provides.

With each step, the choice to go out on the dance floor evolves more into my decision rather than Cora’s. Or maybe it’s just the liquor doing the talking. Either way, I’m here for it.

I shove my phone into the pocket of my tight black jeans and hope that no one steals it. The concern should be higher,

but my mind is doing that thing I asked for—caring less. I slide in behind Cora, fitting into a small gap around a bunch of other people.

The EDM beat fades and a Cardi B song comes on. Cora's eyes light up and she beams, her body shifting provocatively from side to side. She grabs my hands and pulls me closer, giggling and grinning the entire time.

We get lost in the sound, in each other, in forgetting the world exists outside this dance floor. Two best friends allowing all their troubles to be ignored for the shortest blip in time.

Another song, then another, until we're out of breath and blending in with every single other person shaking their bodies in an attempt to free their minds. A few girls join us, and we take turns spinning circles around each other. It's strange and wonderful how easy it is to make friends when you're drunk. People you would never imagine you'd get along with, yet are shaking your hips in tune together.

And let's not mention how it's much more common in the bathroom. Girls are psycho, me included, but throw us in a confined space with too much booze running through our veins and a full bladder, and we'll be sharing stories and braiding one another's hair in minutes, ganging up on some guy Chad who wronged Elizabeth over in the third stall.

Given my typical closed-off nature, it's nice to let myself fall victim to the typical ways of women. Especially with how temporary it is. There are no long-term promises in the bathroom of some dance club. No obligations to stay in contact. Just you and a stranger, a good time, and the ability to walk away and not think twice about looking back.

I'm grateful for Cora, but she's all I need and more than I'm prepared to commit to.

I'm not even sure how it happened, us lasting longer than one drunken night, but if I'm going to stick around for anyone, it's going to be her.

“I’m going to get us some water,” I tell her over the music. I might be wasted, but I’m not a complete idiot. From the sheen covering our skin and the panting breaths, we could use a little hydration.

She nods and continues dancing, her energy bubbling out of her. Cora and a short brunette take each other’s hands and bounce up and down to the hip-hop blasting through the speakers.

I wiggle through the crowd, glancing behind me to see if there are any identifying people to remember to find my way back to her. The one downfall of splitting up in a place like this is figuring out how to get back to your person.

The intoxicated version of me shrugs it off and reminds me that I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.

I make a beeline for the bathroom before heading to the bar for water. The line isn’t too long, but it’s still out the door.

Men pop in and out of theirs, and for a split second, I consider going in there instead to relieve myself.

I decide to eavesdrop on the conversation in front of me instead.

“He’s so hot.” The taller of the two girls grips the short blonde’s arm, nearly dragging her down as she stumbles against the wall, her words slurring.

“Yeah, but so are *you*.”

“Um, you both are,” I blurt out, because how dare they think any less of themselves because of some man.

“Oh my god, shut up, that is *so* sweet.” The tall one reels me in, quite literally, pulling me by the arm over to her. “What’s your name? I’m Faith, and this is Sav. Short for Savannah, obvs.”

The line moves and we take a few steps closer to the door.

“I’m June.”

“June,” Sav gasps. “Are you a Gemini?” She latches onto me to hold me at an arm’s length. “Wait, don’t tell me.”



Faith brings her thumb and finger to her chin, her eyes narrowing to examine me. “I’m not getting twin vibes. Not completely. I bet Pisces.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I’m a Cancer.”

Sav widens her stare. “You know the FBI ranked Cancer’s as the most dangerous of all the zodiac.”

“Is that true?” I let out a laugh and step out of the way of a girl coming from the bathroom. With her exit, we’re able to go inside and escape the loud area.

“Yep,” she lowers her voice to accommodate the quiet but still muffled space. “You’re probably a Slytherin, too. I’m a Hufflepuff if you can’t tell. Capricorn to a T.”

Faith nods obediently, going along with everything Sav is saying. These two are best buds and it shows.

“Here.” Sav opens her clutch and digs around for a moment, pulling out a partially transparent stone. She shoves it into my hand. “I’d sage that the first chance you get, but keep it on you.”

I eye the glistening blue thing and admire its soft and milky appearance. “What is it?”

“Moonstone, silly. Your birthstone. It’ll bring you balance, clarity, and help amplify your Cancer traits.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Even my dangerous ones?”

A stall opens and Faith latches onto Sav and tugs her toward it, the two of them disappearing inside, full of giggles.

A girl with a bright red dress confidently strolls out of the next one and makes her way to the sink.

I shove the shiny thing in my pocket and go in to relieve myself. I hurry in an attempt to recoup some of the time lost from standing in line. Cora is either totally fine, dancing her heart out, or is worried, wondering what is taking me so long. I’m going to assume the former.

The second I stand from the toilet, my head spins, reminding me how much alcohol I’ve consumed tonight. I

accept the fuzz with welcomed arms, ready to intensify it with another round. If I know my friend, she's probably done for the night—shimmying to the beat of her new form of intoxicant. For me though, I need something a bit stronger.

I exit my stall, giving another female the opportunity to tinkle. Washing my hands, I glance behind me at where my bathroom friends had gone in together and consider whether I should tell them bye. I decide against it, knowing this territory doesn't have set rules and the chances of them already forgetting who I am being high.

The music assaults me when I exit the bathroom, a loud thumping in my ears. I go straight to the bar, moving easily around the tipsy people going to and from.

A handsome bartender approaches. "What can I get you?" He continues to shake the drink in the tumbler between his hands.

"Two bottles of water and a double of well vodka."

He glances at the stamp on my hand and nods. "Anything else?"

"No. Thank you." A little common courtesy goes a long way in a situation like this. Too many drunk inconsiderate assholes disrespect servers all the time. Being one myself, I do my best not to be on the giving end of that rudeness.

The guy strolls out of sight, and I take the opportunity to scan the crowd and try to find Cora.

"Here you go." He plants the waters on the counter and a glass of golden liquor.

"What's this?" I ask him, knowing I'm not that drunk. Vodka is definitely a clear liquid.

He flips his head in the other direction. "Some dude covered your tab. Said to tell you you're too pretty to be drinking well."

"Who was it?" I strain to look down the counter at the faces littering the area.

“Didn’t catch his name.” He walks away without another word, helping a customer a few seats down from me.

I sigh, not having a clue who would have bought this for me. I pick up the glass, bringing the thing to my lips and taking a sniff.

What I sort of expected to be bourbon, is actually tequila, throwing out the idea that it could have been Dominic, Cohen, or Magnus, considering that’s their signature drink. Is this just a completely random patron who decided to be nice? What are the chances of that happening? Especially when the few people I call my friends tell me I’m not exactly approachable with the constant resting bitch face. I guess they didn’t approach me, though, they used the bartender to play middleman. But why not wave, say hi, or at least give me some opportunity to say thank you.

I take a sip, swirling the booze around in my mouth and letting the warmth flow through me. It’s not a fierce burn like the cheap stuff Cora and I shoot, instead it’s smooth and steady, a note of citrus in it. It’s good, that’s for sure. But way out of my price range.

And probably something I’ll never have the privilege of drinking again, unless, obviously, I somehow come into a bunch of money. Which doesn’t seem at all likely with the way my life is going.

I drink the rest of the tequila, hating that I have to down it so quickly. I’d rather sit here and appreciate it a bit more, but my friend is alone and intoxicated, and probably in need of the water I promised her.

Sober me would have put more thought into who treated me to such a specialty but drunk me is ready to get back out on that dance floor.

I stand a little taller on my way back in my attempt to peer over the crowd and spot Cora’s blonde hair. I scan the yellow shades, coming up empty, until I do a double-take. I was looking for a single white female with maybe some other girls around her, but nope, Cora has managed to secure a man as her dance partner this time.

*Atta girl.*

I weave through the bodies with ease, finding gaps to wiggle through and make my way to Cora. “Here, drink this.”

She twists the cap off, downing the entire contents of the small bottle of water in one motion. “Thanks.” Cora wipes at her lip, not missing a beat the whole time.

I do the same, pointing at the dude grinding up against her when I’m finished. “Who’s that?”

She shrugs, a smirk on her face.

I shake my head and chuckle. She’s clearly been hanging around me too much, my bad habits are rubbing off on her.

“Hey,” one of the short, dark-haired girls we made friends with yells into my ear. “Want me to take your empties? I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Yeah, sure, thank you.”

“Thanks,” Cora chimes in, immediately going back to her partner.

With my newly freed hands and the high of the alcohol settling in, I join them, swaying my body without any care who might be watching. We stay like this for the rest of the song, then another, until time has lost all meaning and I’m not sure how long we’ve been like this.

“Does he look like Damon Salvatore or am I really that drunk?” Cora whisper screams into my ear.

I slow my rhythm and squint my eyes to get a better view of him as he approaches.

He grins when he slides past me, grabbing my hips and settling his body against mine.

Am I dreaming or is the bad boy doppelganger grinding up on me?

I turn to face him, continuing to move to the beat. “Um, hi.”

“Hi.” His dark gaze leaves a hot trail from my eyes to my lips, flicking down to my breasts and back up to my eyes again. He’s decked out from head to toe in designer clothing, and reeks of expensive booze and cologne. Tequila to be exact.

It immediately sets my Spidey-senses off, alerting me to something I’m not sure of yet. Between his intoxicating stare and the alcohol flowing through my veins, I can’t tell if it’s a bad or good feeling that’s consuming me.

I want to ask him his name. To see if he’s in any way connected to the three men I can’t get off my mind. To confirm he’s not a fourth roommate in the weird lust triangle that is my life. But if he’s not, I don’t want to exchange any more information than I have to.

Instead, I spin myself back around and face Cora.

Her eyes are closed, her arm reached over her head and wrapped around the dude behind her neck. Their bodies sway to the beat. His fingers resting against her waist, rocking in tune with her.

“You are something else, June.” the Damon guy mutters.

It takes me longer than I’m proud to admit to notice that I never told him my name. I flip to face him once more. “Who are you?”

He licks his lips, tugging the bottom one with his pearly white teeth. “Just a man, dancing with a girl.”

There’s an evil glint in his eye, and don’t get me wrong, usually I’m a fucking sucker for danger, but this, this is something else.

“I asked you a question,” I say through gritted teeth.

“And I gave you an answer.” He reaches up, running his thumb along the side of my face and cupping my chin. “I see what they see in you.”

I shake him off, his touch having the opposite effect that he wants. Or maybe the correct one after all. “Who?”

“You know who, June.” He winks and twirls a strand of my black hair, still keeping to the steady thump of the blaring

music.

“Is this supposed to intimidate me or something?” I grab his hand, dropping it and putting mine on his shoulder, moving to the melody.

He reaches for my waist, pulling me closer. “You don’t find me threatening?”

“Not at all.” I tend to go head-on into the fire any chance I get. My soul is called to the darkness.

“And that is why...” He leans in, his warm cheek pressed against mine, his breath lingering on my skin. “One way or another. You will be mine.”

The song stops, my heart with it, the lights going off in a flash and the heat of his touch being replaced by the sweaty air filling the dance floor. The next tune comes on, along with the strobes illuminating the sheen-covered faces of the crowd. My hand hovers where his body once was; now it is nowhere to be found. Gone quicker than he arrived, leaving me with a pounding in my chest that could only mean one thing.

Things are about to get even more interesting.

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## JUNE



Cora and I close out the bar, along with a crap ton of other people, including her random dude.

We all funnel out onto the sidewalk to say our goodbyes. Dozens of bodies go in each direction, leaving a few stragglers behind.

“You sure you’re okay?” Cora hugs me tightly and almost falls over when she lets go.

“I could ask you the same.” I narrow my gaze at the guy waiting patiently for her. “You hurt a hair on her head, and I’ll find you Liam Neeson style and end you.”

The seemingly plain but attractive guy holds his hands up. “Drunk doesn’t mean consent.”

Maybe he’s not so bad. But it could be a front to convince me otherwise. Or maybe I’m being paranoid, and a little overprotective of my friend.

Their ride pulls up in front of the bar and he points to it. “This is us.”

Cora steadies herself to face me. “You have one coming?”

“I’ll order one when I get outside the Haven. Rates are cheaper.” I point to a few buildings down where the Haven ends, knowing damn well that I’m walking home from here. I spent more than I should have on booze and if I stand any chance of balancing the budget, I’m going to have to opt out of transportation tonight.

It's not too far, but in my somewhat drunken state, it should make for an interesting stroll home. I have half a mind to crash on that park bench again, just for the sake of not having to deal with my idiot roommates when I show up at three something in the morning.

But, as much as I hate them, I love my bed more, and boy does she sound hella good right now. If only teleportation was a thing.

Cora presses a sloppy kiss against my cheek. "Love you, bitch."

"You, too, skank." I grab her shoulders and steer her toward her new man. "Take care of her."

"Of course." He gently helps her into the back seat, shutting the door behind her and going around to the other side. "Have a good night."

The silver car takes off and when I glance around, I'm the last one standing here. The rest of the throng fluttered out their respective directions.

I take a deep breath, grateful to finally be alone after that rather hectic evening. Don't get me wrong, it was fun, quite a bit actually, but now I'm drained, mentally and physically, and not having anyone around to drain any more of my energy is a welcomed blessing.

I go past the bar we were in, casually making my way out of the Haven, each step guiding me further toward my apartment. It's strange to be simultaneously in a hurry but want to take my time, too. I could use this window in between human interaction to attempt to regulate my next encounter. Going from an enjoyable evening to that hell hole I call home is a massive mindfuck.

A car approaches from my rear, and I shift to look at it. It slows, turns down an alley, and disappears from my line of sight. I focus back on my path, crossing the empty street and stepping into a lesser lit area. The Haven is bright and inviting, making everything around it seem much drearier and unappealing.



It's clever, really. Like a moth to a flame kind of thing they have going on. Drawing people in with the lively vibe it puts off. Although now, with not another soul in sight, it's a bit eerie.

I pick a leaf off a tree I pass, flipping the foliage between my fingers and breaking off little pieces of it. Raising my arm up, I take a whiff of my armpit. I could definitely use a shower but considering how late it is, that's going to have to wait until I can get a few hours of sleep. It's laundry day tomorrow anyway. Or well, today, if we're being technical.

It's the one day a week I only have one job to work instead of three, leaving me a small window of time to get my errands done. It's a financial hit I hate taking, but if I didn't, there would be next to no way for me to get anything done. And truthfully, I need the break. As little as it is.

Another car passes, snapping me out of my distracted mindset. I watch it drive a few blocks and put its turn signal on before I stop concentrating on it.

A sound to my right catches my attention but I react too slowly. My vision goes dark from something that's put over my head.

This can't be real. This can't be happening.

I throw my arms, elbowing anything I possibly can in an attempt to get away from my captor. "Get the fuck off me," I blurt out, but it's no use.

The person latches onto me, pushing the fabric against my nose and mouth, forcing me to panic and breathe in whatever is lining the thing covering my face. I power through despite the effects taking hold; my world growing even fuzzier than it already was.

My knees buckle out from under me, dropping me to the ground. Pebbles impale my skin, and my palms scrape against the pavement. That's going to leave a mark. But it's the least of my worries given the circumstances.

I fight the uncontrollable drug overriding my ability to function properly. I grip the ground, willing myself to get up

on all fours and crawl away. Anything to escape.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be.” The person finally speaks, reaching down and pushing the bag into my face again.

I hold my breath, but it doesn’t matter, there is no dodging the drug-laced fabric.

My head spins and with one final thud to the ground, everything fades to black.

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*I* wake to the sound of screaming.

Only instead of settling my sights on who’s making all the noise, I realize it’s me that’s causing all the commotion.

A man standing in front of me, a cigarette butt pressed between his fingers. He flicks it to the ground. “Nice of you to join us.” He leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

My forearm burns painfully. A round welted mark at my wrist where he had pressed the hot thing to my skin. Both of my arms are tied to the wooden chair I’m sitting in. My legs are unrestrained. Only one other person is here with me in this poorly lit room.

A guy in his mid-thirties. Thick, but not overweight. Brown shaggy hair matching his scruffy beard. Definitely taller than me, but from the angle I’m in, I’m not sure exactly how much more. Scars litter his face, predominantly across his brow and cheek. A faded, blown-out tattoo peeking out from under his shirt sleeve.

“What do you want?” I ask him. I do what I can to trick my mind into forgetting the searing sting from his assault.

“I thought we could have a little fun.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a switchblade, flicking the thing into the open position. Pressing it into his index finger, he spins it

gently, a bit of blood coming to the surface despite the lack of pressure. “Are you a fan of Halloween?” He raises a brow at me.

I don’t respond, because I know exactly where he’s going with this train of thought. No, my mind is elsewhere, looking for any potential way out of this torture chamber.

“I am.” He kicks off the wall and takes a step forward. “You know my favorite part?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer. “Carving pumpkins.” He flits his attention to the blade. “There’s something about jamming a blade deep into the meaty flesh...over and over...until you create something magical.”

I check my peripheral, noticing the bare wall behind me. The lone doorway is the one in front of me, and behind the man. One that appears to be a hallway from what I can make out.

“People are no different, you see.” He continues, hovering in front of me with the blade inching nearer. “A fresh canvas at my disposal, only to wither away when I’m done with them. Just like a pumpkin would.” He puts the thing against my cheekbone, pressing it until the sharpness pierces my skin.

I tilt my head as far as I can to get out of the line of danger, but being restrained, there’s only so far I can go. I am at his mercy, and he knows it.

He drags the edge against my skin, an evil grin forming on his face with every bit of torment he causes me.

Warm liquid rolls down my neck and puddles at my collarbone.

“Why me?” I fumble with the rope around my arms, the tautness stopping me from breaking free.

Obviously. Like it would be that easy.

I beg the universe for something, anything to help me out of this fucking nightmare.

“Oh.” He wipes the bloody blade on his dark pants, inspecting it when he’s done. “That wasn’t my doing. I’m only

the worker bee, following orders from up the chain.”

This wasn't a random attack? What chain is he referring to? I might be a bitch, but I don't have enemies.

*Unless.*

What if it was the guy Dominic had beaten up in the bar? I never did confirm whether he was alive or simply unconscious. What if he had the power to do this in an act of twisted revenge for what happened to him? Or it could be countless other guys I've turned down and somehow pissed off enough to kidnap and torture me. Carter is the person I argue with the most, but I can't fathom he would ever do something like this. Nor would he ever have the power to pull it off. He might be into illegal shit, but he doesn't have this kind of authority. And what would he gain? He's the one who stole from me—if anyone should be punishing anyone, it would be me doing it to him, not the other way around.

“Then who?” I ask him although I doubt he'll tell me. My chair squeaks under me when I shift my weight.

Whoever is pulling the strings, I don't care to stick around and find out, because if I spend much more time alone with this psychopath, I won't live to tell the tale. That much I know for sure.

I reposition my footing and pause, settling my gaze on this man and waiting for my chance to move. I very well could die here in this dreary room, but I won't go down without a fight.

“You picked the wrong side, little girl.” He pulls another cigarette out of his pack and puts it between his lips. He pats his pocket for a lighter but it's not there.

He turns his back to me, and I realize, if I'm going to act, I have to do it now. This might be the one and only opportunity I get to move with any level of an upper hand. Even if that means merely a second of knowing he's distracted.

With the chair still attached to my arms, I force myself to my feet, rushing away and shoving myself into the wall behind me with force.

The wooden chair buckles against the impact, creaking and struggling to stay together.

“You bitch,” he calls out. The cigarette dropping out of his mouth and falling to the floor.

He rushes toward me, but I pivot and turn quickly, smacking him with the chair I can't seem to break free of.

I groan and slam him once more, throwing us both to the floor and shattering my wooden confines.

He swings his arm, landing a punch across my forehead, crashing into my brow, and dropping me further onto my ass. Blood trickles down and I wipe at it with the shoulder of my shirt.

It's then that I catch sight of the shiny thing that sliced my chin open, laying discarded and unoccupied. We both lock our gazes on it at the same time, flitting a glance at one another and both of us leaping for it at the exact same moment.

I've never moved quicker, and with such a serious intensity in my entire life. Because I'm fully aware that whether I make it out of this depends on if I make it to the blade first. I reach for the handle, holding my breath and summoning it into my grasp, barely grabbing onto it and ripping it from his reach in time.

I draw my arm back and sink the knife into his thigh with as much force as I can muster, rising to my feet and not giving another thought to the antagonizing yelp he lets out. I push past him, using his weakened state to knock him over and get as far away as possible. I burst through the door, blinking quickly to adjust my sights to my new surroundings, scanning for a potential escape. I spot the front entrance, running to it and fumbling with the lock. I shift my gaze toward where I came from, not wanting to become another one of those clumsy girls who die because they couldn't get a fucking door unlocked.

I twist the deadbolt and fling the thing open, rushing out and across the yard, not giving another thought to the house or man I'm trying to put distance between. I bolt down the street,

my shoes hitting the pavement and not slowing until a few minutes later when I'm out of breath and finally sure of where I am. I cross through backyards, hop fences, and dodge barking dogs, putting one foot in front of the other.

I skid to a stop in front of my apartment complex, running up the steps two at a time until I reach the top. I shove my key into the lock, twisting it and almost snapping the thing off inside. I yank it out, turning the knob and slipping inside, shoving it shut and collapsing onto the floor in the somewhat safety of my home.

"Uh," a voice floats out to me. "You okay?"

I settle my sights on Carter sitting in the chair in the corner of our living room. A man I despise but honestly could kiss right now. Not because of anything he's done, but because it means I made it, I escaped from my abductor—I'm safe. Whatever that means.

"Yeah." I bring myself to my feet, dusting my pants off and realizing just how insane I must look to him right now.

"Don't bleed all over the floor." Carter yawns and stretches his arms, turning and closing his eyes.

I could have probably walked in here missing an arm and he wouldn't have put too much effort into helping or caring about me one bit. His main concern is solely on getting back to sleep.

So very typical of Carter to be a self-centered prick.

I grab a paper towel from the counter and clean up the red handprint I left behind on our linoleum-tiled floor and make my way to the bathroom, snatching a clean towel from the closet. I dig around under the vanity to locate any kind of first aid supplies.

Standing at the sink, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Mascara blurred around my eyes, a solid goose eye on my brow with a bloodied wound to go along with it. A small cut along my chin where he had taunted me with his blade.

I've seen better days, that's for sure.

I hold my wrist out and clench my jaw, pouring the peroxide over the cigarette-sized hole in my skin and onto my tattered palm. It bubbles and I fight through the intense pain. I let the water from the sink trickle over it and repeat the steps a few more times. I grab a round cotton pad from Heather's makeup section and douse it with alcohol. I dab it along the damage that was done to my face and toss the blood-covered thing into the trash can. I'm sure there are more bumps and scratches on my body, but I manage to half-ass the major ones.

I turn the shower on and unbutton my jeans, tugging them down and peeling them from my bloodied and bruised knees. I step out of them and drag my shirt over my head. I strip down naked and step into the shower, grateful that there's a decent amount of hot water. I slink onto my ass, pulling my legs to my chest and hugging them as the water rids me of what happened tonight.

I should go to the hospital. Call the cops. Do something in some official capacity. But I know how the system works. They'll ask me what I was wearing. How much I had to drink. They'll have me recall the events that led up, and what happened during, and after. If I knew the man. They'll file a report. Take my name and number. And all it will boil down to is nothing more than an embarrassing waste of time that I'm not willing to sacrifice.

Instead, I sit here, the hot liquid cascading over my skin, both helping and hurting me at the same time. The wounds on my body take turns sending spikes of pain throughout my body. From my head to my toes, I am one solid throbbing being.

My throat aches with the rawness of the scream I had woken up to. The memory of my skin sizzling and the scent of burning flesh lingering in my mind. I force away the thoughts, remind myself that I am safe, that I am far away from the man who hurt me.

My wet black hair sticks to me and I don't move to get it out of my face. I use it as a shield, a protective barrier from the world.

Surely, there had to be a mistake. Maybe he confused me with someone else. Someone who had pissed off someone in power. Someone who deserved what he did to me. But he seemed so sure, so confident, that I was the one he was supposed to target.

I recall the man in Jack's bar tonight, the one who lurked without saying much. Was he the same guy who assaulted me? I think back to their features, noting how different they were.

"No," I whisper to no one. Not the same person.

Must have been a weird coincidence.

But didn't I sense someone following me when I left the bar to head to the Haven? Was that in my head or was there something to be aware of? And what about the random drink I was gifted with...and the new mystery man who approached me, and told me I would be his.

Was it him?

None of that makes sense.

Why would someone buy me expensive tequila and then try to kill me? And why would the Damon lookalike flirt with me and then order me to be kidnapped and tortured?

Is it possible that it was Dominic, Cohen, or Magnus? That they wanted so little to do with me that they would rather have me murdered than deal with me in the future?

Dominic literally beat a man nearly to death when he threatened me. That doesn't really put him at the top of my suspect list. And Cohen...he'd never hurt a fly, let alone me.

But with the recollection of the gun in his hand, pointed straight at me, and then at Cora, anything could be possible. Still, though, I'd never believe it was him unless he really was upset that I had slept with Magnus. It's been years though, what right would he have to stake such a claim after all this time has passed.

Leading me to Magnus. The dark and dangerous bad boy with the soft and gentle inside. No fucking way it was him that ordered this to happen.



Which pretty much gives me no insight on what the hell went down, further making me certain that I was caught up in someone else's war—that I was never meant to be the target of such aggression.

I lean back, resting against the tub and extending my legs. The water runs murky with a mix of dirt and blood.

Whatever it was, what transpired, it's over, and I will do with it what I do with everything else—I shove it into a folder deep in my mind and put it where it belongs, in the past.

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## MAGNUS



It's been too many days since I've seen her.

Yesterday, I went to her work in an attempt to settle my sights on her, but she never arrived while I was there, lurking in the shadows for a glimpse of her beautiful face.

I'd go to her house but I'm not sure where she lives, and it's not like we exchanged phone numbers. Shit, she barely gave up her name.

I could ask Cohen more details to find her, but then that goes against the whole *leave her alone* thing that Dominic has ordered. So, I take the little bit I do know about her, and use it to resolve the ache in my chest and pit in my stomach caused by her absence.

I lean against the building across the street, just hidden enough in the darkness not to be seen by passersby. I wait and hope for her to be in there today, to fuel my addiction and stave off the craving I have for her.

It's dangerous to linger like this, but I do it anyway without a care of what might happen.

Seeing her is somehow more important than my continued existence.

A feeling I've never had about a woman in all thirty-two years of my life, which only makes me chase the high that much more.

The owner of the diner, Bram, an older man with kind yet sad eyes lifts the partition to the counter and steps through, a

carafe of coffee in his grasp. He glides to a booth, pouring a cup and going to the next and topping another off. A teenage waiter cleans off a table and wipes it down. Typical business as usual. The same thing I witnessed yesterday until I was finally called away to my own job, no longer able to ignore the buzzing of my phone.

My heart lurches out of my chest, almost like it spots her before my eyes do. But when I focus on her, my stomach drops, my jaw with it. My pulse picks up and I move from the shadow, out onto the sidewalk. I step into the street, a car blaring its horn at me as it skids to stop itself from hitting me. I continue, completely disregarding the peril around me.

I scan her, my gaze trailing from the injuries on her face to her wrapped wrist and hands. A rage building within me, unlike anything I've ever known. My hand itching toward the gun at my waist, ready to end the life of whoever laid a finger on her. My soul is pulled to her, begging to wrap around and protect her from any other threats. To nurture and care for her while she heals from this terrible attack.

I press my palm against the glass, peering into the diner, still unnoticed by her.

She stands at the end of a table, taking the order of an elderly couple, jotting the details onto a small pad of paper. Her frail fingers gripping the pencil. She offers them a smile and walks away, pulling off the sheet and sliding it across the counter to Bram.

He nods and attaches it to the clip for the line cook.

June flexes her left hand, almost like she's working out a cramp in it, and I ache to be there, to offer whatever aid I can. But right now, the one thing I'm wired to do is eliminate the cause of her despair.

I power walk the entire way home, not giving two shits about being out in the open like this. By the time I arrive, sweat has accumulated on my brow and the anger inside me has continued to fester at an insane rate.

I swipe my badge at the gate to grant myself access, and rush up the stairs and into the house. Immediately, I draw the gun from my hip and the other from my waistband, securing them in both of my hands.

Bursting into the kitchen, I train them on both of my targets.

“Whoa, buddy, what the hell?” Hayes raises his palms in the air.

“Which of you?” I look between them. “Who fucking did this?”

Dom stands, his chair scooting back behind him. He reaches for me, but I shake him off, straightening the gun I have pointed toward him.

“I swear to Christ, I will kill you both if someone doesn’t start talking.”

We have a strict no killing each other in the house rule, but that went out the door when they laid a finger on her.

“We can’t tell you if you don’t explain to us what happened.” Dominic crosses his arms over his chest, a bit of irritation at my disturbance settling into his features.

“June.” The word leaving my mouth raises the tension in the room.

“What about her?” Hayes’ nostrils flare, the possessiveness of his tone telling me he’s innocent, at least when it comes to the harm that was done to her.

I tilt my head at Dom, shifting my body and shoving both pistols in his direction. “You sick fuck.” My head spins, my heart pounding wildly.

The three of us have gone head-to-head in the past, but I never actually thought I’d end the life of either of these men. Especially Dom, my mentor, the man who took me in and gave me a chance when no one else would. He believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself.

But none of that matters now. Not with her involved.

“Maggie.” Cohen tries to gather my attention. “What happened to June?”

“I went to her work.” I grit my teeth. “I know I wasn’t supposed to. I wasn’t going to say anything. I just wanted to see her. To verify she was okay.”

“And...?”

I flit my gaze to the floor, recalling the cut across her lip and brow, the bruising on her cheek, the bandage wrapped around her wrist and hands. The same intense anger I felt then only continues to grow.

“Someone.” I point the gun in my left hand at Dominic. “Roughed her up.”

Dominic’s expression changes, his arms dropping to the table, his fist slamming into the wooden surface. A low growl escapes him. “What?”

Either he’s a damn good actor, or it wasn’t him who hurt her. Telling me that someone *outside* this house got to her. Which might mean several things. June could have enemies of her own, or our rivals could very well know how important she is to us and are using their easy access to her to their advantage. Somehow that will only end poorly. For them, or for us.

The latter is much more likely given our dire circumstances.

But how would they have known?

They must have eyes on our house and saw her leaving the other morning. Or one of the men standing in front of me might have gone against Dom’s order and saw her, putting her even more at risk.

“Tell me, exactly, what you saw.” Dom stares at me with an intensity that I feel within my bones.

Hayes drops a magazine from his gun, checking to make sure it’s full and shoves it back in, pulling the slide and putting a bullet in the chamber.

Dom grabs my shoulder, shaking it and snapping me out of my stupor. “Focus, Bryant.”

“Her face.” I motion to mine. “It was all fucked up.” I hold up my hands, the guns still gripped in them. “She had bandages on both, and her wrist.” I replay the image of her in my mind. “She was limping, nothing drastic, but definitely noticeable.”

Dom’s entire exterior hardens, and he exhales, taking a step away.

“Where are you going?” I call out after him.

“To find her, to see who did this, so I can end him.”

“What happened to the *no June* rule?”

He slides the gun off the table and secures it in his holster like a person would grab their keys before leaving. “Null and void. If anyone is going to kill her, it’s going to be me.”

Without thinking, I raise my weapon at him once more. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Dom swats at me as though I’m a fly in his face. “I’m not going to, you idiot.”

“I’m coming,” Hayes chimes in.

“Wait a minute.” I position myself in their way so they can’t leave. “First of all, neither of you know where she is. Secondly, what makes you think she wants to see either one of you?” I nod at Dom. “She fucking took off the other day when you tried to talk to her.” Then at Hayes. “And you, she looked like she saw a ghost.” I cross my arms, the gun still in my hand. “If anyone should confront her, it should be me. The one person she doesn’t hate.”

The two of them look at each other, then at me.

I add my last point. “And all three of us storming into her work doesn’t sound like a solid plan.”

For once, Dominic is speechless, his mouth parting briefly then closing.

“I’ve known her the longest,” Hayes blurts out.

Dominic rubs his temple. “Two months.” He points to me. “You?”

“A week.” He clearly has me beat on this one.

We both pivot to Hayes, waiting to see if he’ll win this one or not.

“Over a decade.”

“What?” I’m not sure if it comes from me or Dom.

“It should be me.” Hayes runs his fingers through his surfer boy hair. “She trusts me. I’ll get her to tell me who did this to her. Then we can take turns torturing them.”

“She doesn’t trust you. June doesn’t trust *anybody*.” Because if I learned anything from my short but sweet time with her, she’s got mad trust issues.

“This, right here, see.” Dom raises his voice. “This is why we can’t get involved. We’re in the middle of a fucking *war* and we’re completely focused on something else.”

Hayes stares right at him, a look that could kill. “She isn’t just *something*.”

It’s like he took the words right out of my mouth.

“I know, damn it do I know.” Dom reaches into his pocket to pull out his keys. He hands them to Hayes. “Hurry back so we can end this.”

“What the fuck.” I stand my ground. “I get no say in this? I’m the one who found her. If she’s going to talk to anyone, it’ll be me.”

“How about this?” Hayes grips my shoulder. “You can come with me, stay in the car. If she kicks me out, I’ll send you in.”

“Can you two shut up and come on already?” Dom snags his keys back and shoves me out of the way to open the door. He stops in his tracks. “Wait, you said you saw her at work? Where?”

I hesitate, not wanting to give away my precious secret just yet. Like having it to myself means I somehow know her more

intimately than they do.

“I thought she worked at a bar.” He glances at his watch. “Last time I checked, bars aren’t open this early.”

“Definitely wasn’t a bar.” I bite at my lip, hating what I’m about to say—the tiny detail slipping from my grasp. “It was a diner. Bram’s, over on—”

Dom cuts me off. “I know where that is. Come on.”

“Shotgun,” I call out.

“What the fuck.” Hayes stomps behind me.

We climb into Dom’s SUV. A Mercedes AMG G 63, fully tailored to Dominic’s specifications. Obsidian black exterior, Nappa leather inside, blacked-out rims, and bulletproof accents. It cost a pretty penny, but it’s totally Dom’s style. It’s quick, it’s sleek, and it sticks out like a sore thumb. We could have easily taken one of the unmarked vehicles, but knowing how I feel right now, Dom doesn’t care about someone spotting him either. Almost like he’s inviting them to him, to summon the war and go on a rampage, ending anyone in sight.

It doesn’t take long to get there, especially when Dom blows through stop signs and goes the wrong way down a one-way to cut across quicker.

Hayes hops out as soon as we park, shoving his gun into the back of his pants and pulling his shirt over it.

I watch his every step with precision, my fingers digging into my thigh with the desire to trade places with him. To be the one to confront June. In a loving but attentive way. The Hayes I know is rough, brutal, and not the comforting type. How he thinks he’s more equipped for this job than me I’ll never understand.

Hell, Dom might be better suited and he’s a fucking psycho.

Hayes claims he and June go back over ten years, yet he’s never once mentioned her name. She’s important enough to invoke a rage inside of him and a fierce possessiveness but not actively have her in his life?



My gut tells me he's going to make this entire situation worse than it already is because he can't handle a woman like June.

She's strong, resilient, powerful, and if I had to guess, she's fully capable of handling her own. I mean, she's back at work with minimal downtime after whatever happened. A second job at that. And from the looks of it, she was fucking tortured. What other person, aside from those in my line of work, operates that way?

In addition to her strength though, there's this broken part of her. The wreckage that created her toughness and forced her to push everyone away.

She needs someone in her life that sees her. That understands her. That shows her a bit of kindness and actually means well. That won't use or abuse her. That will treat her with caution but give her the ability to flourish and treat her like the princess she really is. And most of all, won't break her trust and leave her once she's finally opened up. Maybe that man isn't me, but it sure as shit isn't Hayes.

That's when it dawns on me. The dynamic between Hayes and June. The raw ache I felt between them. The tragic story that was unspoken and yet still heard by my soul.

Cohen Hayes is the person who abandoned June.

I grip my thigh harder, the anger inside of me bubbling nearly out of control while I watch him reach his hand out and touch her shoulder to get her attention.

No, it wasn't Hayes who inflicted the recent injuries on June, but his damages run much deeper than any surface-level wound. And for that alone, it puts him at the top of my kill list.

COHEN



“*J*une.” I approach her from behind while she’s cleaning off a table.

She flinches, dropping the tray in her hands. A partially empty coffee mug falling to the ground and shattering. “Fuck.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” I cower and pick up the pieces, ignoring the stares of the few patrons I can feel glancing our way.

June shuffles to get them too but I stop her.

“No, let me. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you.” I grab onto a shard and it slices at my palm. I ignore the pain and continue to clean up the mess I made. If only life were this easy to fix, too. But in a way, it is, the pieces and remnants never able to go back together the way they were, often bits left behind despite the rigorous attempt to sweep them all up.

Who am I kidding though? I never once tried to repair things with June. The single most important person to me and I couldn’t bring myself to face her. To tell her the truth and explain why I was stolen from her and where I had gone. I was ashamed. A large part of me thought that she wouldn’t understand, that she wouldn’t forgive me, that I wasn’t worthy of her. So, I stayed away. I kept my distance. I told myself she was better off without me, because I truly believed that.

But seeing her again, it was like I was brought back to those days together. The way she chiseled away at my walls and stole my heart without any stopping her. We were kids, but

it was powerful. Real. It was the shit they talk about in movies. And I have never once remotely felt close to another person the way I did with her. I've never even given it the chance, too afraid that it would taint what we had.

I've kept my relationships short, and strictly sexual, never attaching any feelings to them. Not just on purpose, but because I couldn't. I've had nothing left to give—all my love being taken by the girl with beautiful brown eyes and jet-black hair. The one who was patient and kind and didn't judge me for spending time in the cemetery visiting my mom. She was strong but broken like me. She knew loss and yet still gave me her heart. She was reserved, selective with who she let in, but somehow she chose me, and I will forever be a better man because of the love she gifted me.

But we both broke that day we were unwillingly pulled apart. Shattered onto the earth like pieces of a fallen glass. Separated. Irreparable. Unfixable. Forever changed by a force we could not control. We were young, and there was no stopping what happened. Maybe if I had known, I could have snuck out the night before. I could have gone to her, told her what was going on and devised a plan to stay together. We could have run away.

We didn't get that chance. Because our separation was just as much a surprise to her as it was to me. And it transpired quicker than I could fathom, the moving parts giving us whiplash at how fast it went down. I blinked and she was gone. A fading speck on that gravel road until we turned out of sight, my heart was left behind in the hands of a girl I thought I'd never see again.

“Co.” June steadies my hands with hers. “You're bleeding.”

My gaze meets hers, taking me on a journey to that beautiful summer we spent together. We had been friends since childhood, but we took things to the next level that year when a sad girl let me kiss her and changed my life forever. The biggest change of all was when she was taken from me. Turning me into a cold, heartless version of myself. One that was shaped into the dark and twisted man I am today. The

reason why I'm so damn good at my job, is because of the empty pit in my chest.

"Is there a problem over here?" An older man with a broom appears above us. He steadies his attention on June.

She stands and takes the thing from him. "No. I'm just a bit jumpy. I've got it under control."

He stays put, eyeing me seriously. "You sure?"

I don't hate how protective he is of her, his reaction telling me that there is someone else in her life in tune with potential threats that might arise. He's not wrong to keep his stare locked on me given my history with death and violence, but little does he know, I'd rather die than lay a finger on her. And I would kill anyone who even thought about harming her.

Bryant and Dominic included.

They might be the closest thing I have to family, but June exceeds any level of loyalty I have to them.

"Yeah, sorry Bram. You can take it out of my check."

I reach into my pocket and pull out my money clip. I slide a fifty from the top. "Here, that should cover it."

"That won't be necessary, young man." Bram pivots my extended offering toward June. "If you'd like to compensate anyone, it should be her." The two of them make eye contact. "If you need me, I'll be finishing up the orders. I won't be long."

She goes to work sweeping up the discarded fragments left behind. "I don't want your money, Cohen."

"Please, J. I created more work for you. It's the least I could do."

She rolls her eyes. "Don't get me started on the *least* you could do."

I sigh and sweep my hair off my brow. "June." I reach for the broom, slipping it out of her grasp and replacing it with the money. "I insist." I nod to the booth. "Sit, let me do this."

For some unknown reason, she listens to me, slipping into the cushy seat and crossing her arms over her chest. “Whatever.”

I make quick but efficient work of cleaning up the one mess I’m capable of mending, hoping like hell it isn’t the last one she lets me try to fix.

There’s such a wall between us that it pains my soul, even more, to know she no longer looks at me the way she used to, all those years ago. I don’t blame her, but it still hurts all the same.

I set the broom against the wall and climb in across from her. “Can we talk?”

“I’m at work, Cohen. This isn’t exactly the time or place to clear whatever is on your conscience.” She flits her gaze to the few customers in the diner and at the other waitress taking care of them.

“You’re right.” It’s not often I say those words and mean them. “That’s not why I’m here.”

June raises a brow. “Then what is it? You want to place a carryout order?”

I shake my head, my inner child laughing at her smart-ass remark, reminding me of the June from so many moons ago. Reaching across the table, I hesitate, not wanting to get too close and surprise her again. “Who did this?”

She blinks in surprise, a blank but startled look on her bruised face. “What?”

I motion to the wounds, repeating my question. “*Who* did this?”

“I—I don’t...wait. Why?” Her expression hardens. “Why do you want to know? Why does it matter?”

It’s everything I can do to not jump out of my skin and strangle any person potentially responsible for doing this to her. Sitting across from her, I can fully see the darkened marks on her face. The cut on her brow that is poorly covered by a bandage, the wound along her chin.

“It matters.” Of course it does. How could she possibly think otherwise?

She lowers her voice. “You lost the right to care about what happens to me a long time ago, Cohen.”

I match her tone. “That doesn’t mean I stopped.”

“You sure have a shit way of showing it.”

“I’m sorry.” Those two words leaving my mouth mean much more than they allude to.

June rocks her head back and forth slowly. “Sorry doesn’t cut it.”

The simple fact that she’s still sitting here gives me the tiniest bit of hope I need. Confirming that despite how badly I fucked up, maybe I can gather the broken pieces of us and put them back together.

All I can do is try. My first task is ending the life of whoever did this to her.

“You can be mad at me. You can hate me. You can wish whatever ill will you want on me. I accept that. I deserve that. Truthfully, I do. But I need to know, June. You have to tell me. Who hurt you?”

“You mean other than you?”

Her words slice through me, cutting me deeply. My lips part, but I come up short for what to say. I don’t fault her for treating me this way, but it won’t help me bring justice to those worthy of it.

She reaches across the table and pulls a napkin out of the holder, extending her hand and grabbing onto mine. “You’re still bleeding.”

I savor the touch, basking in how sweet it is. Temporary, fleeting, and a blaring reminder of what I lost. No matter how much time has gone by, I never cared for her less, my love for her never withering in the slightest.

I clung to it desperately. The last remaining shred of my humanity fading into memories of a time far in the past but

never forgotten.

Once I had thought maybe I was crazy. That she was a figment of my imagination I created in a weak attempt to stay sane through the darker days of my life. That maybe I idealized the perfectly imperfect girl who prefers sunsets over sunrises, could eat her weight in popcorn, and who I taught how to play pool.

But seeing her, feeling her skin against mine, looking into the same mesmerizing eyes I had peered into day after day, I realize she's exactly what I remember—only now, she's no longer mine. Not that she ever was, because June can't be captured, not really. She's one of those things that if you want her to stick around, you have to accept that she will remain wild, free, and completely untamed.

I gently place my palm on the top of her bandage-wrapped hand. "June, I need you to tell me."

Her gaze meets mine. Steady, interrogatory, like she's trying to see through me.

The bell on the front door chimes, alerting us to new patrons entering the diner.

"I have to get back to work." June pulls away and scoots out of the booth. She offers the older couple a fake customer service smile. "Have a seat wherever you'd like."

They walk past us and take up residency at a nearby table.

June pushes me toward the door. "I don't need your pity, Co. I'm a big girl. I've handled things on my own for this long, I don't need your help now."

But it's not about pity. It's about getting even. Inflicting the same or more pain on whoever thought they could touch her and get away with it.

"J..."

"No." She continues shoving me, her warmth pressing through the back of my shirt. "I can't talk about this here." June pauses. "Is that your ride?" She points to Dom's over-the-top SUV.

“Maybe.”

“Is that Magnus in the passenger seat?” She squints to take a better look. “And Dominic driving?”

“Um.”

“Go.” She grabs the handle and yanks it open. “All three of you. I’m fine, seriously. I don’t need any of your help.”

And with a final push, I’m out onto the sidewalk. Alone and with none of the questions I came here for answered, plus a fuck ton more of them piling up.

She’s still that same firecracker I remember—hellbent on waging this war called life on her own and not relying on a damn person for anything.

Magnus rolls his window down, his head hanging out of it, waiting for me to fill him in.

I walk over, careful to glance around and check out anything suspicious on my way. Climbing into the back, I sigh and run both hands through my hair.

Magnus turns to me. “Who do we get to kill?”

Dominic stays silent in anticipation of my directions on where to go.

“She wouldn’t tell me.”

“I fucking knew it.” Magnus slams his fist against the dash. “God, no one fucking listens to me.” He points at me. “You’re the reason she’s so cold and shut off.”

This grabs Dominic’s attention. “What? What did you do to her?”

I shake my head, dropping it into my hands. “Nothing.”

“You’re lying.” Magnus is certain he knows what he’s talking about, and unfortunately for me, he is.

He’s a damn good people reader, the best I’ve ever been around, but that means he can read us, too. He’s the master at calling people on their bullshit and that’s exactly what he’s doing right now.



“Enough, you two.” Dominic glances at me. “Did she say anything? Give you any clue who could have done it?”

“No. Not a word.” I recall the marks on her skin. The discoloration. The poorly taken care of wounds, almost like she didn’t seek medical care at all. I process all the information I was given, despite how little it was. I’ve had less and managed to figure shit out, why would I let that stop me here? “Her chin.”

“What about it?” Dom’s interest is piqued.

“There was about a three-inch-long thin gash along it.” I focus on the details, not on the victim, because if I picture it being June, I’ll spiral out of control and not be able to follow through with solving the mystery of who did this. “Must have been a blade of some sort. Who do we know that works with knives?”

A chill runs up my spine, a thought I hadn’t fully processed until now.

When we do interrogations, not a single person makes it out alive. And typically, that’s how it goes in our line of business. The casualties pile up one after another with minimal regard to the lives lost. With that being said, how the fuck did June get away with her life still intact? Does that mean the game has only just begun? That instead of a quick assault, this would be a long, drawn-out torture, not just for her, but for the three of us sitting here? Is this a twisted game to distract us from the war we’re trying to win? A sadistic distraction to gain the upper hand? Is her life now hanging in the balance because of us carelessly involving her? Something we can no longer stop now that it’s in motion.

“I have a few people in mind,” Dominic announces.

I center my sights on Magnus. “Get out of the car.”

“What?” His brows bunch together.

“Someone has to keep an eye on June.” And considering how upset she is with me, I’m not the best suited for the task. No, my skills are better suited for something else entirely. “Dom and I will investigate.”

AKA, slit every throat around town until someone confesses to hurting our girl.

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## JUNE



What gives Cohen the right to come into my work and ask me questions about what happened to me? He's been absent for *years* and he shows up out of the blue being all protective? How the hell did he even find out?

Out of the three of them, Magnus was the one who knew I worked at Bram's. Why wasn't it him that confronted me? Especially since he was waiting out in that ridiculous SUV the whole time Cohen was inside trying to pity me.

I saw it in his eyes, the way he looked at me, like I might fall apart at the seams like that stupid fucking broken mug. I don't need his sympathy, or anyone else's for that matter. I'm fine on my own.

Did they agree that because I've known Cohen the longest that he would be the best to talk to me? Well, they were wrong. Because none of them fit that description.

"June." Bram hovers near me while I refill the salt and pepper shakers.

"Yeah?"

He sighs, his posture stiffening a bit. "Listen, I don't want to pry, and I know you already told me what happened. But if there's anything else going on, I hope you can put your trust in me to help if you need it."

I haven't worked here long but Bram has absolutely shown his trustworthiness. Definitely a too-good-to-be-true situation, still I'm rolling with it as long as I can.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I’m fine though, really. Just an isolated mugging incident is all.” At least, that’s the story I’m telling him and anyone else who asks, because the real version is too fucking unbelievable, especially the part where I managed to get away.

Bram lowers his voice. “Don’t look now, but there’s a guy, across the street. He’s been there for a little over an hour. I don’t want to alarm you, or bring concern to something coincidental, but do you know him?”

I shift my attention from the task at hand to Bram’s concerned face. “The man that was in here earlier?”

He shakes his head. “No, taller. A bit rougher around the edges. Tattooed arms and neck.”

I exhale and go back to my duty. “He’s harmless. Probably just keeping an eye on me since...” I hold up my bandaged hands. “This.”

He shouldn’t be here, lurking in the shadows, but it’s better than him being the man who kidnapped and tortured me. I’m convinced it was a random mix-up, but I’m still on edge about the whole thing. At least it’s Magnus and not Cohen. I’m not sure how much more of his sad looks I could take.

“Okay.” Bram relaxes a bit. “I guess I should call off the cops then.”

“You called the police?” I wide-eye him.

“No,” he chuckles. “They’re on speed dial though if you need me to.”

“I’ll let you know if I change my mind.” I grab the shakers and put them on their allocated tables, glancing at the clock and realizing it’s almost time to leave.

“You can go if you want. I’ll mark the whole hour.” Bram wipes off the counter and grabs the coffee pot. “Want one to go?”

“You sure?” Where’s the catch? Why is he so damn nice? It’s like it’s ingrained in this man’s DNA, unlike the majority

of the population who prefer to only do nice things when they can get something in return from you.

“Absolutely.” He pulls a takeout cup off the stack and fills it to the top.

“Could I have another?” I point outside. “For my stalker.” I reach into my pocket. “I’ll pay for them.”

“On the house. Consider it a thank you for him looking out for you.” Bram pours another cup full and secures the top. “I worry about you kids.”

I ask the question that has been on my mind since I met him. Something that I probably should just keep my mouth shut about. Curiosity striking me too hard at the moment.

“Did you know them? The college students who got shot.”

Bram’s shoulders tense up, telling me the answer without a word. He confirms it anyway though. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry.” It’s one thing to have a tragedy strike so close to home, and another for it to be personal.

The sadness I see written across Bram’s face every time I’m in here and the burden he carries daily making much more sense now that my suspicions are confirmed. Whoever he lost in that doomed alley next to his shop meant something to him.

It’s been a month or so since the accident, the wound still fresh in his memory, in his heart, in his soul.

“I was friends with Claire, one of the victim’s girlfriends.” I’m not sure why I say this.

A spark seems to light in his eyes. “Really?” He tries not to make himself too obvious, but I already noticed the shift in his demeanor at the mention of her. “Have you heard from her?”

“No.” It wasn’t like she and I were the type to keep in contact though. We were buds through association, through Cora. When I notice the minimal brightness in him dimming, I add, “She might be in touch with a mutual contact of ours though. I could ask and get back to you.”

“Yeah. That would be nice. Thank you.”

And if that’s any indication, the person who Bram lost would have been Johnny, Claire’s boyfriend. I wonder how the two of them knew each other. Maybe they were related, or perhaps Bram took Johnny under his wing like he seems to do with other lost and broken people he stumbles across. The goodness in his heart spilling out and making him incapable of watching someone suffer and not do something about it.

“She worked here, right? Claire?”

“Best help I ever had,” Bram smiles, a genuine one. “No offense.”

I laugh. “None taken.”

“You give her a run for her money though.” Bram shoves the two cups across the counter. “I better not keep you any longer. Your bodyguard might worry.”

I take them from him and mentally prepare myself for whatever is going to happen when I step foot outside. Will Magnus grill me? Pity me? Shame me for getting myself into such a situation?

“See you tomorrow morning,” I tell Bram.

A middle-aged woman walks in and holds the door for me so I can walk through.

“Thank you,” I tell her and step onto the sidewalk outside. I stand there, waiting for Magnus to cross, but he doesn’t.

Does he think I don’t know he’s there? Is this him trying to be inconspicuous?

I lean on my hip, putting my weight on one of my legs. “Come on, Magnus,” I call out in his direction.

He appears from the shadows, slowly at first, but then jogs across the street to me.

I shove the coffee toward him. “Here.”

He looks at it with furrowed brows. “You got that...for *me*?”

“If you don’t want it I can—”

Magnus cuts me off. “No, of course.” He takes the cup from me. “Thanks.”

Has no one ever given him something before?

I pop the lid on my drink and let the steam float out. I want to take a sip but I’m rather fond of my taste buds remaining intact. “Why are you here, Magnus?”

He goes right for the kill, flipping the opening and drinking some of his. “Shit, that’s hot.”

“I have to go to work.” I point the direction I need to head.

“Work?” Magnus nods toward Bram’s. “You just came from there.”

I shake my head. “No, my other job.”

“June...”

I sense the judgment coming in his tone.

“How many places do you work at?”

“Today?” I pull my phone out of my pocket to check the time. “Three.”

He stares at me like I just grew a horn out of my forehead.

“Not everyone can be rich like you.” I don’t mean for it to come out as harsh as it does. But with the mood I’m in and the last few days I’ve been having, I don’t apologize.

Magnus’s expression shifts through surprise, to concern, to understanding in a matter of seconds. “I’ll walk you.”

That, I did not expect.

“What? It’s like four blocks.”

“Then we better get moving so you’re not late.” He places his tattooed hand on my lower back and guides me in the general area I had insinuated I needed to go.

His touch is warm and cool all at once. A strange comfort I didn’t expect given my current and ongoing annoyance with the human race.

I let him move me, because I really do need to get to work. I'm exhausted already from working at Bram's but there is no rest for the wicked, or well, more realistically, the broke.

"You never told me, why are you here?"

"What? A guy can't walk with a girl?"

I glance over at him, ignoring the shape of his jaw, the subtle arch of his nose, the dark, wispy lashes that extenuate his beautiful eyes. God damn, he is a sight for tired eyes. "The lurking in the alley across the street is a bit much. You going for a *Joe Goldberg* from the show *You* type of vibe?"

He raises that bushy brow of his, a grin forming on his face along with it. "That guy had game though, no denying that."

I exhale and take a cautious sip of my coffee. "I'm fine, really. I told Cohen that. I don't need your pity, or whatever this is."

"You think this is pity?"

"What else could it be? Cohen shows up out of the blue with that sad look written all over his face. Then you're creeping from across the street like I can't be left alone. What's next? Dominic showing up, too? My boss almost called the cops on you."

"It would have been fine I know a—" his train of thought changes. "Never mind. No, you've got this wrong, June. It's not sadness we feel toward you. I mean, yeah, we hate that you got brought into this. But what you're not picking up on is the rage, the anger, the pure desire to make whoever did this to you pay."

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. Am I hearing him right? They want *revenge*? For what happened to *me*? Why? I'm just some girl to them. I mean, maybe not to Cohen, but to Magnus and Dominic I'm a random one-night stand.

Did Cohen put them up to this and the two of them are forced to tag along on his weird quest for vengeance? But even then, why would he care? He's been gone for years and years and never once cared what happened to me.



“Why?” I finally ask.

“Believe it or not, you matter to us.”

“Sure do have a weird way of showing it. Cohen disappears from my life for a decade. Dominic after one night. And you...” I gaze at him briefly, recognizing the preemptive hurt on his face. “I guess you’re the only one who hasn’t shown their true colors yet.”

His resolve softens, my blow not hitting him as hard as he had prepared for. “I’m sorry, on behalf of them and the entire male population.”

“That’s a heavy burden to carry.” I pause my stride, waiting for the signal to turn green and give us permission to cross the street. Without turning, I can sense Magnus looking at me.

I hate to admit it, but his presence made the walk to my second job much less stressful. After what happened the other night, I’m on edge. Which is something I’ve always been, but now, it’s at an extreme level. A highly paranoid one that makes me aware of the smallest things.

Like the man standing on the other side of the street in anticipation for the light to change. The other older one approaching Magnus and us from the south. A couple exiting a shop a few doors down. And the teenager sitting at a table in front of the Mexican place. The two cups in his grasp dripping with perspiration, telling me that the kid has someone with him, too.

I don’t notice everything, but I hope to see enough. Enough to keep me safe. Enough to prevent the same thing from happening again.

We walk a few more minutes, only now it’s in silence.

“This is me.” I motion ahead to where I’m going.

“You work here? I love this pizza place.”

“Yep.” I dawdle, unsure how this goodbye is going to go when everything else is so uncertain, too. “Thanks...for walking me.”

Magnus grins and pulls me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me and holding me tight. He kisses the top of my head and his body relaxes into me.

“I’ve got to get in there,” I say after an appropriate hug time has passed. “You’re going to have to let me go.”

“Right. Sorry.” He releases me and holds me at an arm’s length, his happiness fading a bit when his gaze trails the wounds on my face.

*Pity.*

Magnus strolls forward and latches onto the handle, holding the door open for me.

I step in and stop when he follows me inside. “What are you doing?”

He rubs his stomach. “Can’t a guy eat?”

I deadpan. “Seriously? Here? There’s that Mexican joint we walked by.”

“But I’m already here.”

I sigh and glance around. “Sit wherever you want. I’ll take your order once I clock in.”

The restaurant is empty aside from us and a couple at a table smack dab in the middle of the room. Understaffed, too, but with hardly any customers, I’m not at all surprised. I’ll be taking the place of whatever other waitress is working before me, and mentally hoping for a busy but manageable shift. I could use the money, but it’s stressful when I get overly slammed. The kitchen help can hardly cover their own work, let alone stop to come assist me if I need it.

I walk across the open area, offering a fake smile to the patrons already sitting down. They cringe a little at my appearance, reminding me for the millionth time that I look like shit.

“Whoa, what the hell happened to you?” Saul, the manager, calls out the second I step into the back.

“Not a big deal, I got mugged.” I slide my timecard out of the slot and reach to put it into the machine.

“Hold on there.” He puts his hand out to block me from finishing my task.

“What?” The urge to punch him in the throat grows with each passing second he’s taking from me. Can’t he wait to be a dick until I’m at least being paid for it?

“You, uh, don’t look so good, June.”

“Yeah, I’m aware.” I scrape my card against his hand to try to move him. “Can I clock in? I need to take someone’s order.”

“Go home, June.”

*If he says my name one more time...*

“What? Why?”

He pulls his hand away but not before circling my face with his finger, going so far as to press it above my brow. “This. Not good for business.”

I swat him away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Did you just smack me?” Genuine shock riddles his features.

Did he forget completely about touching my face first? Like my reaction wasn’t a normal one to a creepy pimple-faced weirdo getting too comfortable with my personal space.

“Yeah, want me to do it again?” I shouldn’t have said that.

He stands up straighter, putting himself fully between me and the time machine. “You’re fired.”

“Are you kidding me?” Because I called him out on getting a little too handsy?

His gut presses against my torso, pushing me back.

“You disgusting prick.” I throw the cardstock in my grasp at him. “I fucking hated working here anyway.” That’s the God’s honest truth. This place sucked. Either it was deadass empty or too busy to manage. Meaning no tips from no people, or hardly any from my inability to juggle ten tables at a time.

This has got to be a record though. Being fired twice within a short period. What's next, Bram and Jack kicking me to the curb, too?

I'd be royally screwed.

I turn on my heel, going back the way I came, shoving the swinging door open and not caring that it slams against the wall.

Magnus is on his feet in an instant, rushing over to me. "What's wrong?"

"Come on. Let's get out of here." I reach the front door and throw my middle finger in the air. "Fuck this place," I call out, hoping it's loud enough for Saul to hear.

"What the hell is going on?" Magnus follows me despite having any clue why I'm rushing out.

I burst onto the sidewalk and angrily walk a few blocks before the rage inside me simmers in the slightest. "Fuck." So much for the money I'm trying to make to get out of the apartment situation I'm stuck in. I can't fucking win. I run my hands through my hair, wincing at the ache it causes.

"June." Magnus reaches out to me. "Hey." He steadies my shoulders and forces me to look at him. "Breathe." He takes a deep breath in and exhales like he's trying to teach me how to.

I peer up at him. "Why are you still here?"

"Where else would I be?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Work or something."

"This is more important."

"Following me around?"

He shakes his head gently. "Making sure you're okay."

"Good luck with that one."

"Here, sit." Magnus guides me to a bench.

It's then that I recognize where I took him. The park. The one I go to in an attempt to decompress from the chaotic world around me. The place I accidentally crashed all night and

scared a couple kids into thinking I was dead. I've never taken anyone here.

He lowers himself onto the bench first and pats the spot next to him. "Please."

I comply because what else do I have to do. I'm not due at Jack's until this evening and it's not like I want to go home and deal with my idiot roommates. I was supposed to be working for the next five hours, not wandering around the city pissed off with Magnus on my tail.

"What happened back there?" Magnus leans into the bench, his arm resting behind me.

I have the strong urge to keep my mouth shut, to not burden Magnus with my mundane issues, but I find myself talking anyway, despite my natural tendency to bottle everything up. "Apparently, my appearance was bad for business." I leave out the part where Saul had invaded my space.

"Wait, so let me get this straight. You got fired because of something completely out of your control?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

Magnus runs his hand through his hair. "Damn, princess. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." It was mine, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. For not paying better attention to my surroundings. For walking home intoxicated.

"It might as well be."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I turn and face him, pulling my leg up and resting it on top of the other. I ignore the ache from the bruises on my knees and shin and continue to look at his serious yet gorgeous face.

He flits his gaze at my bottom half.

"It's nothing," I tell him before he can ask.

"If it was nothing you wouldn't have winced."

"You noticed that?" I thought I hid it well enough.

“I notice everything.”

Does he see that despite my injuries and how pissed I am about losing yet another job, that I still want to rip my pants off and climb on top of him, sliding myself over his shaft until he’s buried deep inside me?

I break eye contact and try to keep that one off his radar. Neither one of us can afford to deepen our already intense connection.

“What happened to you...” Magnus touches my shoulder, bringing my attention to him once again. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t yours either.” Why are he and Cohen hellbent on making this *their* problem?

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Stop being cryptic and tell me why you think this is about you. I’m not your responsibility.” I take a drink of the coffee I’m still holding in my grip.

Magnus must have left his at the pizza place when I stormed out in a fury.

“I have enemies.”

“Don’t we all?”

Magnus rocks his head back and forth. “Not like this.” He extends his hand, gently tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. “It’s not safe for me to tell you much more.”

“If what you’re saying is true, and it was your *enemies* that did this.” I hold up my bandage-covered hand and circle my face with my finger. “Pretty sure we’re past the point of keeping me safe.”

“I never meant for you to get hurt, I promise.”

I don’t mean to, but I let out a laugh. “Stop blaming yourself. It wasn’t your fault. It was some freak misunderstanding that had nothing to do with you or Cohen or Dominic. How would that even make sense? I’m a nobody to you three. How would they know who I was and better yet,

what the hell would be the point? They might as well kidnap and torture your fucking paperboy.”

Magnus’s jaw tenses at that last bit. “You really don’t get it do you?”

“Get what? Please tell me what I’m missing here.”

“How important you are to us.”

I chuckle again, this time standing up from the bench. “Right. And I’m the Queen of England.”

“Princess,” he mutters under his breath.

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes and fold my arms over my chest. “You guys clearly have some issues to work through, but they don’t involve me. I have my shit taken care of. I don’t need any of your help.” And right now, I should be on the hunt for another job, not dealing with this.

“You think this is a joke?” Magnus rises to his feet in front of me. “There’s nothing to laugh about. These *men* are dangerous. They let you go to prove a point, but that doesn’t mean they won’t finish what they started just to drive it home.”

“They didn’t let me go,” I say quietly.

“What?” His eyes shift back and forth across my face.

“I escaped.”

“Did you...did you kill the person? How many were there?”

“No. I stabbed him in the thigh and ran out the door. There was only one of them.”

“Christ.”

“It had nothing to do with you, Magnus. Stop blaming yourself. How would they have even known to go after me anyway?”

“They must have seen you leave the house.”

“I...” My heart picks up its pace when my mind catches up to what he just said. “I wasn’t alone, Magnus. I was with

Cora.”

All the doubts I had, all the moments I blew Cohen and Magnus off for their overconcern that could have never been linked to me disappear in the blink of the eye. If what they’re saying is true, and that it is their dangerous enemies who attacked me, that means Cora is in danger, too.

And if I don’t get to her before they do, she might not be as lucky as I was to escape the twisted ways of the man who threatened to carve me like a pumpkin.

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## JUNE



*I*s this how the guys feel? This agony in my chest. This aching fear consuming my entire being at the thought of someone hurting Cora.

If it is, there's no wonder why they're reacting the way that they are. If Cora gets hurt because of me, I could never forgive myself. I would stop at nothing to inflict twice as much pain on whoever touches her.

"We'll find her," Magnus calls out from behind me. He catches up within a moment and reaches out to stop me. "June. Please."

"You don't get it." I turn to him, facing him with what must be a wild look on my face.

He tilts his head. "I do, trust me, I do. But reacting irrationally isn't going to do any of us a favor."

"How do you expect me to be rational?"

"A minute ago, you didn't believe me, now you're storming off in a hurry."

"You think I care what happens to me?" I picture Cora sitting where I was the other night. The knife pressed against her cheek, the blade digging across her flesh. No fucking way will I allow her to experience that. But what if I'm too late? What if the damage is already done?

"Obviously you don't. But I do. And I bet Cora wouldn't want you putting yourself at risk to save her."

He's totally right. Cora would be pissed.

“Then what? What am I supposed to do?”

“Where’s your phone? Call her.” Magnus pats my pockets and pulls the device from the one in the back.

I unlock the thing and click on the last person I had called. Cora. It goes straight to voicemail. “Fuck.”

“Send her a text.”

I thumb a few words together and hit send, the little bar at the top pausing and not wanting to go all the way through. Her phone is definitely off.

“Where *should* Cora be right now?”

I think back to the last time I saw her, getting into that car with the random dude from the bar. He seemed nice, but isn’t that how they trick you? They lure you in and pull the rug out from under you when you least expect it. She had sent me a message the next morning, a few emojis to let me know how bad her hangover was, but other than that, I haven’t spoken to her. I was too embarrassed to admit what had happened to me that night after I had left. Here I was worried about her and it was me that got caught up with a psychopath.

I try to process the days, align the details Cora has told me when her classes are and her social calendar. Maybe she’s at home, having some quality time with her partially dysfunctional family.

What if she’s tied to a chair, bleeding out onto the floor of that house? The one I can’t even remember where it was because I was fueled into a self-preservation frenzy to get the fuck out of there as quickly as I could.

“Campus, let’s try campus.” Because the idea of her sitting through a boring lecture is far more appealing than the alternative.

Magnus nods, pulling out his own phone and pushing a few buttons. “I have a car coming.”

“I’m not waiting on an Uber, Magnus.” I continue on the path I had taken prior to him stopping me, making my way

through the gated area and out onto the sidewalk in front of the park.

A blacked-out vehicle approaches, slowing to a stop near us.

“Me either.” He grips the handle and opens the door. “Get in, princess.”

I swallow my pride and hop in the back, putting entirely more faith than I’m comfortable giving into this tattooed man I barely know. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and if I want to find Cora, I need all the help I can get.

Magnus’s phone buzzes and he answers it, pressing it to his ear. “Yeah?”

I can’t make out the mumbling on the other line.

“She’s with me.” He flits his gaze to me. “She’s fine. We’re trying to locate the other girl, Cora.” He waits while the other person speaks then continues. “If she’s important to June then she’s important to us. End of discussion.” He disconnects the line and steadies his attention out the window.

We drive the few blocks across town in the opposite direction I had come from and arrive at the university’s grounds.

I hop out before Magnus can stop me and make my way across the grassy area. It wasn’t too long ago that I was a student here and yet it feels like an eternity. Each passing day is a hurdle that grows larger, reminding me that I probably won’t overcome the challenges that keep coming at me.

“June,” Magnus calls out. “You have to stop.”

I round the corner, my heart nearly leaping out of my chest as my sights settle on that familiar blonde-haired girl. I gasp, bringing my bandaged hands over my mouth to hush the noise that escapes me.

Magnus rushes around me, drawing a gun from who the fuck knows where.

I put my arm out to stop him, to disallow him from going any further.

Cora. She's alive. She's smiling, laughing, and gripping the arm of another girl.

I drag Magnus away, going back behind the wall and letting my weight fall against it, savoring the relief flooding through my body.

Cora is fine. Unharmed. And showing no signs of trauma.

"Was that her?" Magnus keeps the pistol in his grip, not quite ready to holster it.

It suits his whole bad-boy appearance but doesn't match with his genuinely gentle nature. His entire existence is a contradiction and somehow, it totally works for him.

"Yes." I steady my breathing and let my heart take a break from thumping wildly.

"Why didn't you go over there? Talk to her?"

"I don't want her to see me like this." I hold out my hands. "If she doesn't *need* to know then I'd rather her not."

Magnus finally puts away the gun, tucking it behind his back. "Why didn't you get proper medical care?"

"Who said I didn't?" Is there anything he doesn't pick up on?

"I'm not an idiot. I've had my fair share of wounds. Those are going to heal like shit if you don't get them taken care of."

I push myself off the wall. "They're fine."

"Where are you going?"

"Home." I turn to him. "Now that I know Cora is safe..."

"Just because she's okay now doesn't mean what I said is any less true. These people aren't fools, June."

"Okay, well, the more I'm seen with you, the higher my chances of being kidnapped again are. So wouldn't it make sense for me to go home?" If I'm lucky, Carter won't be home, and I can take a nap in peace before my night shift at the bar.

"Let me take you then, drop you off."

"And lead them and you straight to where I live?"

Magnus steps forward, closing the gap between us. “God damn it, June. I’m trying to protect you. Don’t you see that?”

The million-dollar question rattling through me: why?

“Can’t you for one second put yourself in my shoes. What you just felt for Cora, don’t you think that’s how I *still* feel, and have ever since the moment I first saw you? You were in danger the very second I locked my eyes on you and you will remain in danger until either one of us is dead. I take no pleasure in torturing myself with concern. There’s no escaping it now, so please, for the love of all things holy, believe me when I say I’m trying to keep you safe.”

I study his face, the concern lining his brow, the tightness of his jaw, set in a hard line. His eyes pierce through me, begging me to understand what he’s going through. Maybe he really is speaking the truth. Because why would he lie about something like this? How would *that* make any sense? What would he possibly gain from taking time away from his life to look over me? And given my run-in with that creep from the other night, wouldn’t it be smart to have a man wielding a gun lurking in the shadows, ready to leap at the slightest threat?

“Okay,” is all I respond.

He swallows, continuing to stare at me. “Okay?”

I nod. “Yeah. You can take me home.” I owe him that much after he brought me here. Helped me calm down enough to figure out where Cora was and ease the raging nerves that almost had me running through the streets of this city until I found her.

He breaks out into a grin and lets out a laugh. “I really thought I was going to have to throw you over my shoulder and cart you to my car.”

“Is that still an option?” I raise a brow at him and wink.

“Only if you keep tempting me.”

We walk to the vehicle at a much slower pace than the one we took away from it. My body is already feeling lighter at setting my sights on Cora and confirming that she was untouched. There’s still the chance of something happening to

her, but it seems unlikely given the time that has passed. If they were going to, wouldn't they have acted soon after I managed to slip out of their grasp? Maybe Cora isn't on their radar at all, leading me to believe I was right with the original idea I had about it having been an isolated accident. A freak fucking coincidence that I ran into some weirdo who thought I was someone else.

If he hadn't mentioned that a higher-up was pulling his strings, I would have chalked it up to a sick weirdo getting his rocks off on carving up girls. But no, he's a hired hand who gets paid to fulfill his twisted desires.

Magnus opens the door to the black car and climbs in behind me. "Where to, princess?"

*Shit.* I don't really want him to see where I live. Partially because of how private I am, the remaining bits, a heavy embarrassment at the drastic difference from his place to mine. He lives in a literal mansion and I'm slumming it with a bunch of low lives.

"Um, Weber and Sixth," I tell him the closest intersection.

It's not far from here but getting a ride beats having to walk. Especially when danger seems to prowl around every corner.

"What time do you head back out?" Magnus keeps his eyes trained out the window, surveying each person and building we pass.

"A few hours. Why?"

"I'll pick you up."

"That won't be necessary."

"Sure it is." Magnus's features harden again, like he's preparing to fight me on this.

I have half a mind to tell him the wrong time, but I wouldn't put it past him to tear the whole city apart looking for me if I don't show up when I say I will. This might be a battle I'm not capable of winning, given how deadly serious he is about my safety. Perhaps if I humor him, give him what he

wants for an evening or two, he'll realize there is no threat, and he can return to his normally scheduled programming. And I can go back to my own life and the issues that keep piling up.

With the Cora scare, I didn't exactly stop and look for help-wanted signs posted in the windows we passed. I was more focused on finding my friend in one piece, and still alive.

"June." Magnus breaks my concentration.

"Yeah?" I blink over at him.

"That job earlier, the one pizza place."

"What about it?"

"How much would you have made during your shift?"

"I don't know? Why?"

Magnus reaches into his pocket, pulling out a wad of cash sufficient to solve quite a few of my problems. He flips through it and slides off some of the bills. "Will five cover it?"

"You're going to give me *five hundred* dollars?" If I made that much at *one* place, let alone all three of them, I wouldn't be struggling to pay my bills. And I sure as shit wouldn't be living in that disgusting dump.

"Is that not enough?" He tries to get more but I stop him.

"No, that's more than I would have made." I push his hand away. "But I can't accept that."

"Why? It's my fault you got fired."

"How many times do I have to tell you? You had nothing to do with it." But I'm beginning to realize there's no convincing Magnus otherwise.

"What if it was—would you take it then?"

"I'm not looking for a handout."

"I'm not giving one."

I could easily settle the debt I have with Cora with that cash, and maybe even breathe easier at having lost that job earlier. It would give me a tiny cushion of time to not rush into

another gig, and perhaps find something I don't hate. It would provide a bit of freedom, relief, and offer me a chance I wouldn't have had without it. But then it would make me weak, dependent, and give Magnus the idea that I can be bought, or worse, that I expect that from him.

"No strings attached, I promise, princess." He shoves the money into my hand, folding my fingers around it. "Pretend it never happened."

How can I forget something so small to him but so big to me? It might not be much to him, but it's a life-changing amount of cash to me. With it, plus the fifty Cohen managed to force on me earlier, a huge burden has been lifted from my shoulders. Temporary yet monumental.

They say money can't buy happiness, but when it's the main cause of most of your problems, I'd say it's a gigantic contributing factor to having a good or bad life. I'm not after Ferrari's or gold-plated dinnerware, I'd just like a roof over my head that doesn't come with a potential drug-dealing sexist pig using up all the hot water and making passes at me every opportunity he gets.

The car slows to a stop at the intersection I had told them to take me to.

"Which one is yours?" Magnus peers out the window.

"I can walk from here." I reach for the door handle and tug it, but it doesn't budge. "Child-locks, seriously?"

Magnus opens his and steps out, holding his hand for me to take. "I'll escort you the rest of the way."

"No, it's fine, it's just right over there." I vaguely point in that direction.

Magnus sighs. "Will you at least let me put my number in your phone in case you need me?"

I look at him through my lashes, wanting to tell him no. How do I deny such a beautiful man when he's got that puppy dog kind of vibe about him? Well, more like a guard dog.



“Fine.” I pull the thing from my pocket, unlock it and hand it to him.

He pushes a sequence of buttons, his own device ringing in response. “And just in case I need you.”

“What could you possibly need me for?”

Magnus raises his eyebrow and grins. “I could think of a thing or two.”

“I’m sure you could.”

He studies my face, the smile on his fading. Magnus leans down, gently pressing his lips to my cheek. “If you need anything, anything at all.”

My heart stutters at his softness. “Okay.” I meet his gaze one last time. “Thank you.”

“I’ll see you at...” Magnus turns his wrist over to check his watch. “Eight?”

I don’t have to be at work until nine, but I find myself agreeing anyway. “Yeah.”

Magnus climbs into the back of the car, hesitating before closing the door.

I wave at him and use the opportunity of space between us to get moving. The direction they’re parked means they can’t turn down my street, given it’s a one-way and that would be illegal. They’d have to circle the block and come down the other end. I’ll be long gone by then.

The rustling of pavement lets me know they’re driving away, but I don’t look back. I keep going, inching closer to this hell hole I call home. It’s not far, just a few buildings down from where they dropped me off.

Opening the front gate, I steady my breathing to prepare myself for whatever bullshit Carter is about to lay on me. With his less than legit job, his hours fluctuate. Meaning he’s more than likely inside, sprawled out on the couch with a bag of chips next to him and a remote control in his hand. No doubt getting crumbs everywhere like the little leech he is.

I step through the entry of our building. There are four units, two on the left, two on the right. One upstairs on each side, one on the ground level. We live on the top floor of the right in a three-bedroom unit. Immediately, I notice the commotion up the steps at our door. I rush up to them and spot my shit being shoved into a tote.

“What the fuck is going on?” I grab the clothes out of Carter’s grasp. “Get off my stuff.”

“You’ve got to go, J.” Carter shoves his hand across the threshold so I can’t get inside.

“Don’t fucking call me J like we’re friends you fucking low-life.”

Heather stands behind him, her arms crossed over her chest. “He’s right, June.”

“Someone care to explain why I’m being kicked out?”

“What happened to your face?” Heather asks me, but not out of concern, more like she’s trying to prove a point.

“I got mugged, Christ. You’re booting me out because of that? How the fuck does that make any sense?” I thought these two couldn’t get any worse, and somehow they continue to prove me wrong.

“If that’s what you want to call it.” Heather picks my shower caddy off the floor and tosses it into the box with my other belongings. She nudges it toward me with her foot.

“Whatever trouble you got yourself into, is none of our business. But you make it ours when the thugs that are after you come by here and threaten us.” Carter continues to block my path. “Especially those kinds of guys.”

What are they talking about? “Someone came here?”

Heather nervously glances at the ground and nods. “Yep. Luckily Carter was on his way home or who knows what they would have done to me.”

I stare at Carter. “You’re the one who sells drugs, they were probably here for you.”

“They asked specifically for you, June.” Heather exhales and places her hand on Carter’s shoulder. “We can’t have that here.”

“You can’t be serious. I paid my rent; you can’t evict me.”

“We can, and we will.” Carter grips the handle and starts to close me out.

I place my bandaged palm against it. “Where am I supposed to go?”

Carter shrugs. “You’ll figure it out.” He shuts the door in my face, not a care in the world that he threw me to the wolves like this.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my key, shoving it into the lock. But it won’t slide in, not the way it used to. Fuckers already changed the locks on me. I slam my fist against the door, the ache of my injuries reminding me of my fragile state.

Footsteps approach me from behind, and when I raise that same fist to slam it into whoever is coming toward me, I’m stopped.

Magnus holds me from punching him. “Come on.”

“What? How did you...?” That question has multiple meanings.

“Doesn’t matter.” His jaw tightens and he glances at the place I was locked out of. “You’re done here. It’s not safe for you.”

“It’s not safe for me anywhere.” I thought the attack was random. I tried my best to convince myself and Magnus of that. I shoved that knife into that man’s thigh and ran like hell to get away. I was sure I wasn’t followed, that he couldn’t have chased me in his condition.

Maybe Magnus was right after all. Because how else would they have found where I lived?

This wasn’t random. And if they can easily find me here, what else do they know about me?

That same question rattles my core, the one I've asked myself time and time again.

*Why me?*

I study the remains of whatever possessions I have, half-ass shoved into a cheap plastic tote. The shampoo bottle that is currently leaking onto the few clothes Heather and Carter grabbed.

“Unless it’s of sentimental value, leave it.” Magnus slides his hand under my arm. “I’ll get you new.”

“Wh—what?” I let him guide me down the steps one by one, the entire situation still processing in my mind, making my head spin with a plethora of emotions. I glance back, the last few things I owned becoming a blur as we walk out of sight. “I need my...” But I draw a blank. I’ve had less and survived; do I really actually *need* anything from that mess of a box?

Magnus pauses to listen to me. “What is it?”

“My charger,” is the only thing I can come up with.

“I can buy you a new one.” He continues to help me down the stairs. “Your phone could use an upgrade, too.”

“I don’t want—”

Magnus places his hands on my shoulders and forces me to look at him. “You’re getting a new phone, a new charger, an entire new wardrobe, and better beauty products than whatever off-brand shit I just saw in that box. You will have a bed to sleep in, a safe place to rest your beautiful head. And for Christ’s sake, you are letting our doctor tend to these wounds.”

“I don’t have health insurance,” I blurt out.

“Is that why you didn’t go to the hospital?”

“Among other reasons.” Can my level of embarrassment rise any further?

“Not a concern. It will all be taken care of.”

“You can’t just—”

“I can, and I will. Not up for discussion, princess.” Magnus settles his palm on the small of my back.

We step out onto the sidewalk, the sun blaring in my face, the realization that I have to start completely over again settling into my core.

I’ve worked my ass off, and for what, to be kicked out by my piece of shit ex-friend and her sad excuse of a boyfriend? I get their concern for their own safety, but do they seriously have no regard for mine whatsoever? How can someone be so fucking cruel and inconsiderate? Did they even run it by our other two roommates, or did they decide my fate themselves? I wouldn’t be surprised if this was all Carter’s doing. Hell, I wouldn’t put it past him to have bribed a couple of his druggie buds to come by and cause a scene to make it seem like I was stirring up more shit than I really was. The bruises and cuts all over my body making his ruse that much more believable in his master plan to ruin my fucking life.

Magnus opens the car door for me. “Let’s get you home.”

I climb in and rest my head against the seat, because what other choice do I have?

“I want to kill him,” I mutter under my breath, fully meaning the words.

Magnus exhales and pats my thigh. “In due time, princess.”

## DOMINIC



“We’re going to have to set some ground rules.” I shift my gaze toward the stairs, where the sleeping beauty rests in our spare bedroom.

I got home a couple of hours ago from doing recon with Hayes to find out that Bryant brought June to our house, with the intention of allowing her to stay here. Whether that is temporary or permanent is lost on me. It was short notice, but I did what I could to get a few things for her to make her time a little more comfortable.

This new arrangement is a mixture of good and bad with the way this situation is unfolding. On one hand, having June in our home means that we can keep an eye on her, and do what we can to maintain her safety. But on the other, it will confirm to all our enemies that she is our weakness, the thing that could potentially be our downfall. Something we all agreed we would not permit. And here we are, each of us experiencing romantic feelings for the same woman.

There is a minimal chance that this will end well for any of us.

Even if we manage to win this war, then what? The three of us will start another over her.

“Toilet seats need to be put down.” Bryant is the first to chime in.

I rub my temple. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

He plucks a grape from the bowl sitting in front of him and pops it into his mouth. “What’s wrong with manners?”

“Nothing. Nothing is wrong with that. But I’m referring to more serious matters.” Like where she’ll be sleeping, the distance we should keep regarding our personal and professional lives, and a general rule of keeping it in our pants. It won’t bode well if there is any temptation, and if we establish that boundary now, the better off we’ll be.

June appears around the corner, rubbing her eyes but somehow appearing more beautiful than ever. Something about that just woken up look makes me want to cross the space between us and pick her up and take her back to bed. But I don’t. I remain stone-faced and still, not moving an inch in her direction.

“You guys talking about me?” She walks barefoot down the steps and into the kitchen with us.

Hayes unglues himself from his phone and plants his gaze on her. A side of him I’ve never known before. Not much can distract that man from his work.

Bryant meets June halfway, putting his arm around her shoulders and tugging her toward him. “You hungry?”

She shakes her head. “Not really. Do you happen to have an extra toothbrush I could use?”

“Your bathroom has been stocked,” I tell her. “Bryant mentioned you didn’t have your toiletries, so I sent for them.”

“You *sent* for them?”

“Yes. If you find they are not suited for your taste, I will replace them with whatever you wish.” Although I can’t imagine she’ll have many complaints as I had our driver get the best of what was available. “I took the liberty of having your clothes washed. They’re hanging in your closet with a few other items.”

“Um, thank you. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Not necessary,” all three of us guys say at once.

I clear my throat. “You should eat something though. What would you like?” I walk over to the fridge and look inside.

The doorbell rings and I shift my attention toward it.

Bryant exits without a word, and a minute later, he arrives with a bag of food in his grasp.

“Seriously?” I glare at him, wishing I could somehow shake some sense into his empty skull. “That’s it. Last one. No more.”

“Forever?” He pouts like I kicked his puppy.

“Until this is done.”

“Until what’s done? Me? I can leave.” June folds her arms and takes a cautious step back.

“No, not you,” I weakly reassure her. How can I make her understand the severity of our situation without telling her the truth? That would only put her more in danger, and I’m not willing to do that to her.

Bryant pulls container after container out of the takeout bag.

Chinese. He’s risking our lives over Chinese.

“Then what?” June’s gaze pierces through me.

“It’s complicated.”

Bryant pulls the plates from the cupboard and reaches in to grab some silverware. “What he’s trying to say is...”

Hayes smacks Bryant when he walks by him. “Bryant, keep your mouth shut.”

“Leave it to you to be okay with leaving me in the dark.” June glares at Hayes and I’m grateful that the attention has shifted from me.

I don’t want to withhold from her, but it’s the only thing I can think of to prioritize her safety.

“Can we eat, in peace, for once?” Bryant opens the first container, revealing fried rice.

“I’m not hungry,” June says again.



Hayes approaches the selection of food. Plopping some of the rice, General Tso's, and an eggroll onto a plate. He reaches into the fridge and pulls out one of his Dr. Peppers and strolls over to our dining room table. Dragging the chair back, he turns to June. "Eat."

The two of them have a momentary standoff but then she ends up claiming the seat. Maybe she realized it was three against one and her odds of walking out of this room without feeding herself were slim to none.

We might disagree on a lot, but her well-being is one of the few things we have in common.

Bryant slides a full plate across the counter to me. "Here."

"Thank you." I nod and take his offering. "But I mean it, this is the last time. You'll have to put those cooking classes to use."

June brings her napkin to her mouth, chewing through her bite before speaking. "You took culinary classes?"

Hayes chimes in. "Bryant has taken a course on pretty much everything. Culinary, photography, botany, pottery... pretty much anything that ends in a 'y'."

"Jack of all trades." June opens her drink and takes a sip.

"Master of none." Bryant slides into the seat next to her.

"Better than a master of one." She elbows him and smiles.

I hate the jealousy that courses through me at their interaction. I shouldn't feel that way. She is not mine. She is not theirs. She is no one's. Yet, the envy still slips into my veins at wanting that look of admiration to be at me.

I note the tenseness in Hayes' jaw, telling me he's experiencing a similar emotion, too. Which is exactly why we need to amend the house rules to accommodate our newest member.

"How are your wounds?" I ask her.

Bryant informed me that she did not receive proper medical care after what had happened, and that he had our on-

call doctor tend to them when they arrived at the house. I haven't seen the extent of the damage, but with the visible bruising and discoloration, it would only make sense to have a professional care for them.

"Better." She flits her gaze at me.

"Good. Are you in any discomfort?" I haven't had a chance to speak with the doctor about her condition.

"No, he gave me something for the pain and inflammation, and used some fancy antibiotic. Said it would help with healing."

"You should make it a point to get some rest in the meantime, too," I add.

"I took a pretty solid nap." She reaches into her back pocket to pull out her phone. "I need to get to work here in a bit."

"Work?" Hayes and I speak at the same time.

We really must get out of each other's heads.

"Yeah, I have to be there at nine. It's not far, I can walk from here."

"No," all three of us blurt out.

"You better be saying no to me walking, and not me going." June shoves a piece of chicken into her mouth, chewing it and glancing between all of us.

I cool my rising temper. "I think what we meant to say is, you should take the evening off. Spend it in bed, binge-watching television, or whatever it is you enjoy doing. We have a state-of-the-art entertainment room with access to anything you'd like, all at your fingertips. I can send for whatever food or drink you prefer."

"I have to go to work," June insists.

"No." I clench my jaw.

"Am I being held captive here? Against my will?" She stares across the table at me.

“Of course not.”

“Then I am going to leave here in twenty minutes and go to work. Either I can walk, or you can have your *driver* take me.” She uses air quotes to enunciate the word driver. “This living arrangement, while absolutely appreciated, is completely temporary, and not necessary. As soon as I’m able, I’ll be out of your hair and no longer burdening your lives.”

Hayes speaks up. “J, you don’t understand, it’s not sa—.”

“Safe?” She cuts him off. “It’s not safe for me out there? Guess what Co, I’ve made it this far without you, I’ll be fine on my own.” June exhales and places her napkin on her plate. “I’m grateful for your hospitality, I really am. But I won’t be in your debt because of the shit storm that is wrecking my life. I’ve never needed anything from anyone, and I don’t plan on starting today.”

“That’s not what this is about.” Hayes stands when she does. “Don’t blame them for my mistakes.”

“It’s too late for that, Co.” June storms off, up the stairs and out of view.

“Dude, what the fuck did you do to her?” Bryant asks the question rattling my own mind.

Hayes runs his hand through his hair and slumps down into his seat. It’s strange to see him so...disheveled. Especially over a female. Usually, he’s mad about not being able to kill someone or the lack of ammunition at our local supply center.

“You wouldn’t get it.” He leans his head back and sighs. “She’ll never forgive me.”

“Have you tried...” Bryant stretches his arm across the chair June was sitting in. “Talking to her? Believe it or not, communication is kind of important.” He focuses on me next. “This whole keeping shit from her isn’t going to go over well for us. I think it’s best we just be honest about what’s going on.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“She’s not like the rest of them, Dom, she can handle it. The one thing I’ve learned about her is that she doesn’t trust anyone.” Bryant nods at Hayes. “I’m guessing because of this fucking idiot.” He turns back to me. “We’ve given her no reason to trust us. Do you really think being secretive is going to do us any favors?”

“No, but—”

“I have followed you for this long, and I would go to the ends of the earth for you. You two are family to me. And I know she means something to both of you. So please, if you care about her, about us, then you’d at least consider what I’m saying to be true.” Bryant grabs his plate and June’s. “I’m the people person, remember. The one thing I’m a master at. Put a little faith in me.”

I hate that a strong part of me thinks he’s speaking the truth. That his words hold some value and that confessing to June would be the best thing for us all. But if we do, there is no turning back. She could react poorly, take off and put herself in more danger than she already was. The reality of the situation could be uglier than she imagines, scaring her away forever.

Why would that be an issue though? Why does it matter that we keep her near, when doing so is the riskiest thing of all?

I’m being selfish for wanting her, and in our line of work, that’s not a luxury we can afford.

I should have stayed away the first time I saw her and felt that magnetic pull. I should have never entered that random bar ever again. But there was something about her. Something dark that drew me in. A familiar depth to her that had me going in there every chance I could spare. I told myself that if I didn’t engage with her, it would be fine. And I managed that. I stole little moments when she wasn’t looking, just to be near her. But with each passing day, and each disgusting disgrace of manhood that made a pass at her, a simmering rage built inside of me to be there, *just in case*.

I've never wanted to be wrong more than in that moment I saw him follow her down that hallway and into the bathroom. I could smell his ill-intent like a cheap aftershave, reeking so potently that the only thing I knew to do was to show him who's boss.

I could hear his words when I entered that space, that she had a fuckable mouth. A declaration I knew with certainty was not welcomed in that moment. He followed it up by telling me that we could share, further proving he had every intention of forcing himself on her and solidifying the thirst I had for his blood.

I beat him but held back knowing that she was there. That I was probably frightening her more than she already had been by his sick advances.

I was certain she would fear me, because she had every right to. That's the effect I have on people who know me, and most who just catch a glimpse of me. Ruthless. Cruel. Brutal. Those are the words I hear whispered when I walk by. Let them believe what they want, especially if it's true.

But when June looked into my eyes, it was like she saw past that, or somehow embraced it for what it was. She wasn't afraid. And that's why, when she stepped forward and grabbed onto my face, I lost all control, melting into, and becoming one with her. The only thing on my mind was bringing her every ounce of pleasure she deserved. Because for someone to face something as evil as I am, and to dive headfirst without reservation, I knew I had found something absolutely rare.

And that alone is why I believe Bryant. That June might not react poorly to the truth. She saw plenty of it that night and still wanted me, perhaps even more once she was exposed to the real me. If anything, I should be afraid of her for going against normal human nature to cower in the presence of such darkness. No, she walked straight into the line of fire like the vixen she is.

"Fine," I finally say. "Not now, but later. I'll accompany her to her night shift. In the meantime, you two have work to do."

Hayes perks up. “Seriously?”

“Do you have something better to do?”

“No. I mean, you’re going to tell her? Really?”

“Yes. At least, the parts she needs to know.” I rise from my seat and take my plate to the kitchen.

Bryant relieves me of it and scrapes the contents into the trash before loading it into the dishwasher. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Of course you do, it was *your* idea.” Hayes stands again. “I gave everything up. *Everyone*. I put it all in the past. Now you’re telling me I didn’t have to? That I could have been with her this *whole* time?”

“What are you talking about dude?” Bryant wipes his hands on a towel and tosses it onto the counter.

“Nothing, fucking forget it.” Hayes shuts us down and takes off in the same direction June had gone, only I imagine he’s going to his room, not hers. He’s fuming, and between the two of them, there are too many emotions running wild.

“I’ve never seen him this moody.” Bryant closes the takeout boxes and places them in the fridge.

“He’ll be fine.”

But a part of me wonders if he will. I’ve seen the things he’s capable of. Hayes, the person that he is today, was born in blood—both literally and figuratively. Men like me, we came from the womb cold and ruthless, it was ingrained in our DNA, but Hayes, he was turned into a hardened psychopath by the shit life threw at him. He endured loss after loss until one day, he snapped, something breaking in him that could never be repaired. He’s fueled by violence, and it’s not that we don’t share that in common, but mine is a natural response, where his is a conscious choice. And in a lot of ways, that’s a much more potent attribute.

People fear me because I am pure evil.

People underestimate Hayes because he chooses it.

People misjudge Bryant because he looks it.

The three of us combined, a deadly force not many dare to fuck with.

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The ride to June's work is quiet. She sits opposite of me, her arms folded across her chest like she's pouting that I insisted on escorting her to work. She's going to be even more pissed when I go in with her, and sit out her shift in my corner booth.

I have other things that I need to get done, work that requires my attention, but it will have to wait until I'm certain that she is home and safe. It's not ideal, that's for damn sure, yet I do it anyway, because the thought of something happening to her when I could have prevented it eats away at me.

I'm already furious enough with myself that danger managed to find her. I thought I was doing the right thing by keeping away once I crossed that line with her. But little did I know that Bryant and Hayes had their own thing going with her, too, putting June deeper in the line of fire.

None of us should have gotten involved.

Now there's no possibility of going back. Our enemies wouldn't believe we cut ourselves off cold turkey, and they'd use her as collateral on the chance that it would work. The only way to keep her safe now is to keep her close, and do everything we can to protect her.

"You're not going in there," she tells me when I climb out of my side of the SUV and approach her.

"I am."

"No, you're not."

"Come on." I grip her under her arm and nudge her toward her place of work.

"I'm not a child." June pulls herself from my grasp.

“Then don’t act like one.”

June narrows her gaze at me and sucks in a breath, her wild eyes telling me she’s considering all the things she’d like to do to me...just not in a fun way. Although, fun is a subjective term.

I steady my stare back at her. “Until you are no longer in danger, someone will escort you to and from wherever you please. If you have a problem with that, tough. The alternative will likely result in your untimely death. Now, would you like to step inside or perhaps you don’t enjoy being punctual?”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Neither did I.”

“Clearly you did, you’re the one enforcing it.”

“My apologies for caring whether you live or die.”

“I’m going to prove you wrong. This is all one big misunderstanding.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” I place my hand on her lower back, my other outstretched toward the entrance of the dive bar she spends most of her nights in.

June shakes me off once more and walks to the door, each of her footsteps carrying the weight of her growing annoyance at me.

I grip the handle and pull the thing open, following her into the poorly lit establishment. Without saying another word to her, I mosey over to my booth, unbuttoning my jacket and folding it neatly in half. I ensure the table is dry and free of any other debris, then set it carefully down. All the while listening in on the conversation June is having with the man named Jack who owns the place.

“Did you two come together?” He asks her.

“No,” she says firmly.

“Oh. I thought you did.” Jack pauses and shifts his tone. “What happened to your face?”



His first thought was to question her about me and not the very visible injuries she sustained? What a dick.

“I got mugged.”

“Damn, that’s rough. You okay?”

“Other than looking like shit, yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

Despite the bruising and cuts on her skin, June is far from *looking like shit*. She’s just too oblivious to notice her own beauty. It’s frustrating, really. Her simple yet elegant features. She’s aware enough to flaunt her body and use it to her advantage, but I’m not sure she realizes how stunning she truly is, not just eye-catching in the sense of getting extra tips.

“Okay, well, the table in the corner hasn’t ordered yet if you want to grab them before Jane does. And obviously, high roller over there.”

I settle into my seat and wait for her to arrive.

Does he not realize how loud he speaks and that his voice carries throughout the bar, to the point that anyone who *wanted* to pay attention to what he was saying could?

June makes it a point to go to the other customers first, despite knowing I tip better than anyone in this place. I’m not bothered by it though, I prefer her to do what she wants, so long as she’s maintaining her safety.

She drops off their order at the bar and then continues on her way over to me. “Your usual?” Her voice is missing that usual sly flirtatious tone it typically had prior to us fucking in the bathroom. It would probably still be there had I not completely disrupted her life.

“Yes.”

Not wasting another second, she turns on her heel and goes to the bar, mumbling my drink to Jack and taking the tray filled with full glasses to the other patrons. She drops off a refill to a lone woman at a table, and slides by the counter again to get mine.

“Thank you,” I tell her as she strolls away without exchanging even a glance.

She's pissed and somehow, I love it—my cock throbbing in my pants at having gotten under her skin so damn badly. I shouldn't feel this way, want her this fiercely, but I do, and to think I can sit here all night without doing something about it will be the biggest challenge my self-control has ever faced.

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*T*he night progresses that way, her floating around to her tables and then dropping off a drink when mine gets low. I cautiously sip the decadent bourbon, savoring each last bit the same way I'd love to do to June.

I shift my mind from remembering our night together, the heated passion we shared in an adrenaline-fueled desire. The tension had been building for weeks but I wasn't quite sure it was reciprocated until she took that step forward and applied her lips to mine. I was completely lost in her, the chaos of the world falling into a slow-motion vortex that I temporarily escaped from. For those fleeting moments of our bodies becoming one, the only thing on my mind was her. Not the war. Not the many threats. Not the possibility that a man half my age might steal the empire I spent my entire life working toward. Just me and her and nothing else.

I knew I couldn't keep her. Couldn't pursue her. That I had to go back to the way things were before. And yet days went by and the thought of her wouldn't leave me. I was sucked in, hook-line-and-sinker. Completely shaken by the idea that something that fucking rare existed. That it was possible for my thoughts to be of anything other than violence and bloodshed.

Granted, that was exactly the thing that led us to that moment.

June was an angel but with tattered wings and a devilish grin, a darkness matching mine I couldn't stay away from.

The same that stands before me today, angry and brooding to and from, as if I'll be bothered by it and leave her alone.

Doesn't she realize it only makes me want her more? That defiance, disobedience, that stubborn-headed *I can do it all on my own* vibe she has.

"Stop looking at me like that." June appears in front of me, her hand on her hip.

"Like what?" I should be checking the notifications popping up on my phone, not shadowing her with my gaze. This was obviously a terrible idea coming here tonight. I should have tasked Hayes or Bryant. But even then, would they have been able to withstand her alluring presence?

"You know what you're doing."

"Do I?" I thought I was being discreet but perhaps she's more in tune with my desire than I realized.

"Either fuck me or leave me alone."

I blink at her, a genuine bit of shock consuming me. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She remains still, unmoved, completely dead-ass serious.

"Is that option on the table?" My own mouth betrays me by asking the question I should have kept to myself.

June glances over her shoulder then back at me. "Not *literally* the table." She nods toward the kitchen area. "Staff bathroom. One minute. Don't keep me waiting." She takes off in that direction, disappearing out of sight.

Is she really implying what I think she is? Right here? Right now? After everything that's happened? Especially with how mad she is at me?

Who am I to question a woman who knows what she wants?

It would be wrong of me to not fulfill her desires, even if they go against everything I was trying to enforce. Boundaries. Rules. Distance.

To hell with it all.

I slip out of the booth and follow where she had gone, completely acting with confidence that I belong in this employee-only section. Who would dare to stop me anyway?

I knock lightly on the bathroom door, June's healing but still battered face greeting me on the other side.

She opens it up enough to let me in and shuts it behind me, locking it and turning to me. "This means nothing. And it doesn't mean I'm any less mad."

This is the part where I regain control, walk out of here, and put a stop to what's about to happen. Instead, I reach out and pull her toward me. I glance down at her from my position towering over her, taking in her beauty from this angle.

June reaches around, her hand finding my already growing erection through my pants. She grins and stands taller to bring her lips to mine. "Make it quick."

"Oh, love, I'm anything but quick." I run my hand up the nape of her neck and onto the base of her skull, gripping her hair and tilting her head up to look at me.

Our eyes lock onto each other, and I realize, if I'm going to back out, this is the time.

She meets my mouth with hers once again, sealing the fate we already decided when I stepped foot in this bathroom. Hell, when I walked into this bar. I was a fool for ever thinking any differently. June breaks away, flipping herself over and unbuttoning her shorts, tugging them over her delicious ass. She spreads her legs as far as her discarded clothing will allow, and reaches forward to hold onto the single sink basin.

"You going to fuck me, or should I do it myself?" June looks at me through the mirror in front of her.

"You wouldn't."

"Don't tell me what I would or wouldn't do." She raises her right hand from where she was holding on and shifts it toward her pussy.

I reach around and grab onto it as she slides her middle finger down her slit. "Mine," I growl at her.

“Then act like it.”

How on Earth is it possible that I am such a feared man and here she is, nearly a foot shorter than me, a tiny little thing, half my age, calling the shots like she runs the place?

And why is it so fucking hot?

I cower behind her, gripping her thigh and grazing my mouth over her wetness. I give myself a quick taste, sighing at how fucking delectable she is. Just as I remembered from our time spent together in that *other* bathroom.

She pulses in response and lets out a sigh. “I don’t have all night.” June holds a condom between her fingers out to me.

I take it from her, biting off the corner of the wrapper and spitting it onto the ground while simultaneously taking my other hand and gliding two digits against her clit, rubbing in a circle, and dipping them into her pussy.

What can I say? I’ve always been rather good at multitasking.

Once I’m sheathed, I remove my soaked fingers and step closer.

Her hair brushes against my face, the scent of it a mixture of citrus and honey.

I press myself into her, the tip of my cock aligning with her hole, pushing through the tightness and spreading her to fit me inside.

She lets out a moan, dragging my hand up to her face to cover her mouth.

The other I keep on her hip to steady her into me.

I go easy for the first few thrusts, letting her body get adjusted to the fullness, but the second I sense her tenseness diminish, I pick up the intensity.

June reciprocates, slamming herself down onto my shaft and moaning against my hand.

A knock rattles the door, stopping us completely mid-motion.

“June, you okay in there?” Jack, her boss.

I slide my palm down her lips and rest it against her throat.

“Yeah,” she calls out, her voice faltering. “Just changing my bandages. I’ll be right out.”

“Okay.” He lingers for another second. “Mister bourbon neat disappeared, but he left his jacket behind.”

Her gaze flicks to me in the mirror. “He could have stepped outside to make a phone call.”

I rock myself back until the tip is barely in, and then forward, slowly moving my cock inside her again, not wanting to spare another second because of the interruption.

June tips her head up, enjoying the renewed friction. She tightens around me, her climax building with each steady motion.

I slither my hand along her side and around her front, slipping it under her bra and covering her breast. Pinching her nipple, I place my other palm over her mouth, thrusting deeper into her taut pussy, not caring at all about the man inches away on the other side of the door.

Jack adds, “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

June moves her body into mine, my cock growing harder in response. She manages to reach for the faucet, turning it on and giving us a little bit of a sound barrier for our forbidden sexcapades.

The sound of Jack’s footsteps let us know that he finally walked away.

I lean into her and whisper in her ear, “Come for me.” I slow my pace but maintain the depth, sending her spiraling into climax, mine following in tandem, exploding together in beautiful chaos. I ride out the wave with her and pull myself free, sliding the condom off and tossing it into the wastebin.

June pulls up her shorts, securing her outfit and washes her hands.

“Well, that was unexpected,” I tell her.

She turns, dropping the paper towels she used to dry her hands with on top of the used rubber. “And meant nothing.” She pats my chest. “Don’t forget that.” June reaches for the handle of the door. “Wait a minute before you follow me out.” She leaves me behind without another word, only continuing to show me just how she cannot be tamed.

And further instilling how badly I want to make her mine.

Both a contradiction and yet here I am, willing to do whatever it takes.

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## JUNE



I'm living in a house with three men I want nothing more than to fuck on a regular—unattached—basis, and yet, I'm not supposed to be sleeping with any of them.

“June, did you hear me?” Dominic snaps his fingers in front of my face.

The same ones that were knuckle deep in my pussy last night in the employee bathroom at Jack's bar.

“Yeah, I get it. No banging each other.” I point between them. “Does this count for you guys, too?” Partially sarcasm, but one can never be too sure.

“No one, and I repeat, no one,” Dominic looks to all of us. “Is exchanging bodily fluid in this house.”

“But what about—”

Dom cuts Magnus off mid-sentence. “But nothing.”

Magnus crinkles his brows. “I was going to say sharing drinks.”

Dom's jaw tightens, something he does regularly when he's annoyed. Or frustrated. Or pretty much experiencing any emotion. “You know what I mean.”

Is he trying to convince himself or us? Because I'm pretty sure he was a willing participant in last night's shenanigans. And if what he's attempting to enforce is true, does that mean it's okay for me and him to fuck, but not the rest of the guys?



That's going to be a hard no from me.

It's all or nothing.

Although, despite wanting to strangle Cohen for leaving me all those years ago, I'd still like to see if we still have the same insane chemistry we did when we were kids. We never did have sex, even though I wanted to. He was always wary and wanted to make sure we waited until I was older and could think more rationally about such a big decision. Little did we know, we didn't have the luxury of time on that one, and instead, I lost my v-card to some loser I didn't care about when I was fifteen, starting off my sex life with a one-minute interaction that resulted in minimal pleasure on my behalf. Not to mention a sexual hunger that was awoken and pretty much has been insatiable since then.

I've fucked Dom twice and Magnus once, and despite them being the best I've ever had, there's still *something* missing. It's not like I could choose just one of them anyway, nor would I want to. I'm not a solo partner kind of person. I'd never be satisfied tied down and I refuse to settle for anything I don't want.

So, for now, I'll stay in this house, and have sex with whichever will screw me, even if it's a secret from the rest of them.

What they don't know won't hurt them.

"Fine, no fucking. What's next?" Magnus sips his coffee and takes a bite of his bagel.

Something about the way his tattooed arm makes his shirt bulge sends a fire straight between my legs. I stop myself from gnawing my lip and staring too hard. I had a world-class orgasm yesterday and somehow, I'm roaring for more. I unlock my phone, swiping through my apps until I find the one I'm looking for. The screen alerts me that there's only one day left until my period starts, explaining why I'm in ultra-horny mode.

Dom's device buzzes but he ignores it. "I think now would be an appropriate time to fill June in on the severity of the

situation.”

Cohen lowers his mug onto the counter, a bit harder than normal. “Is that really necessary?”

I glance over at him. “What’s your problem, Co? You don’t trust me?”

His blue gaze settles on me. “Has nothing to do with you, J.”

“Then what?” I point to the other two men. “Magnus and Dom have no issue telling me the truth. You’re the only one who refuses.”

“It’s for good reason,” Dominic adds in Cohen’s defense. “I was hesitant, too.”

“What changed your mind?” I ask him.

“Your safety is our main concern.” Dom’s phone vibrates again. “And we can’t ensure that if you aren’t aware of a few aspects of what’s going on.”

“What, like that you’re in the mafia?” I let out a laugh but none of them join in on the humor.

Instead, their faces show a mixture of surprise and shock, none of them saying anything.

“Oh,” I glance at Magnus. “You weren’t joking.”

Honestly, it makes sense. How else would the three of them have everything that they do? Between the mansion, the private security, their expensive taste in booze, and pretty much everything else, along with the other details I’ve picked up on but haven’t paid much attention to. They have enemies, they disappear at all hours of the day and night, not to mention my very first close encounter with Dominic. What else was I expecting? Him to be a teacher or something?

They’re incredibly secretive and if my declaration was true, it’s for good reason.

It’s not like you can go around telling everyone you’re in a dangerous and hella illegal line of work.

I shrug. “Okay, and?” Because that can’t be the whole big reveal. Obviously, it’s nothing to discount, but there is clearly another layer to this mystery I’ve yet to unravel.

“I fucking told you.” Magnus smacks Cohen’s arm and glares at Dominic.

“Told who what?” I give Magnus my attention.

“That you wouldn’t freak out.”

“It’s going to take a little more than that to surprise me.”

Cohen drops his head into his hands, his elbows planted on the counter. “I can’t fucking believe this,” he mutters.

I ignore him and repeat my question. “But really, what’s *actually* happening?”

“We’re at war,” Magnus speaks up.

Dom raises his hand to cut Magnus off. “Yes, what he’s saying is true. There’s been a shift in management, and we are set to take over the operation. We’re getting some pushback from rivals who wish to hijack that control, meaning everyone in contact with us is essentially at risk.”

I nod at him to continue and bring my mug to my lips, drawing in a mouthful of the strong coffee courtesy of Magnus.

“Our enemies have deemed you a weakness, and will use that to their advantage to throw us off and gain the upper hand.”

“That explains what that guy said,” I recall the evening of my kidnapping.

Cohen speaks up, his stare locked onto me. “What was it?”

“Something about choosing the wrong side.”

“One of Beckett’s minions,” Cohen tells us.

“What’s a Beckett?” I bite off a chunk of the remaining bacon strip on my plate, chewing it and waiting for one of them to tell me.

“Not what, *who*.” Magnus comes to my rescue. “Simon Beckett. The leader of the group, trying to overthrow us.”

“Ohh.” I piece the puzzle together in my head, a part of it not making sense. “What happened to the previous leader?”

“Dead.” The three of them say in unison.

Dominic shifts his posture. “I’ve been training with him for most of my life, as his main advisor, to take over when he retired. The transition was supposed to be seamless. Turns out, he fell before that happened, rather abruptly. His wife has been overseeing most operations since his death, but she wants out.” His shoulders tense. “I should have been the obvious benefactor, but Beckett has made it a point to rally troops to claim the throne for himself.”

It’s amazing how much they’ll confess once they get started. A second ago, they were too tense to say a word, now they’re answering every question I toss their way.

“Hence the war.”

I spin my mug back and forth on the counter. “So, you’re not just *in* the mafia, you *are* the mafia. Okay, okay. Boss dies, you take over, Simon won’t allow it.” Suddenly, an idea dawns on me. “Why not just kill him then?”

Did I really just suggest murdering a man to eliminate their problems? And not be bothered by it at all?

“Don’t you think we would have done that if it were that simple?” Cohen runs his hand through his blonde hair.

I look at him, finally take him in. The soft features that have been hardened over time. The sweet, innocent boy who is now haunted by a constant darkness I only now noticed. Is this why he never came for me? Was this new life of his more important than the promises we made to each other that summer? I shake my head to rid myself of the thought. What’s done is done, there’s no going back and changing the past. And if I could, would I even want to?

“What Hayes is saying,” Magnus chimes in. “Is that the situation is a bit more complicated. We can’t kill Beckett for

the same reasons he can't kill us. We're protected, we're smart, and we're dangerous. As is he. Well, for the most part."

Dominic clears his throat. "It's all about strategy. Getting his men to turn on him, sabotaging his efforts, making him look like a bad choice."

"Choice?"

Dom nods. "Yes. The wife that took over, gets the final say on who she wants to hand the reins over to."

"That's fucking stupid."

He shrugs. "I don't make the rules."

"Then why follow them?"

His phone goes off once more, this time pulling his attention from my face. His expression gives nothing away to what the notification might say. It could have been anything from a winning lottery ticket to a death in the family and I'd have no idea.

"You good?" Magnus asks him.

"I need to go." Dom shoves the thing into his pocket.

I glance at the clock. "Me too."

"No," Dom basically growls.

"Excuse me?" I climb off the chair and grab my plate. "I have work."

"You had work last night." He steadies his gaze on me.

"And this morning, and afternoon, and tonight. Well, after my first one today, I'll be job hunting, *then* I'll be at the bar again. Get with the program."

"That's unacceptable."

I slide my dish into the sink and stroll around the counter, slapping Dominic on the back on my way around him. "Good talk." I continue toward the stairs, turning around and glancing between the three men staring in my direction. "Which of you are escorting me?"

They look at each other, their expressions lined with surprise.

“I will.” Magnus beams and raises his hand.

I had a hunch it would be him, considering Dom has other plans, and Cohen gives off vibes like I’m a ticking time bomb. He’s playing a solid game of hot potato and he refuses to lose.

“Wait.” Dom steps away from where I had left him and focuses on me. “Magnus will accompany you now. Hayes will join you this evening. But I request that you come home in between shifts.”

I cross my arms over my chest and study the gorgeous man in front of me. Nearly every ounce of me wants to say no, because he’s not the boss of me, but on the other hand, he *did* ask nicely. And if I want him to keep fucking me like he did last night, I should probably comply with him occasionally.

Still, though, it’s not an option to obey him. I need to find another job. “I can’t.”

“You can, and you will.” His demeanor hardens.

“No.” I stare at him, matching his intensity.

Magnus jumps between us, his hands out. “Okay, as much as I’d love to see you two go at it, you’re both wearing way *too* many clothes.” When neither of us budes, he continues toward me. “I’ll go with her, Dom, it’ll be fine.”

Dominic slowly shifts his stone-cold gaze to Magnus. “It won’t, and you know it. You’re being naïve and reckless.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s my middle name.” Magnus reaches my side and stops, his hand resting on my back.

Dominic steps closer, his voice deepening. “I said no touching.”

“Actually, you said no swamping fluids, and unless I have a medical condition, I’m unaware of, this is not off-limits.” Magnus drags me to his chest and throws his arms around me, smothering me in a hug.

One I didn't realize I needed until I was wrapped in it. It's suffocating, but I relax into it anyway, enjoying it while it lasts.

He releases me a second later, my body itching to be near him again.

I blame those damn pre-period hormones. I'm horny, filled with rage, and desperate for cuddles. All three things are a complete contradiction of one another.

"Don't test me." Dominic tightens his fist and I'm not entirely sure if he realizes he's doing it. "You two will come back here when you're done. End of discussion."

I step around Magnus to stand in front of him. "No, not *end of discussion*. You might be the boss of him, but you're not the boss of me. This living arrangement, it's temporary, and I won't put my life on hold because of it. If I don't pick up another job, it will completely fuck up my entire plan."

Although, not having rent to pay, that makes saving for my own place a bit easier. I shouldn't be this harsh on Dom, but if I don't stand up to him, no one will, and I seem to be the only one he'll back down from.

"How much?" Dominic shoves his hand into his pocket, pulling out a money clip similar to the one I've seen Cohen and Magnus have. Engraved, fancy, and stuffed full of cash. "Name your price and you can quit working right now."

"Not going to work, I already tried." Magnus grips my shoulders and rests his chin on the top of my head. "You're wasting your time, Dom."

I glance over at Cohen, watching him watch us in silence while he sips his coffee.

"Maybe you didn't offer enough." Dominic takes the entire wad of bills out from under the clip while walking over to us. "Here."

I don't even bother looking at it. "No. You can't buy me." I sense his frustration, my guilt following suit. "But, because my uterus feels like it's about to fall out, I will grant you the afternoon."

The idea of wandering aimlessly scouring windows for help-wanted signs sounds hella unappealing given the current state of my female reproductive system. Instead, maybe I'll use the time between gigs to take a freaking nap or do something I don't do often, relax.

"Are you not at all concerned about the danger you're in?" Dom remains with his hand outstretched like I might actually take his offering.

I reach for it, the clip, too, shoving them back together and into his pocket. "Not really."

"This is serious, June. These men, these people, they'll kill you and not think twice."

Maybe I should be more scared, threatened by the life I've stumbled upon, but honestly, I embrace it for what it is, because what other choice do I have? I refuse to let them think they've rattled me, that I can't handle whatever comes my way. I've never been one to show weakness, and I won't start now.

"Then let them, they'd probably be doing us all a favor." I don't mean for this to come out as melodramatic as it does, but it's the truth.

If the evil they keep trying to warn me about finds me, then it would eliminate the burden of them having to watch over me, the obligation they feel to maintain my safety. They would be free to go on with their lives the way they were prior to my arrival, and focus on winning the war they're battling. It's not like I'd be leaving much behind either, given I barely have two nickels to rub together. Cora would be bummed, that's for sure, but she'd get over it in time.

Magnus shakes my shoulders and turns me around to face him. "That's not true."

I catch a glimpse of Dom, his brows bunched.

"Do you think we do this for fun?" Dom says from behind me. "We don't invite people into our home. We don't *worry* about anyone. And we don't go to the lengths we have to keep



someone safe. Whether you want it or not, we are going to protect you, respect you, and provide for you.”

Magnus nods his head with each of Dom’s words. “What he said.”

“Yep,” Cohen adds.

My heart aches at the rawness surrounding us. It feels so... unfamiliar.

“I understand you want this situation to be temporary, June, but it’s not.” Dominic exhales. “So, I encourage you to embrace it for what it is. There is no reason for you to want to put yourself in any unnecessary peril to make a few bucks. Whatever you wish for, we can give it to you, without question.”

I meet Magnus’s gaze, an idea coming to me, something they would never be willing to do in a million years. Something money could not buy.

He seems to read my mind, a grin forming on his beautiful face. “Oh, you little vixen.”

I chuckle and shake my head, turning to the rest of the guys. “Fine. I won’t get a third job. But I’m keeping the other two. I won’t be reliant on a man...or three.”

Dominic’s shoulders relax in the slightest. “That’s acceptable, for now. Although, I do hope you reconsider.”

“I’ll think about it.” I stare at him, my gaze lingering on his hands, his mouth, his strong arms. I recall the private moments we’ve shared together. The tenderness and consideration he paid my body, despite his polished and serious exterior. I should fear him, I know this, but instead, it only makes me want him more.

“That’s all I ask.” He pulls his vibrating phone out once again. “I have to go. We can discuss this in detail later.”

I should be afraid of each of these men. They’re all criminals, dangerous ones who do God knows what during their work hours. And yet here I am, more intrigued than ever,

defying them at every chance and growing more attracted to them with each passing moment.

That alone concerns me the most. The attachment I have to them. The fact that despite everything I say and do, I *want* to be here. It's not the potential hazard to my life that freaks me out, it's that the feelings I have for them are developing into something out of my control.

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*M*y shift at Bram's goes exactly how I expect—a bit awkward with Magnus lurking around, but overall, it's a relatively easy one. I enjoy working at the diner the most out of all my employment ventures, mostly because of Bram.

There's something about him that my other bosses don't share. Kindness? Compassion? A genuine consideration for his employees? Maybe I'm not used to basic human decency out of a superior, given that most of my managers have been selfish assholes. Which, I totally get, because it's not their place to be more concerned with their workers than the bottom line, but there's a point you'd think fundamental social skills come into play. Like the douche at the pizza place firing me because of my face. He didn't care at all that I was hurt, only that it might hurt business.

Bram on the other hand has tried to offer me paid time off and goes out of his way to do my job so I don't have to. Which literally defeats the purpose of me being here.

I settle my gaze across the diner at Magnus, Bram hovering above him with a steaming pot of coffee. The two of them are chatting and I can't help but wonder what the heck about. I untie my apron and hang it on the hook with the others and exit from behind the counter.

Their murmurs die down when I approach—never a good sign.

I lean against the booth and cross my arms. “What did I miss?”

“Oh, nothing you don’t already know.” Magnus reaches over and rubs my shoulder with his tattooed hand. “Like how stubborn you are.”

I side-eye him. “I like to call it strong-willed.”

Bram smiles. “That’s it alright.” He nudges the pot toward me. “Now that you’re officially off duty, would you like a cup?”

“To-go, if you don’t mind.” I reach for it. “Here, I can get it.”

Bram swats my hand gently. “Shh.” He looks over to Magnus. “You want one, too?”

“No, thanks though.” Magnus slides out of the booth, standing dangerously close to me. His body grazes mine and he peers down at me. “You okay?”

“Mmhm.” I force a toothless smile and take a step back to put a little space between us, otherwise, I’m going to get fired for indecent exposure when I rip Magnus’s clothes off.

“Come on, princess.” He hooks his index finger around my hand and drags me with him.

His touch is cool and welcoming, unlike the nickname he’s coined for me. It’s starting to grow on me, although I still dislike it. Maybe because it feels so...dishonest, considering I’m nothing close to a princess. If anything, I’m the exact opposite.

A damsel in distress.

Magnus slides a twenty out of his pocket and across the counter, replacing it with the cup of coffee Bram poured for me. “Thanks, again.” He tugs me away before Bram turns around.

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Bram tells him while holding up the bill.

I smile, knowing that Magnus isn’t about to go back and take the money. Finally, someone else gets to benefit from Magnus’s seemingly bottomless pockets. “See you tomorrow, Bram.”

“About that...” Magnus says while opening the door for me. “You have the day off. Or well, the morning.”

I step onto the sidewalk and stop. “What? Why?”

“Bram and I, we agreed that we thought you were a bit overworked and could use a tiny break.”

“But I don’t. I’m fine. I—”

“June.” Magnus stops me from reaching for the handle to reenter the diner. “It’s one shift. Enough for you to sleep in. I can bring you breakfast in bed. Whatever you want.”

“Did Dom put you up to this? To keep me home? Under his thumb?”

“No? I don’t give a shit about Dom. I mean, I do. And he’s totally right.” He shakes his head. “But no, I’m not fucking around. Up until a couple days ago you had *three* jobs. You were kidnapped, and tortured. And if that isn’t enough, you said your period is coming. I care about you, whether you believe it or not.”

I don’t mean for it to happen, but tears well in my eyes. I don’t know if it’s because I’m mad at him for going behind my back, or the influx of hormones making me emotional, but I do something unexpected. I reach toward him, tugging his white t-shirt and wrapping my arms around him, resting my head against his chest.

“Are you...um...hugging me? Willingly?” Magnus holds his arms out to his sides, a bit confused at my sudden public display of affection.

“Shh, go with it.” I squeeze him a little tighter and close my eyes, breathing him in.

“Right, yeah, duh.” He embraces me, patting my head and kissing the top of it. “You sure you’re okay?”

I tilt my head up at him. “Aren’t you the *people person*? Can’t you just read me and figure it out?”

His big, beautiful blue eyes melt into me. “You’re not used to someone doing something nice for you, without expecting something in return.”

A stupid teardrop rolls down my cheek and he catches it with his thumb and wipes it away.

“Let’s get you home.” He presses his lips to my forehead.

A moment later, the car we arrived in pulls up in front of the diner.

Magnus leads me over to it, opening the door for me and following me into it. “This is probably too hot.” He goes to put my coffee into the cup holder, but I heed his warning and reach for it anyway.

I pop the top and take a cautious sip, relieved when it doesn’t burn my tongue off. I’ve been plopping an ice cube in my cup lately, and if I’m not mistaken, Bram went ahead and did it for me. “It’s not bad.”

Magnus tries it for himself and nods. “You were right.” He extends his arm across the seat. “Come here.”

I comply, mainly because his presence has been like a salve to my soul lately. I should stop, scoot to the other side of the seat, and put distance between us, but instead, I rest my head on his shoulder and bring my legs up onto the seat.

He drags them over to lay over his. He sighs and runs his fingers over my bruised knee. “Does this hurt?”

“Not really.” At least not anymore. I’ve gotten used to the healing ache, along with the other injuries I obtained that night.

“I’m sorry, for this, and for everything else.” Magnus leaves his palm on my exposed thigh. “I hate that you’ve been forced into this life.”

“It’s not your fault,” I reassure him. Because at the end of the day, it was my choices that led me to them. I didn’t have to sleep with Dom. Or go home with Magnus. And I sure as shit didn’t have to walk home alone after the bar when I already had numerous bad feelings that day.

“I won’t let it happen again. None of us will.”

“I don’t doubt that, considering none of you will let me out of your sight.”

He rubs my shoulder and pulls me closer. “And it’s going to stay that way.”

But it can’t, and I won’t allow it. That’s not what I do. I don’t stay.

It’s only a matter of time before I do the thing I do best... leave.

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## JUNE



I open my eyes to a note sitting on the pillow next to me.

It was rather strange to go to sleep without setting an alarm, and having no consideration for when the hell I woke up. And even more so that I wasn't woken up thirty-seven thousand times by my annoying ass roommates.

If anything, my current roomies either have soundproof walls, or they have been tiptoeing around not to disturb me. A thoughtfulness that is totally foreign.

*Princess, text me when you wake. Love, M.*

I climb out of bed, plopping gently onto the plush rug at my side. I slide my feet into the slippers tucked barely away, and head to the massive, attached bathroom. I make quick work of brushing my teeth and splashing cool water on my face to wake me up. I stand up straight, only to recognize the familiar feeling between my legs.

*Shit.*

Instinctually, I start opening drawers, my heart sputtering when the first one is lined with various feminine hygiene products, quite literally saving my day. I grab a tampon and close myself into the little toilet room. Although, there's nothing little about it. It's rather large, almost the size of the entire bathroom at my prior apartment on the other side of town. The one I got freaking kicked out of because Carter is a royal prick.

I finish up, washing my hands and drying them on the plump towel that is somehow already warm. I slip into the sweatpants I had stolen from Magnus and hug my arms to my chest. I could easily rummage through the clothing they got for me to find a sweatshirt, but I'm dying for a cup of coffee.

Making my way down the stairs, I hear rustling in the kitchen. I round the corner to find Magnus with his back to me, jotting something down on a piece of paper.

"Morning, you."

He turns, his eyes a bit wide. "No! Go back up. You were supposed to text me. You had *one* job."

I laugh and continue toward him. "You're literally *right here*."

He juts out his bottom lip and pouts, but pulls me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me.

A person clears their throat behind me, either making their presence known or insinuating we're too close.

Both I ignore on purpose, hugging Magnus back and relaxing into him.

"Oh, don't look so gruff," Magnus tells the newcomer. He holds out his arm. "Do you need a hug, too?"

"No, I don't," Dominic tells him, making his way over to the fancy coffee machine on the counter. He pushes a sequence of buttons and it quietly comes alive. "I could use your assistance though. We leave in five."

"What the hell, I thought I was on princess duty?" Magnus grips me tighter.

A smirk settles on my face.

"*June* doesn't have work, meaning she'll be home, where she's safe. She doesn't require your surveillance here."

The smile fades. "*She* is right here." I loosen my hold on Magnus and stroll across to where Dominic is standing, waiting for his coffee to finish. I reach for it the second it's done. "Thanks."



Dominic glares at me through his thick lashes before pulling out another mug and repeating the steps again.

Magnus turns away and attempts to hide the laugh that bubbles up out of him. “Oh man, I could get used to you living here, princess.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I tell him. “It’s only temporary.” Although, I have no idea what that even means. How long will their war be going on? What if it never ends? Would that be such a bad thing?

*Yes.* Because this goes against everything I am. I’ve already stayed longer than I normally would, but given the circumstances, I don’t exactly have a choice in the matter. I don’t have a place to go home to, and I don’t have enough money to go out and get one. Plus, the very real possibility that I’m a walking target that could be eliminated at any moment if I step outside alone. Or maybe that’s what they want me to believe, to keep me here.

Dominic checks his watch. “You now have three minutes.”

Magnus groans and walks to the fridge. He pulls out a tray with a beautiful assortment of cut fruit with yogurt and granola with various toppings in small glass containers. He places it on the counter beside me. “Your breakfast.”

I glance at it, then at him, then at it once more. He made this, for me?

Not caring that Dominic is watching, Magnus plants his lips on my cheek. “I’ll see you in a bit.” He pulls away and winks. “You look good in my sweats.”

I catch Dom’s hardened stare out of my peripheral.

“Do not leave this house,” he orders me.

“Dude, chill, she’s not going anywhere.” Magnus slaps him on the shoulder. “Right, princess?”

“Mmhm.” I sigh, the heaviness of my period looming over me. If I weren’t so fucking tired, I’d leave just for the sake of defying this man who thinks he can control me. I’ll have to save that recklessness for another day. “But only because I

have nowhere else to be.” I point toward the vast open area. “Where’s Cohen?”

“On a job.” Dominic grabs the replacement cup of coffee. “There’s more food in the fridge.” He nods toward a large double door. “And in the pantry.”

Magnus walks into the living room and snatches the remote off the spotless table. “TV here. One in your room. The projector downstairs is pretty easy to use but if you’re not feeling tech-savvy, I can show it to you later.” Each step he takes, his tattooed muscles bulge the white shirt he’s wearing. Black fitted jeans highlight his strong body. It’s a simple look, and somehow, it’s sexy as hell.

Dominic on the other hand, is the complete opposite. He’s got a dapper kind of thing going on. A white collared shirt unbuttoned at the top, revealing a bit of hair on his chest. A sleek dark vest overtop, with a matching set of pressed slacks, and a perfectly polished pair of obviously expensive leather shoes. He slides his thick arms into his jacket, repositioning it at the top. His beard is speckled with grey, and his hair is perfectly in place, like he put careful consideration into every single aspect of his appearance.

It’s dramatic, but it’s Dominic. Totally fitting to his incredibly serious demeanor. He’s all business, with that rough, *don’t fuck with me* vibe. And yet, that’s all I want to do—disobey him.

He plays it off like he hates it, but I know deep down he loves that I challenge his every move. I’m not afraid of him, not the way everyone else is, and if I had to guess, that’s why he’s drawn to me. He’s not used to being seen as anything other than the ruthless man he presents himself to be.

“If you need me, I’m just a call away.” Magnus meets Dominic at the door, pausing to look at me.

I climb onto a stool at the kitchen counter and bring the beautifully arranged tray Magnus put together toward me. “I’ll be fine, don’t worry. I won’t leave, I promise.”

“Good girl,” Dominic says before walking out.

Did I hear him correctly?

I flit my gaze up as they leave, my cheeks giving away the slightest blush, his words catching me a bit off guard.

They disappear on the other side of the garage door, leaving me alone in the kitchen with my thoughts and this delicious spread. I consider taking it into the living room, but my luck I'd spill something on their expensive couch and that's not a risk I'm willing to take. Instead, I sit here, sipping the coffee I stole from Dom and stirring some berries into the yogurt.

I force myself to slow down, to eat my meal with intention. It's not like I have anywhere else to be, and it's been a while since I've truly felt safe in a space. I never felt welcome around my old roommates. Sure, it was my place, too, but it was never home. There was no comfort, no solitude from the outside world. It was just another layer of my life that was unstable. I was constantly on guard, watching over my shoulder and holding my breath for the next stupid thing to happen. It wasn't like that in the beginning, but I should have seen the red flags go up and get out when I could.

Who am I kidding though? I see blaring red flags and make it a point to go headfirst into them. I'm attracted to all things bad, especially men. Honestly, Cora is probably one of the few good people in my life, possibly the only one.

Which is why I'm certain that it's only a matter of time until the three men I'm currently staying with turn on me. Realize I'm a burden to their life. That I no longer serve a purpose and am only adding to the negative. It's what humans do. They use others and discard them when they no longer need them.

I'm guilty of it, too. That's why I never stay long enough for someone to do it to me.

Loss isn't something I handle well, so I avoid it at all costs. If you don't get attached, there's nothing to lose, no risk of allowing yourself to get hurt. It's rather foolproof.

Until now.

With each passing day, I'm more drawn to these men. I grow comfortable with their existence. It's comforting. Hell, even Cohen, who will barely speak to me, brings me some level of contentment. It's like I've been lost at sea, and finally have something to hang on to, regardless of whether it's fleeting and will pass with the storm called life.

I must be cautious though, otherwise, I'll be pulled out too far, unable to make it back to shore on my own.

Finishing the rest of my breakfast, I hop off the stool and scoot my dishes toward the sink. I rinse them off and load them into the dishwasher, careful to pay attention to how it was already organized. The last thing I want to do is make someone angry for putting them in wrong. It's petty, but if I'm going to be staying in someone else's house, I'd like to not fuck with the way they do things. Apparently taking Dom's coffee is acceptable, but messing up the kitchen is not.

I do my best to put everything away with where I think it goes, and wipe off the counter, leaving no trace that I was ever there. I scurry across the silent space, and up the stairs to more familiar territory. I go into my makeshift bedroom and pull my phone off the nightstand.

There are a few missed notifications. One for Cora. One from Magnus. The rest is from social media. I swipe those away and click on the photo of Magnus.

**Magnus: Miss you already xo**

**Me: You've been gone like ten minutes.**

Dots immediately appear.

**Magnus: More like thirty, princess!**

I glance at the time, noting that he's probably correct. I made no effort of rushing when I was downstairs. I should be out looking for another job right now, or perhaps not taking time off from the one I do have. I have a shift tonight at the bar, though, so maybe the guilt of the free morning will dissipate once I'm back to work.

I hold the phone to my chest, my legs guiding me out of my room and down the hall. I press my hand against his door,

and the thing creaks open. The scent of Magnus floats out and greets me, inviting me to come inside his space. I comply, the familiarity of that night we spent together coming back to me. I run my fingers across his sheets, recalling the way they felt against my skin. I find myself climbing in and basking in the continued comfort Magnus provides, even in his absence. Resting my head on his pillow, I breathe him in, closing my eyes and relaxing into the bed that doesn't belong to me.

None of this does. This room, this house, the men that live in it. This life, lavish and dangerous. None of it is mine. And the clock continues to count down, reminding me that it won't last forever. But what's the harm in savoring it while it does? Don't I deserve that much? I've been through hell and back, numerous times, shouldn't I allow myself the decadence of pretending that for once, everything might turn out okay?

I pull his blanket up to my neck, settling into the soft, yet firm and inviting mattress.

I can't control everything, nor can I choose the outcome of the future. But right now, I choose to enjoy this momentary peace life is offering me. I have a feeling it will be gone before I know it.

Sleep welcomes me almost immediately, which isn't at all surprising given how deprived of it I've been. If I thought my slumber on that park bench was nice, it's nothing compared to high thread count sheets and black-out curtains.

At some point, warm arms wrap around me and a head nuzzles in behind mine. Lips kiss the back of my head and our legs intertwine. I doze again, pulling Magnus's hand up to rest along my chest. I shouldn't allow any of this, I should climb out of his bed, go into mine, and stop permitting these feelings to continue to build...but how do I resist something that is so damn good?

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y phone vibrates against the bed, waking me up from my slumber. I pry Magnus off me and reach for the glowing thing.

I squint, recognizing Jack's number on the screen. I press the green button and hold the device to my ear.

M

"Hello." My voice cracks.

Magnus grumbles something and stretches his tattooed arm out toward me.

"June, hey. Are you sleeping? It's like seven o'clock."

I sit up and rub my eyes. "I was taking a nap." Is that a crime? "What's up? Is something wrong?"

Muffling comes through the line. "Put that over there," Jack tells someone else. "No, June. I hate to do this, but I double booked the shifts tonight, so I don't need you to come in."

"Wait, what?" I slide out from under Magnus's arm and hop off the bed. "Who's working instead?"

So help me God if he says Jane.

He hesitates for a second. "Jane is."

"She's been there like three weeks?"

"I know." Jack sighs. "I called her first to cancel on her, but she mentioned quitting and well...I'm sorry, June."

"And what if I quit? Didn't you consider that?"

He covers the receiver again. "No, on the other side."

Magnus rolls over on his back, dragging his forearm over his eyes. What a beautiful sight.

Jack speaks up. "Yeah, I did, but I know you won't. You don't really have another choice." He pauses. "I've got to go. I still have you down for tomorrow night. I'll see you then." He hangs up, not caring if there is anything else I have to say.

*Don't have another choice.* His words cut through me. How dare he think I'm stuck working at his shitty bar. But he's not wrong. He's aware I'm broke as fuck and desperate for every extra hour he throws my way. It would be foolish of me to quit, especially when I'm already down a gig. Working at Bram's has been a saving grace, but it won't compensate for

the lost wages at *two* jobs. He has me cornered between a rock and a hard place and he's using that to his advantage.

And here I am, playing fucking house with three dangerous men.

Magnus pats the spot next to him, where I was only moments prior. "Come back to bed."

My head throbs with the mixture of my newest problem and the sleep my body isn't quite used to. "Do you have a medicine cabinet around here?"

He sits up, running his hand to get his messy hair off his brow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a headache." I glance at his bathroom. "I can get it if you tell me where it is."

"I've got you, princess." He reaches into the nightstand and pulls out a bottle, popping the top and dropping two pills onto the palm of his hand. Magnus slides off the bed and brings with him the glass of water that was sitting on a coaster, dripping with condensation. "Here."

I take the little white things and down them without the liquid. A habit I formed when I did my best not to leave my room once I was already inside, at my old apartment. The less I had to interact with my roommates, the better. I recall all the shit I left behind. Clothing, books, school supplies. Nothing of real value, but everything left that I owned. It's pathetic that I have next to nothing to show for the years I've been on this planet. Even the one thing I do have, my body, is in shit condition. Bumps and bruises still healing from the asshole who kidnapped and tortured me.

They'll heal, that's for sure, but will I? Shouldn't I be more concerned or traumatized by what happened? Is there something wrong with me because I've managed to shove it into a folder in my mind and not be bothered by it since? Instead of terror or fear, I mostly feel angry, like I want to get revenge on who did this. But mainly, I'm focused on how the hell I'm going to afford this thing called life. I had this morning off, not by choice, and my evening shift was taken

from me. I have the money Magnus and Cohen gave me, and the little bit I had been saving, but it isn't much. And each workable hour that passes, I start to panic at how I'm going to figure this all out.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Magnus asks me.

I let out a chuckle, considering I'm desperate enough to take him up on that offer. "You wouldn't get it." Because how could he?

He's surrounded by anything and everything he could desire. He doesn't want, not for material things. None of these guys do. They've worked hard for what they have, despite it being less than kosher, and money is the last of their concerns. They're at war to claim a lucrative throne, and I'm wondering where my next meal will come from.

"Try me." Magnus tucks a strand of my jet-black hair behind my ear.

There's a kindness in his expression, like maybe he would understand. But I'm not willing to open up that part of me to him. Not if I stand any chance of ever walking away. The more I give, the harder it will be when things have run their course. For him, for me. It's a reality I don't want to face, but one I'm aware will happen with or without my consent.

A knock sounds on the door. "Maggie."

"Come in," Magnus calls out.

The handle turns and Cohen pokes his head around, his face tensing when his sights land on me. "Dinner is ready." He flits his gaze to Magnus. "She shouldn't be in here."

"You guys seriously need to work on the whole talking about me like I can't hear you thing." I cross my arms and walk away from Magnus, bumping into Cohen when I exit the room and head toward mine.

"Are you coming?" Cohen says to me.

I don't bother turning around. "I'll be down in a minute; I need to freshen up." AKA change my tampon since I accidentally napped for five billion hours. I don't add that part,



not because I'm modest, but because I'd rather Cohen think that me and Magnus potentially just messed around.

When I finish in the restroom, I sit on the edge of my bed, wondering what the fuck I'm doing with my life. I drag my fingers along my scalp, raking my hair out of my face, and let out a sigh. I pull my phone out of my pocket, clicking on the text that Cora had sent me earlier.

**Cora: Which night are we going out this week?**

Our ritualistic hang out that both of us look forward to more than we probably should. A perfect depiction of how much we dislike our lives outside of each other.

I graze my brow with my fingers, and trail it down to the cut on my lip. They're healing, but they're still fresher than I'd hope they would be prior to seeing Cora. I don't want her to worry any more than she already does.

**Me: How about Saturday?**

I push it out and hope that between now and then, the marks will fade and won't be quite as noticeable.

**Cora: Works for me, boo boo. Text me if anything changes.**

**Me: Will do. You okay?**

**Cora: Yep, swamped with assignments. You?**

**Me: Yeah, I'm good.**

She heart reacts to my response, our conversation fizzling out with the few exchanged messages.

A figure appears in my doorway, casting a shadow into the room. "Everything okay?"

I turn to see Dominic standing there, leaning against the frame. His body practically taking up the entire space. He's not wearing his jacket, and his sleeves are rolled neatly to his elbow, somehow making his already sexy outfit that much hotter.

"Yes." I rise and make my way toward him, but he doesn't move.

“Not very convincing.” He studies my face.

“What can I say, I must be a shit actress.” I stop in front of him, shoving my hands in the pockets of my stolen sweats, and wait for him to let me through.

“Is there something I can do?” His gaze remains on me.

“Other than step aside?”

Dominic plants one foot forward, then the other.

I crane my neck to look up at him but remain firmly grounded where I am.

He closes the gap, leaving no space at all between us. Not even a hair could fit between our bodies. He raises his hand and glides his fingers along the side of my face, tilting it toward him. “I can’t help you if you won’t tell me.”

“Who said I wanted your help?” There are a million other things I do want from him though.

Dom lowers his face, grazing his lips along my forehead, down my nose, and resting just against my mouth. “You know I can please you in more ways than one.” His words are a murmur barely spoken.

My eyes close and my body begs to react. My bottom lip runs up his, hovering barely apart. In a split second, I imagine him guiding me backward, shoving me onto the bed, and climbing on top of me, our tongues frantic to dance their familiar rhythm. I’d rip his white dress shirt off, buttons flying, and I’d trail my hands down his chest and into his pants, grabbing onto his thick...

He breaks away, snapping me out of my fantasy. “But if you don’t want that.”

If only he knew how badly I wanted that very thing.

Dominic leaves me standing there with the female version of blue balls. He turns when he gets to the door, his hand gripping the wall. “Dinner is ready, you won’t be told again.”

I remain for only another second before following him out and down the hall, to the stairs. My stomach growls in

response to the scent of something delicious wafting in my direction.

Dominic takes his place at the table, across from Magnus, next to Cohen, leaving me the open spot across from Cohen and next to Magnus. They watch as I approach, not yet touching their food. Were they waiting on me this whole time? Had I known that I wouldn't have had a mini existential crisis.

The second I sit, it's like they come to life, passing things around to each other. Magnus holds his plate for Cohen to put a steak on, then over to Dominic for asparagus and sauteed mushrooms. He finishes it off with a scoop of little potatoes that look crisp and tasty. Magnus swipes the empty plate in front of me and lowers the full one in its place.

"You didn't have to do that," I tell him.

Why can't I just be normal and accept something nice being done for me?

I correct myself. "Thank you."

Cohen nudges a can of Dr. Pepper toward me, almost like it's a peace offering.

If only he would open his mouth and communicate with me instead of flitting through various stages of ignoring me or pretending I'm not in the room.

"This doesn't happen often, don't get used to it." Magnus nudges me.

"What doesn't?" I ask him.

"A home-cooked meal, together, at the table, at a reasonable hour."

"Oh." I fork a piece of potato, letting the many flavors settle onto my tongue. Salty, earthy, but with a bit of something else, maybe oregano, definitely garlic. Yep, they're as good as I thought they would be. I cut into the steak, relieved when it's pink inside. It has the right amount of char and tenderness, and is seasoned perfectly, although, I'm not at all surprised. Leave it to these three to know their way around a piece of meat.

We eat in silence for a few minutes until Magnus finally breaks it. “What time do you need to leave?”

“About that.” I press my napkin to my mouth and finish chewing the bite in my mouth. “Jack called and told me not to come in.”

Magnus tilts his head toward me. “Like ever?”

“No. Just tonight. I guess he double booked me and another girl. Ended up giving her priority over me.”

“The new waitress?” Dominic takes a sip of his water.

“Yep.”

“She’s terrible.” He slices a strip of steak and plops it into his mouth.

I eye him, watching the way his jaw moves. Something that shouldn’t be *that* sexy.

He swallows and continues speaking. “Really. I saw her mess up at least three table’s orders. She over-pours her drinks. She’s sloppy.”

And here I am, chopped liver compared to her because Jack doesn’t want to risk her quitting. Wouldn’t she be doing him a favor anyway, especially if she’s costing him money by being a fuck up?

“I could have a talk with him,” Dominic adds.

“What? No.” I shake my head. I glance down, realizing that I’m holding my knife in the air toward him. I lower it with my voice. “That isn’t necessary.” I add, “Maybe not with Jack,” under my breath.

“Neither is you working somewhere you’re not appreciated.” Dominic’s jaw tenses.

I shift my attention to Cohen, who’s eating his food quietly, sadness written across his face. Magnus on the other hand is happily consuming his, practically giddy with each bite. He must have been hungry after our nap together.

Magnus points his fork at Dom. “I agree.”

“I can’t afford to quit. And it would be great if you didn’t get me fired either.” I focus back on Dom, doing my best to read his features. I recall when he brutally beat that man in the bathroom with no regard, something I’m sure he’d do again to Jack if I gave him the go-ahead.

Jack isn’t at the top of my list though. The man who attacked me is. And Carter follows close behind.

“At what point will you realize that money is no issue?” Dominic glances up from his plate and narrows in on me.

“Maybe when you realize this arrangement is temporary.” Even if I were to allow them to help me *now*, it wouldn’t be sustainable. What would I do when I go back out into the world, a free woman? With no job, no income, nothing to call my own. I’m already risking too much by not finding a third paying gig and letting shifts slip through my fingers with the others.

“Okay.” Dominic pats his mouth with his napkin and places it beside his plate. “If I accept that, will you?”

Is he fucking with me?

He stands from the table, walks out of the room, and around a corner where I can no longer see him. The sound of electronic buttons floats back to us.

I look to Magnus and he shrugs, continuing to eat his dinner.

Cohen remains painfully quiet.

Dominic returns, setting a stack of cash next to my plate. A golden band around it noting the denomination. It’s much smaller than one would imagine that amount of money would be, but considering it appears to be all hundreds, it adds up. “One month. Will that suffice?”

“You’re not serious.” I blink at it like it might disappear and focus on Dom.

He goes to his seat and sits back down, taking a drink of his water and not acting at all as though ten-thousand dollars is sitting out here with us. “It’s a yes or no, June. Do you require

more? Because that could be arranged.” Dom scoots his chair out again.

“No.” I hold out my hand to stop him.

“Very well then.” He picks up a knife and cuts off another chunk of his steak.

“But I...I can’t take this.” I look between these three men, hoping one of them will speak up and question Dom for his antics.

Dom exhales and plants his hand on the table. “What are your reservations? I have no issue with it. Do you?” He shifts to Magnus.

“Nope,” Magnus replies.

Dom turns to Cohen. “And you?”

Cohen, with his head still a bit lowered, glances at me briefly, then at Dom. “No.”

“Then we’re all in agreement. The cash is yours to use however you see fit. Although I would advise that you don’t use it all in one place, or make a lump sum deposit, unless you want the IRS snooping around. If there is anything else you need, let any of us know and we will provide it. At the end of the allotted time, we will assess how to go on from there, given your safety is still maintained. If you choose to leave, a stipend will be given to you to allow you the opportunity to find proper employment. In the meantime, my only condition is that you quit working until further notice.”

“But I...” My words trail off because I’m honestly not sure what to say.

I want to be defiant, tell them that they don’t control me, that they can’t tell me what to do. To toss the cash across the table and say I cannot be bought. But at the end of the day, can’t we all? Doesn’t each of us have a number they would do anything for? Ten thousand dollars is a *lot* of money. More than I would make in a month, or six. And the only catch is I have to live here for a few weeks and *not* work. The one thing that causes me the most stress is simply erased with a stack of crisp bills. Wouldn’t I be a fool for turning this deal down?

They're offering me safety, security, and financial support, not to mention anything else I could ask for.

And yet, there's a pit in my gut opening up and screaming at me to run. I don't stick around, not this long, and sure as hell not a month. This goes against everything I've worked toward to keep myself from being hurt. The man who cut me the deepest is sitting across the table from me, living in the very lavish home I'm supposed to stay in. He barely speaks to me. Hardly looks at me. He's hurting, I'm aware of that, but so am I.

Despite my own issues, I shouldn't let that stop me from seeking solitude and shelter here. Although, the only way I can be okay with agreeing to this arrangement is if I set my own terms.

Dominic waits for me to continue like the gentleman he is. He's fierce, he's brutal, but he absolutely has manners.

"I will quit Jack's, but I want to stay on at Bram's. And I won't look for another job until time is almost up."

Dominic considers what I've said, processing the information carefully.

"Bram treats her well, and I can watch over her there." Magnus delivers a supporting point I am grateful for.

Dom counters. "One day a week."

"Five," I say without hesitation. Always go big and have room to work with.

"Two."

"Three or no deal." The actual amount I was hoping for all along.

"Fine," Dominic concedes.

"And once a week, I'm going out with Cora. Non-negotiable."

Dom clenches his jaw and his nostrils flare slightly. It's adorable, really. "I need at least twenty-four-hour notice."

"This Saturday. How's that for notice?"

“I will do my best to accommodate your request.”

“Oh, and one final thing.” I make sure to keep my eyes trained on him. “I will *swap fluids* with whoever I want to in this house, and you will have no objections.”

He runs his tongue along his teeth, sizing up my latest demand.

Cohen tenses from his spot like he’s anxiously waiting for Dominic to reply.

“Very well.” Dominic pauses as if there is something else he’d like to add, but he keeps it to himself. He pulls his vibrating phone out of his pocket and peers at the screen.

Cohen lets out a sigh and stands from the table, taking his plate with him. He tosses it into the sink and makes his way toward the stairs.

Dominic calls after him. “Hayes. We have work to do, don’t go anywhere.”

Cohen stops, his back still to us. His shoulders are tight, his hand making a fist at his side.

A small part of me wants to reach out to him, to take him into my arms the way I had done when we were kids, and hold him to me, telling him everything will be okay. Younger me had no idea that those words were a lie. I meant them though, because I truly thought if we were together, nothing else mattered. We could handle anything that came our way, and we did. Two broken pieces that were an unbreakable pair.

But things out of our control broke us apart, severing that bond we had shared. Leaving us more damaged than we were to start. It changed us into different versions of ourselves and would ensure that we would never be the same again.

I can’t even look at him without replaying that last memory of him in my head. Him hanging out of the back window of his father’s pickup as it drove away and out of sight. I clung to the hope that eventually, Cohen would return. That he would fight for us and prove my belief wrong that everyone leaves. Instead, days passed, and they turned into



weeks, months, years. The stolen bits of my heart hardened into cold, irreparable darkness in his absence.

I shouldn't have taken it so personal. We were only kids, drunk on the idea of love. But the feeling reminded me too much of another loss, one I wished I could rid myself of. Cohen, being in my life did exactly that. It was a beautiful bandage to the gaping wound on my soul, only to be shattered when he suddenly left. It taught me a valuable lesson, that you cannot rely on another person for those comforts, because people ultimately will leave, and you'll be alone to pick up the pieces left behind.

Why give them the chance in the first place?

Cohen was the only man I've ever loved. That I had ever, truly given myself to. I opened up to him, and he did the same in return. We saw the ugly parts of each other and chose to be together anyway. He loved all the little things I hated about myself that I never let anyone else see. We found a home in one another. A dangerous power to give to someone.

It hurt when he left, but it pained me more seeing him doing well, thriving even. Did he never feel the way I did? Never thought to come back to me? Was I nothing to him, especially compared to how much he mattered to me? Did each day pass without his mind remotely wondering how I was? If I was okay? If I missed him at all? If I had moved on?

How could he be so okay with the way things happened when I was fucked up over it?

"Do you need me?" Magnus asks Dom.

"No. Stay here. Hayes and I can handle it."

I avert my attention from Cohen to the food in front of me. I push it around on my fork, no longer hungry at all despite everything being delicious. Between the rollercoaster of dinner conversation and the period cramps I'm having, I'd rather be horizontal than sitting here awkwardly.

"June." Dominic folds his napkin and sets it on the table. "Are we in agreement?"

I consider his question for a moment. "Yes."

“Good.” He leaves out the girl part. “You mentioned something earlier. About someone needing *talked* to.”

“What?”

Magnus leans over and whispers, “Are you done?” while pointing at my plate.

I nod and he takes it, cutting into the steak and finishing off what I left behind.

Dom adjusts the sleeve of his shirt. “I said I would talk to Jack, you said no, but insinuated there was another person. Who?”

“Oh. Nothing. No one.”

“As much as I’d like to, I can’t read your mind.” He moves to the other arm. “This is my expertise. Trust that I would take care of it, whoever it may be.”

I shouldn’t, but I say it anyway, “I was referring to the guy who kidnapped me.”

Dominic pauses, shifting his gaze at Cohen, who has now turned around and is leaning against the wall.

“Can you tell us anything about him?” Cohen speaks up first, which is surprising since he’s usually doing what he can to ignore me.

“Um.” I think back to that night. The bag that went over my face, the wetness on the inside that made me weak and unable to get away.

“No detail is too small,” he adds. “Any identifying marks, hair color, height, build.”

“He was sort of chubby. Definitely not in shape like you guys are.” I glance at each of them. “Brown hair, beard. He was chain-smoking cigarettes.” I flit my attention to my wrist where he had pushed the hot thing into my skin. I rub the spot and recall the painful burn that had woken me up from my drug-induced slumber. “He had scars, all over his face. And a tattoo, on his arm.” I point to the spot on mine, right where the sleeve of my shirt ends. “I couldn’t see what it was though.”

Magnus places his hand on my upper back and gently glides it around.

“Good, this is all helpful, J.” Cohen takes in every detail like it’s the only thing keeping him alive. “What else?”

My finger trails the cut along my chin. “He had a switchblade. Was talking about Halloween...carving pumpkins. Told me he was following orders but didn’t say who from, just that I picked the wrong side.”

I sense the energy in the room continue to shift with each detail shared. A combined rage settling through all of us at getting revenge.

“I broke free from the chair he had me tied to, saw an opportunity to take the knife, and plunged the thing into his thigh before getting the fuck out of there.”

“Do you remember where you were?” Cohen keeps his eyes trained on me.

I shake my head. “No. I just ran, and kept running until I saw something familiar. It was all a blur.”

“You did good, J.” Cohen’s expression remains hard but softens in the slightest.

“I want to slice him up the same way he intended to do to me.” I don’t mean to say this out loud, and yet it slips out anyway.

“You’ll get your chance, don’t worry.” Dominic snatches his keys off the counter. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Is he serious? How would he ever find the man responsible? I don’t have a name, a location, anything of use other than a few vague details about the psychopath. Still, I find myself believing his assurance that justice will be served.

“Hayes.” Dominic tips his head for him to come on.

The two of them leave without another word, disappearing into the garage and going to work on whatever task they face tonight, leaving me and Magnus behind.

Magnus gathers the plates, stacking them on top of each other. “How about a movie?”

I help him clean off the table and carry what I can over to the kitchen. I put the salt and pepper shakers back where they belong, and face the cabinets. “Which one has the Tupperware?”

He stops rinsing the dishes to come over to me, wiping his hands on a towel on the way. Magnus grazes his fingers against my cheek. “I can get this. Go sit down.”

“Another stipulation of staying: you guys have to let me do stuff. I’m not helpless.” I point to the vast selection. “I will climb all over those expensive countertops if you don’t tell me which one.”

Magnus grins and steps forward, reaching to a top cabinet. His shirt goes up, revealing a section of a tattooed bird on his torso. A phoenix. It’s beautiful, just like the man it’s permanently marking. “Here.”

We make quick work getting the leftovers put away and cleaning up from dinner. It doesn’t take long for us to find a groove and accomplish our mission, functioning in perfect harmony.

“About that movie.” I lean against the island once we’re done.

“Yeah?” Magnus raises a brow at me and glides closer, until he’s standing right in front of me. “You up for it?”

“Not like I have anything else going on.” Since I’m not allowed to leave, and my shift was canceled. “Actually, hold that thought.”

Magnus tilts his head.

I reach into the pocket of my sweats and pull out my phone. I touch the last number in my call registry and push the speakerphone button.

It rings twice then it connects.

“June, listen, I know you’re upset, but I can’t really talk now.”

“Jack, after further thought, I wanted to inform you that I will, in fact, be quitting. Consider this my immediate resignation.”

Magnus grins and bobs his head up and down in approval. He presses his thumb and index finger together to make a little circle. “Nice,” he whispers.

“What, you can’t be serious? You’re not even going to give me two weeks?”

“I’m giving you more of a notice than you gave me, so if anything, you’re welcome. I got a couple hours, you’re getting what, twenty-four?”

“That’s absurd, you can’t—”

I cut him off. “I can, and I will. I don’t appreciate being taken for granted, Jack. I understand you have a business to run, but you chose a shit employee over the best one you have, and that’s on you. I’ll be in Saturday to pick up my check.” I disconnect the line, not at all bothered by anything else he might have to say.

“That was...badass.” Magnus raises his hand for a high-five.

I slap it back, a smile spreading across my face. Damn, that felt good. Cutting out crappy people from your life can be hella liberating. A bit scary though, because I rely on them for money, which in turn is how the world goes round. Still, I cherish the blip of joy it brings me to basically tell Jack to shove it.

“Come on, princess.” Magnus weaves his fingers around mine and pulls me out of the kitchen and along a hallway I haven’t been yet.

It suddenly dawns on me that there are so many parts of this house I have yet to explore, and here I am, committed to living in it for the next month. I guess I have time to get acquainted with it, especially if I’ll be spending most of my time stuck inside.

He opens a door, flips a light switch, and leads me down a set of stairs. We go around a dimly lit corner and through

another opening.

My eyes take a second to adjust, but when they do, I spot the various cream-colored leather chairs and couches arranged around the room. A bar is located in the back corner, fully stocked and neatly organized like everything else in this house.

He reaches for a remote, pushing a button to illuminate the recessed lighting in the ceiling. Bright white beams out, allowing me to fully see the attention to detail that was taken here.

“It’s been a while since we’ve used this room,” he tells me. “Not since, well, you know.”

“The war.”

“Yeah.” Magnus pokes the thing again, turning on the projector. “We’ve been a bit occupied.”

“Do you need to go?” I crane my thumb at the door. “Don’t let me keep you.”

“Nothing pressing needs my attention.” He places his hand on the small of my back and nudges me toward the couch. “You’re stuck with me.”

I let out a chuckle. “I could think of worse things.”

“No kidding.” He plops down next to me. “What do you wanna watch?”

I sink into the comfortable, plush sofa, wondering how much this thing costs. It fits the room perfectly, telling me that either the room was designed for the furniture, or the other way around. “Something funny?”

I haven’t watched a movie in ages. Between not having a television in my bedroom at my old place and my budget not exactly movie theater friendly, it didn’t leave much in the way of catching a flick.

He scrolls through a selection and stops. “What about the new Ryan Reynolds one?”

I shrug, not entirely sure which one he's referring to. "That works."

Magnus side-eyes me. "You sure, princess?"

"Mmhmm." I pull my legs up onto the couch and relax into it. He could put on whatever he wanted and I'd be content. It's rare that I get to do something like this.

"I think you'll like it. It's not out for another three weeks." Magnus clicks another button and pauses the screen. "Popcorn?" He jumps over the back of the couch and glides across the room to an old-fashioned popcorn maker I'm only now noticing. "Something to drink?"

I sigh and rest my face on the cushion, watching him move around with ease. "I'll have whatever you're having."

He finishes up at the machine and walks over to finger a few of the bottles until he finds the one he's looking for. "This is no Hawk's Mark, but it's pretty good."

I squint to take a better look. "Is that Tremblan?"

"Yeah." He holds the thing out toward me. "You ever had it?"

"Once. It's pretty tasty." Not as expensive as Hawk's, but still too rich for my blood.

The room fills with the scent of buttery popped corn as the machine spits out little puffs of deliciousness. Magnus pours two glasses of the brown liquid and brings them over, then goes back to retrieve a bucket of popcorn. He hops onto the couch and tosses a piece into his mouth.

"You ready?" A look of complete contentment settles on his face, telling me that it's been a bit since he's found comfort in such a mundane evening, too.

I take a sip of my drink and nod. "Thank you."

"Of course, princess. Anything for you." With the flick of a finger, Magnus shuts the lights off and turns the movie on.

It doesn't take long for the two of us to polish off our snacks, especially with the mini popcorn war we had at the

beginning of the show. He refills our drinks shortly after, and settles into the couch with his arm splayed out for me to join him.

I settle into the crook and bring my legs out to the side on the deep seat. I place my hand to my stomach, resting it on top of my aching uterus.

Magnus kisses my forehead and holds me close. “You okay?”

“Period cramps, I’ll survive.” Is it weird to be this open with a man I barely know? It hasn’t been long, but I feel like we’re past the point of awkwardness.

“I hear orgasms help with that.”

“This couch would never survive.”

“Couches can be cleaned, or even replaced.”

This thing looks and feels like it cost more than the stack of cash I left sitting on the table upstairs.

“Oh, speaking of that, I got you something.” He sits up. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.” Magnus pauses our movie and bolts out of the room. The second he’s out the door, I no longer hear him. These rooms must be soundproof or something.

I sit there waiting, wondering, curious what he could have possibly gotten me that has to do with bloody couches.

A moment later, he reappears, something in his left hand.

He grabs the remote and holds it toward the projector, pushing a button to dim the light on the screen. “Trust me?” His blue gaze meets mine.

“Yeah,” I breathe.

Magnus lowers himself toward me, brushing his lips against mine. They’re soft, gentle, and eager. Everything I remember them to be from our night together. Our tongues dance in rhythm, swaying back and forth with ease.

He reaches between my legs, sliding his hand down my thigh and parting my knees.



Just his slight touch has a moan escaping me.

Magnus pulls his hand away, only to come back a moment later with a phallic-shaped thing in his grasp. He continues kissing me, flicking a button on the side, and turning the device on. It vibrates quietly and he rubs it against me. Up and down on my most sensitive areas.

“Fuck,” I mutter, my hips reacting to the electric pulses caressing me. I run my fingers up his neck and weave them into his hair, pulling him closer to me to deepen our kiss.

Magnus glides the thing in all the right spots with the perfect amount of pressure.

I shove him away and climb on top of him, straddling his body.

He keeps the thing between us, positioned right where his cock is. Magnus increases the speed, rubbing it a bit harder against me. His other hand makes its way up my frame, along the nape of my neck. Gripping my hair, he tugs me toward him.

I break away, desperate to provide him remotely the same amount of pleasure he’s giving me. I drop to my knees on the floor and reach for his waistband, unbutton his jeans and tug them down.

“You don’t have to...”

I lick my lips and look up at him. “I want to.”

At this, he pivots to grant me better access to getting his bottoms out of the way. He springs out of his boxers, his erection telling me he wants it, too.

I grip the base of his shaft, coming closer and breathing on the tip of him. I swirl my tongue around and taste the precum that builds.

Magnus pats the couch beside him.

I climb up, getting into the doggy position to allow myself access to him still. I spread my lips around his head, and tease him before guiding him further into my mouth. I moan against

him when he places the vibrator on my clit again, this time, my desire heightened at feeling him inside me.

His cock hardens and grows, filling my mouth completely.

I do what I can to relax my jaw and take as much of him in as possible. I slide him in and out, touching the back of my throat with every motion.

“God damn,” he whimpers.

I swirl my hand up and down against him and widen my tongue.

He removes the vibrator and replaces it with his hand, still over my sweatpants, rocking it side to side. Somehow, the sensation is more intense, heightening my climb to orgasm.

Magnus grips my head and thrusts his hips gently.

My eyes water at the fullness of my mouth, but I don't dare stop. I want this too badly. I need it.

He climaxes first, his warm load exploding in the back of my throat and sending mine into action immediately after.

“That's it, princess.” Magnus moves his hand as I pulsate onto it.

I keep mine moving too, slowing the stroke down and taking every last drop he has to offer me while grinding against him. My body quivers and gratification gushes over me. Slowly, I pull him out of my mouth and swallow him down.

He drags my face to his, our lips meeting again. Magnus kisses me, his tongue darting into my mouth. He breaks away, resting his forehead on mine and running his thumb along my bottom lip.

I grin and sit back, giving him space to put himself back together.

Magnus stands, pulling his pants over his hips, and repositioning his cock. He zips everything back up and drops onto the couch, his arm outstretched for me once again. “You feel any better?”

“Absolutely.” I grab my bourbon off the table and scoot over to him.

“Good thing you amended that no-bodily-fluid rule.”

“Like that would have stopped us anyway?” I take a sip and hand the glass to him, watching as he tips it up to his luscious lips to get a taste.

A thought crosses my mind that no matter how hard I try to ignore it, it keeps bubbling up. One that continues to challenge all the rules I have in place to keep myself safe.

*I could get used to this.*

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COHEN



The ride to our destination is quiet.

I sit on the right side, Dominic on the left. Both of us peering out our windows, more than likely the same thing on our minds.

June. The man that hurt her. And the sweet torture we'd like to inflict on him.

But with June's latest confession, it seems Dominic wants to share that pleasurable experience with her.

Can I allow that to happen though? Just because we're used to this world of brutality doesn't mean she should join it so carelessly. I understand she's reacted well to everything she's been shown, but at what point will it have been too much? And then what? Will she truly see us for the ruthless men we are, and finally say enough is enough?

I've lost her once before—can I handle another?

It's better to have her around and hate me, than not at all.

I'm hopeless, that much is given. There is no mercy for me. No amount of Hail Mary's or penance can save my tormented soul from the things I've done. I was broken when she found me, June being the glue that held me together, only for it to all come tumbling down when we were ripped apart. She was the light through the darkness I never thought I'd find. A precious gift from the universe that I treated with more decency than I thought I was capable of, in an attempt to protect her from this cruel world. She saw me for who I was, the broken sad boy, and helped me catch my breath when I felt

everything slipping out from under me. I shouldn't have given a single person so much power, but I knew with absolute certainty that she would never take advantage of it. Her intentions were pure, like mine were with her.

The moment she was stripped from me, it felt like my heart was ripped from my chest. I had to get back to her, and I knew it was only a matter of time until I made that happen. I wasn't aware of the lengths I'd go through until I had already gone through them.

Dominic found me sitting in a pile of blood so thick that it coated my entire body. I was only a teenager, and yet I had done more damage than he had said he'd ever seen. I killed ten men that week. Three of their bodies scattered around me, oozing what was left of them out onto the concrete of the building we were in.

His gun was trained at me until he realized that I was unarmed. Just a kid covered in the remains of people who had it coming. I was exhausted, hadn't slept in days. Couldn't remember the last time I had a meal. My only thirst was for revenge, and that's exactly what I got. I ended the life of every person deemed responsible for the death of my father. The people standing in the way of my freedom, my path back to her. My quest was easier than I imagined once I flipped the switch and allowed the darkness to consume me.

"You're safe now," Dominic had said.

But did he mean from the dead people or from myself? Because I would never escape the black cloud looming over my head, the one that was there my entire life. The one that only temporarily lifted the one summer before everything changed. The cloud was gone, a bright beaming light brought in from the blissfully perfect moments with her, only to be taken and replaced by a ravishing storm that would wreck and ruin me forever.

"Your past," Dominic continued. "You keep it there. Anything you knew before this moment, you forget. You cannot return to that life. You made that decision when you

carried out this rampage. I can help you, but you must make one last choice. Death, or the cause?"

"What?" I stared up at him, noting the hardness of his jaw. The expensive suit he was wearing. The effortless strength he carried, like people listened to him when he spoke.

"Protection comes at a cost. These men you killed, there are more of them. And they will come after you and anyone you care for. You may have concluded your murder tour here today, boy, but the implications will follow. If you leave this building alone, they will find you. If you hide, they will seek. Anyone you contact, they will pursue. Every step you take will be a trail of death lingering in your wake. Unless of course, there is a force that prevents that. That is something I can offer you."

"Why?" If I was such a liability, why would he ever consider taking me under his wing instead of throwing me to the wolves?

Dominic's gaze had trailed over my face, down to my blood-soaked hands and the bodies that cluttered the space around us. "Because I know potential when I see it."

My mind had fluttered to her face. The ache in my chest pulled at the thought of leaving her behind. It was something I battled with every moment following the one where I was forced into my dad's truck and driven away and out of sight. I didn't realize the man driving the vehicle was running from men like this until we were motel hopping in our attempt to get away from them. The idea of getting back to her was the only saving grace I had. It wasn't safe to break away, not when they would have come for me, and potentially put her in danger. But when they finally caught up to us, and ended my dad's life, I knew what I had to do.

I would kill every one of them and make my way back to her.

It wasn't until I shoved a dagger into the first man's heart that I realized the severity of what I had done.

It was easy. Too easy. And it made me understand just how dark and twisted I really was inside. How I would do literally anything to end this and be with her.

But with each kill, the doubt set in. How would I explain the missing time? Would I tell her what I had done? Would she forgive me for my ruthlessness? Would she fear me? Yet, the only way I would find out was to see it through. And that I did. I shot and stabbed and snapped necks until I collapsed onto the cold, wet concrete in a pile of blood that did not belong to me.

Finally, I could rid myself of this life, and be at her side.

But with Dominic's words, he told me that I was in too deep, and there would be no escaping the world I careened headfirst into. No amount of death or time would protect June from me and the wrath that would follow. In that moment, and each that had followed our separation, all I wanted was her, but she was the one thing I couldn't have. I wouldn't do that to her. I wouldn't risk her life so fucking foolishly. Our beautiful summer would have to stay that, a memory that I would cling to for the rest of my sad existence.

I stood from the wreckage that day a different man. I had shed the skin of a boy seeking revenge and became a man who would give up everything to protect the last remaining good in his life. Even if those two things were the same.

I walked away from her because I was told that was what I had to do.

And now, she's back in my life, but not because of me, because of these two men who insist on putting her in danger. She thinks I abandoned her. That I willingly let her go. Yet, leaving her behind was the single hardest thing I've ever had to do.

It's not like I can explain that. She wouldn't believe me. She wouldn't understand. I couldn't tell her the horrible things I've done to ensure danger would never come her way.

She hates me because I love her. That reality hurts harder than I thought possible.

I always told myself that protecting her was worth it, the smart choice. The noble one.

I didn't want this life for her. That's why I've done everything in my power to make sure she stayed out of it. I acted selflessly, and all she sees is a man that walked away with little to no regard for what she went through.

Dominic and Bryant continue to push the limits, confessing details of our work that I never wanted her to know about. Things that should have come from my mouth, yet I kept it shut to ensure her safety.

They've touched her. Been intimate with her. Shared things with her that I never did because she was too damn innocent and I wanted to maintain that purity. They are two of the most ruthless, brutal men I know, and they share a bed with the only woman who I've ever given my heart to. I don't doubt that they will fight for her, but how much danger will they bring?

It fucking kills me that she looks at them with more adoration than she does with me. Those same eyes I stared into countless nights under the stars, making up stories of the future together. Hatred lines her gaze when she settles her sights on me. Disgust. Resentment.

And I don't blame her for a single fucking second. I broke her heart. I caused her pain.

How am I supposed to sit across the dinner table from her and pretend I love her any less than the day I was forced away from her? Live with her and not want to take her into my arms and hold on tight and never let her go. Beg for her forgiveness and promise I'll never do it again.

I want to feel her kiss against my lips and forget all the time that has passed between us—pick up where we left off, daydreaming of a time when we would run away from it all. Me and her.

I can't count the number of times I've laid my sights on a short girl with jet-black hair and my heart dropped, thinking it was her. Every fucking instance, a reminder that I would



never, could never, let her go. She was a part of me. And I would carry that with me no matter how much it hurt.

Seeing her in that bar, talking to her for the first time in years, it ripped the half-assed stitches I had mended my broken heart with and tore me apart all over again. She's always been just out of reach, a cruelty I was cursed with, never able to be with the person I care most about in this world. Stuck living this life of solitude, a killer by day and night, the only thing that brings me the smallest satisfaction are the shackles keeping me from her. Sure, I have Dom and Bryant, but we were a team because of our skills.

We share a taste for bloodshed and bourbon, and now, women.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Dominic asks me through the silence.

“No.” I reach for the handle of the door and pull it the second the vehicle has slowed down enough. I hop out while simultaneously grabbing my pistol from its holster. Chambering a bullet, I run up the front steps and kick in the front door, wasting no time at all.

Dom takes his time, walking with less urgency to catch up to me. He's not bothered by my rampage; he's used to it.

There's a thin line between being reckless and efficient, and I walk that tightrope more often than I probably should. I guess that's why I'm good at my job, because I'm not afraid of taking risks. At least not when it comes to me. With June, that's an entirely different story.

Hence our efforts of finding the man responsible for the cuts and bruises on her porcelain skin. We've killed a dozen men, and will continue to slay them until we are satisfied she has been avenged.

Beckett has us exactly where he wants us, focused on retribution instead of the war. It's genius really, although I doubt he understood the lengths we would go to when he made his order. He will meet the same fate as the rest, it's only a matter of time. Dominic was right about one thing all those

years ago, death follows in my wake and I welcome it with open arms.

“What the fuck,” a man calls out from his spot on his couch. His disgusting stomach hangs out of the bottom of his shirt. He reaches for the gun on his side table, but I point mine at him.

“Move another inch, I dare you.”

“Okay, okay. Fuck.” His eyes go wide when he spots something behind me.

The typical reaction from the fear-inducing legend I share a home with.

Dominic’s shadow is cast over me as he appears in the room. He skims his gaze over it and settles on the man. “Pull your sleeves up.”

“What?”

I step closer with the barrel aimed at him.

“Fine, Christ.” He complies, revealing two pasty, hair-covered arms.

“Anyone else in the house?” Dominic comes around to my side.

“No. What’s this all about?” The man anxiously glances from me to Dom.

“We’re looking for someone. Brown hair, beard, scars on his face.” Dom strolls around the room, peering at anything he can for a clue. “Into knife play. Has a tattoo around here.” He sticks his index finger on the spot June had mentioned it was located.

“Vincent, yeah. What’d he do?”

“You know him?”

The guy nods and relaxes a bit now that he assumes he’s not the one in trouble. “You could say that. Why? What kind of trouble has he gotten himself into?”

Dominic ignores his questions and asks one of his own. “Where is he?”

He shrugs. “Last I heard he was holed up recovering from some knife wound. Went rogue and kidnapped some bitch who got the best of him. Fucking hilarious if you ask me.”

My heart rate picks up speed. “What part of that do you think is funny?”

“All of it, really.” He lets out a chuckle then his expression shifts to serious. “Oh, was she *your* bitch?”

I pull the trigger without another thought, the vibration of the recoil settling in my wrist, the bullet lodging itself right between the man’s brows, exactly where I was aiming.

His eyes go wide and a bit of his blood splatters around, his head whipping back against the couch he’s sitting on. Red trickles down his forehead and his mouth hangs open.

Dominic sighs. “You couldn’t have waited, maybe, I don’t know, another minute or two?”

“We got all we need. A name.” With June’s description of her assailant, we’ve made more progress tonight than we have since we found out she was taken. We had been going around blind, asking everyone we could about a man who might be into knife torture. And considering the crowd we run with, that could be a multitude of people. We had narrowed our search to a handful of suspects remaining, but without her help, who knows how much longer it would have been until we found the one guilty.

“I’ll call it in.” Dominic pulls out his phone, pushing a button and bringing it to his ear.

I leave him to give the details of our location to our clean-up crew—something that shouldn’t seem so routine to a person, but is second nature to us. I just killed a man, spilled his blood onto the wall of his living room, and I feel no different than I did before. Not better, not worse. Just numb.

Is there something wrong with me for being cold with death, and careless to inflict it on others? For ten years, it’s all I’ve known. The only thing keeping me remotely sane, if I can

even still be considered that. I'm a murderer. A killer. A destroyer of evil. But doesn't that make me the most sinful of them all?

I don't care what happens to others. No part of me harbors guilt for what I've done. Every ounce of care inside my black heart is reserved for one person, and one person only. Her.

And yet she wants nothing to do with me. She hates me.

Still, I will continue on my mission to do everything I can to save her from this life that has consumed me, even if that means an ocean of bloodshed.

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## JUNE



The last few days have fallen into a routine pretty easily.

I discussed the changes with Bram, letting him know I would be only working three days a week instead of whatever he would give me. We agreed to Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, and decided that we may flex them if needed.

He was pleased with this, despite me originally worrying that he might not be okay with the lowered hours. He continues to surprise me with his kindness and consideration for my well-being. He's skeptical of the tattooed man that follows me around to and from, but I think he's aware he's keeping me safe.

What was once a strange annoyance has turned into me being grateful for the shadow that looks over me.

Magnus is protective, intimidating, and a total fucking sweetheart.

A drastic difference from Cohen and Dominic. They're both too busy with whatever else they have going on to barely pay any attention to me. Which is fine, considering the sooner they end their war, the quicker I can be free from their constant surveillance. If only there was something I could do to speed up the process and help them out with their problem. It's the least I could do after they gave me ten large to live with them. I might have had to sacrifice my freedom, but what exactly did they gain other than a liability?

I carefully walk down the stairs in my heels and into the kitchen.

“You’re not wearing that,” is all Cohen says.

“Damn, princess. You’re looking fine as hell.” Magnus hops up from his stool to take my hand and help me the rest of the way.

“These shoes are a bit much, you think?” I turn to the full-length mirror in between the kitchen and the living room, taking in my outfit. A long sleeve black dress, made of something close to heaven, with the most revealing plunging neckline, almost down to my belly button. The length sits mid-thigh, with a short slit on the left side. Thank God for my period being over, otherwise, I’d be worried about more than just my ass having the potential to accidentally hang out. Chains of various lengths line my neck, one all the way down between my breasts, and a few shorter ones with matching stones. The heels aren’t too tall, maybe three inches, but it’s more than I’m used to wearing.

“Not at all. I’d definitely do ya.” Magnus folds his inked arms across his chest and leans against the wall. He sighs and shakes his head.

“What?” I tuck my sleek onyx hair behind my ears to reveal diamond studded earrings. All of which was located in my room, courtesy of my live-in bodyguards. Along with makeup I could never afford and a stunning leather clutch that I’ve tucked my lipstick, cell phone, and a few of the hundred-dollar bills I was given.

Cohen steps forward. “You need to change.”

“No.” I stare straight at him. He hasn’t spoken to me in days and now he’s going to demand that I switch into another outfit?

“Yes.” His jaw tenses but I don’t care that he’s bothered. He lost the ability to have any input on my life when he left and never came back. He’s had numerous opportunities to open his mouth and communicate with me, and yet he remains

painfully silent, reinforcing my belief that he doesn't actually give a shit at all.

"You realize this was upstairs. If I wasn't meant to wear it, it wouldn't have been there. Clearly you, Magnus, Dom, someone approved this. Maybe your fucking driver, I don't know. I don't care. Stop pretending that you do."

"You think I don't care?" Cohen softens his resolve.

"It's pretty obvious, Co." I fight back the anger that rises, the one that threatens to ruin this potentially good night. He's had ample chances to talk to me, and he's choosing to do so now? "I won't allow you to ruin my evening."

Magnus pulls his ringing phone out of his pocket. "It's Dom." He presses the button and connects the call. "Boss." He nods through the muffled speaking as if Dom can see him. "Got it." He exhales and glances between me and Cohen. "Um, so. Good news and bad news."

"What's the bad news?" I plant my hand on my hip and wait for him to tell me I can no longer go out with Cora.

He flinches like I might smack him. "You and Hayes get to hang out."

I narrow my gaze. "And the good news?"

"You and Hayes get to hang out." Magnus steps forward. "You two need some quality time anyway. I've got to help Dom with a thing, meaning Hayes is off the work hook and gets to escort you tonight."

"Why can't I help him?" Cohen runs his hand through his hair.

"Calls for my expertise, not yours." Magnus shrugs. "Trust me, I'd rather take your place." He glides over and kisses my cheek. "Don't kill each other." He continues toward the door, snatching a set of keys off the stand. "Seriously." And with a wink, he's gone.

I swallow down the news and do my best to process it. Turning to Cohen, I say, "I'm not changing. You can't make me. If you don't want to go, stay here, but I'm leaving."

“June,” Cohen reaches for my arm.

I yank it away. “You know better than to try to control me, Cohen.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.” He motions to his body. “Give me a second to get out of these clothes.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

Cohen nods toward the living room. “Make yourself a drink, I’ll be right back.” He vanishes up the stairs and leaves me behind.

My heels click against the floor as I stroll over to the mini bar, not because he told me to, but because some booze could take the edge off what I’m feeling right now. Various shades of brown fill three different crystal containers. I assume they’re bourbon, given that seems to be their go-to. I pull the stopper off one of them and pour a bit of it into a short glass. Bringing it to my lips, I take in the aroma and sip it carefully. The taste is smooth, consistent with what they usually drink. Expensive, that’s for sure.

The burn rolls down my throat and into my chest. I swallow another mouthful in hopes that it will calm my raging nerves.

Footsteps sound on the steps, and when I turn, my pulse picks up its pace.

Cohen appears, black fitted jeans, pointed onyx shoes, a snug, white button-up that’s hanging open, his chiseled torso exposed as he fumbles to fasten it. A v-shape leading down to his groin. His golden hair is messy but in a sexy kind of way. “At least you have good taste.” He continues toward me, seizing the glass from me and taking a drink.

“I could say the same about you.” I shouldn’t, but I extend my hands and finish buttoning where he left off, leaving the top few undone. I fix his collar and pat it down where it stood, grazing my fingers along his skin. My gaze flits up to his, my heart nearly thudding out of my chest. I steal the bourbon back from him and down the rest of it in one swallow.



“Thanks.” He rolls his left sleeve up and tucks it neatly in place.

“Mmhm,” I mumble.

Cohen fumbles with the right one but manages on his own.

Touching him like that was already dangerous enough, I can't risk it again. Being this close to him, the flood gates threaten to burst and send me over ten years to the past when our love was fresh, unbroken.

In a way, it feels no time has passed. That he is still the sweet, miserable boy in need of someone who understands him. He probably thought I was saving him then, but little did he know, he was the one that saved me. From my darkness. My depression. The nightmares that kept me up at night. But then he left, throwing me into the depths of the shadows—alone, damaged, and ruined.

I've worked every day since then to build up those walls. To disallow anyone the power to hurt me that way ever again. To maintain every ounce of control over my life, my body, my soul. And I've done exactly that. Never giving another the chance to betray me—always being two steps ahead, one foot out the door at all times.

I thought I had a grip on it, but inches away from him, I can sense my soul reaching out to his, begging to sever the distance between them. I've been angry with him for ignoring me since I've been here, yet maybe that's the only thing that we can do to ensure we don't go down that road again.

“Are you ready?” I walk away from him in an attempt to put that tumbling wall back up.

“Yeah. Are you?” Cohen rinses our shared glass in the sink and heads toward the door, plucking a set of keys from the hooks with the others.

“Your driver isn't taking us?” I follow him into the garage, careful when I walk down the steps.

“I'm driving.” He clicks a button on the key fob, the headlights of a dark matte-grey sports car lighting up.

It's then that I notice how big the garage actually is, with at least a half dozen other vehicles parked around the space. Dom's Mercedes SUV, a blacked-out Suburban and a matching sedan, a couple muscle cars, Cohen's ride, and numerous motorcycles.

Cohen strolls over and opens the passenger door, extending his other hand for me to use for support. "My lady."

I roll my eyes at him but accept his help anyway. If I'm going to eat shit in these shoes, it's going to be because I'm drunk, not because I trip before getting into the car.

My fingers on his are electric, sparking that fire from our past. I ignore it and settle into the bucket seat, adjusting my dress once I'm inside the elaborate thing. Four connected rings embellish the steering wheel and are sprinkled about the leather upholstery.

He climbs into the driver's side and presses the garage door button before turning the car on. It roars to life, along with a rather large screen in the center of the dash. Cohen pokes at it and music comes through the speakers.

I side-eye him. "You still listen to The Broncos?"

The soft melody plays. A beautifully tragic song about heartbreak and loss. One of the many tunes that we had danced to on the rooftop of a pizza shop a lifetime ago.

"Yeah. I guess I'm a bit nostalgic." He extends his hand, but I hold mine out and stop him. "I can change it if you'd like."

"No. It's nice." I shouldn't allow it to play. Shouldn't let the notes weave their way in and tighten the noose around my heart. Maybe I'm yearning for the past, too. One track won't do any harm.

Cohen puts the car into reverse and backs out of the space. He shifts it to first, his foot pushing on the clutch as he makes his way through the gears.

I focus out the window and ignore his hand gripping the gearstick. Something I didn't realize could be a turn-on until he was next to me doing such a mundane task. I pull out my

phone and send Cora a quick text to let her know I'm on my way.

**Cora: Already here, two drinks in. Can't wait to see your ass!**

I'm only one behind her, but knowing Cora, she's already feeling a bit saucy.

The car ride isn't long, except once we hit the outskirts of the Haven, traffic slows to a crawl.

People gawk at Cohen's car, mostly guys and the occasional girl. The windows are tinted enough that they can barely see inside, probably an added safety feature to attempt to protect their identity. Although with a car that sticks out like a sore thumb, I assume it's difficult not to be noticed. I wouldn't put it past him to have bulletproof glass just in case something happened.

We pull up in front of our destination and Cohen pulls the parking brake and rests his palm across my thigh.

"I'll get the door." He jumps out and walks around the front of the car, tossing his keys to the valet and slipping him some cash. Running his fingers through his hair, he approaches my side and tugs on the handle, opening it up and offering me his hand again.

I step out of the car and adjust my dress from where it's riding up my thigh. "Do I look okay?" I'm not sure why I inquire, but the familiarity of him has me asking his advice anyway.

Cohen sighs and holds out his elbow. "Yes, J. You're a masterpiece."

I weave myself around him. "You clean up pretty well, too, Co."

He glances down at me, his blue eyes peering into my soul. "I won't bother you tonight, but make sure you stay where I can see you. Don't take drinks from anyone you don't know. Actually, scratch that, only get them directly from the bartender, and under no circumstance do you leave with anyone other than me."

And just like that, the mood is ruined. Cohen goes back to controlling bodyguard mode, a switch that he so easily flips, reminding me that all I am to him is a job. A target to ensure their safety.

A bouncer opens the door for us, and we step through into the noisy place.

I pull away from him. “Got it.” I take a few strides and scan the crowd for the beautiful blonde I’m looking for, not the one I came with. She waves her hand at me to catch my attention, a grin spreads across her face. I continue toward her, already feeling lighter at putting some space in between me and Cohen.

“Dude, when you said *dress up* you really meant it, didn’t you?” Cora holds me at an arm’s length and studies my outfit. “You’re like, super-hot, J.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I’d be a lesbian for you, too.”

“This is so pretty.” She skims the necklaces laying on my chest. “Are those *diamond* earrings?” Her eyes go wide. “Did you hit the lottery and forget to tell me?” Cora’s finger runs next to my face to move my hair out of the way to get a better look. Her touch floats against the makeup-covered mark on my chin. “What’s that?” The bubbly vibe fades. “What happened?”

I tuck the clutch under my arm. “It’s no biggie. I’m fine.” I gesture toward the bar. “You want to get a drink? I’m buying.”

“Okay, seriously. What the hell is going on?” She follows me over to the busy counter.

The bartender immediately walks over, something I’m not quite used to. She places two glasses filled with a golden liquid in front of us.

“I didn’t order those,” I tell her.

She throws a thumb in a general direction. “Pretty boy did. Said your tab was on him. Can I get you anything else?”

I glance where she had pointed and spot Cohen standing there, his glass tipped in the air at me. I glare at him and he

grins.

“Pretty is an understatement,” Cora says. She raises her arm and signals for him to join us.

“No, wait.” But it’s too late, he’s already on his way.

Cohen stands close behind me, his fingers resting on the small of my back. “Is there a problem, ladies?”

“Not at all,” Cora speaks up. “But it’s tradition for us to start the night with a shot. I thought maybe you’d want to join us.” She turns to the bartender. “Three of your cheapest tequila’s, please.”

Cohen scrunches up his nose. “Come on now, we can do better than that.”

“Nope, the cheaper the better,” Cora corrects him.

I tilt my head toward him. “Can’t fuck with tradition, Co. It’s bad luck.”

Cora passes the shots out to each of us. “What are we cheersing?”

“How about nostalgia?” Cohen offers.

The rope tugs tighter around my heart.

“I can get down with that.” Cora holds hers up in the air. “To nostalgia.”

I sigh and make eye contact with her then Co, clinking our glasses together at the same time. “To nostalgia.” I down the contents and bask in the warmth running down my chest, hoping it takes root soon and frees me from being so damn uptight.

“I’ll leave you two be.” Cohen places his empty glass on the counter. “Have fun, but not too much.” He gives my waist a light squeeze and then disappears into the crowd.

“Okay, so.” Cora grabs the original two drinks we were given and leans into me. “Tell me everything.”

I follow her away from the bar and over to a dirty but deserted high-top table that gives us a little shelter from the

roaring crowd.

She eyes the dance floor then me. “Spill.”

“Um, well, where do I start?” That I was kidnapped and tortured moments after I left her last week? That I stabbed a man, escaped with my life, only to get fired and kicked out of my house the next day. That a beautiful, knight in tattooed armor offered to let me live with him and his two housemates, all of which I have romantic feelings for in one way or another. Past and present. And they’re all in the mafia, which means they can provide whatever I could possibly need or want, and that they seem to truly want to do that. Oh, and I agreed to stay with them and accept their protection for the next three weeks in exchange for ten thousand dollars.

No big deal. They’re also currently in a war, if you wanted to add that, too.

“How about the hottie over there? He’s friends with Magnus, right? Wasn’t he at his house?” Cora wildly waits for me to give her any detail I’m willing to spare.

I sip my bourbon and scan the crowd for his stupidly handsome face. “Yep. They’re roomies.”

“That’s crazy. All three of them, under the same roof.”

“Four, actually,” I add.

She reaches out to grasp my forearm. “Wait, there’s another guy? This is getting good.”

I laugh. “No, I meant *me*.”

“*You’re* staying there, too?” Cora brings that same hand of hers to her chest. “You realize how fucking lucky you are, right? People write books about this shit.”

“What, no way?” I inadvertently avoid her question.

“Um, yes way. It’s called reverse harem, google it. Seriously. Best smut money can buy. Any genre, too. You want some alien love? They’ve got it. Vampires? Yep. How about a little werewolf action? It’s there. Obviously, there’s biker gangs and mafia, too.”

I hold my hand over my mouth to hold in the drink that I nearly spit out. I swallow down the liquid and cough a little. “Sorry, wrong pipe.”

“You okay?”

I nod, my eyes watering a bit.

“Pretty soon you’ll fall in love, someone will almost die, and then you’ll live happily ever after. Sprinkle in a little conflict to keep the readers turning the page.”

Great, I’m living in a mafia reverse harem book. Can I skip ahead and see how this one ends?

“You’re the worst.”

Cora rubs her chin. “I hope I’m not the one that bites it. I am the meaningless side character in the story.”

“Meaningless my ass.”

She smiles. “You’re right, I totally have main character energy. I’ll probably get a spin-off book of my own.”

“A girl can dream.”

“Wait, you changed the subject. Explain to me how you managed to *move in* with them since the last time I saw you?”

I want to confess everything. All the minor and major details that led to tonight, but a lot of them aren’t my secrets to tell and that would be unfair of me to be that careless with the sensitive specifics of their complicated lives. “Well, if you recall, I was having money trouble.” I reach into the leather clutch. “Speaking of.” I pull out a couple of the bills and slide them across the table. “Here. I really appreciate you helping me when you did.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” Cora glances down at the money. “That’s more than you owe me, though.”

“Consider it interest, and my meager attempt at reimbursing you for all the booze you’ve provided lately.”

She laughs and holds up her glass. “Again, what are friends for?” Cora guzzles her drink and scrunches her face. “Back to your story.”

“Right, so. I had a rather weird day. Got fired from that pizza shop I was working at. Dude was a real prick.” To say the least. “I had run into Magnus by chance, and he offered to drive me home. And when I got there, Carter and Heather had thrown my shit on the little landing at the top of the stairs and changed the fucking locks.”

“Damn, J, that’s intense.” She circles her chin with her finger. “What happened there?”

“Dumb accident. I was carrying stuff and missed a step. Cut my face and bruised my knees. Anyway, Magnus was still leaving when he saw me fall, and being the sweetheart that he is, he insisted I stay with them until I get things sorted.”

Cora narrows her gaze and slowly bobs her head up and down. “You’re totally a sugar baby now.”

“Am not.” I grin and down the rest of my bourbon, courtesy of my blast from the past.

“J, I love you and all, but you are oblivious. You’re wearing designer everything from head to toe and those earrings...” She continues to study my appearance. “Wait, what did you say they do for a living?”

“I don’t know, security or something.” Isn’t that what Cohen had told me before I knew the truth?

Cora puts up both hands to use air quotes. “Security. Okay.” She shrugs. “Whatever. If my bestie is happy and healthy, that’s all that matters. The wealthy part is just a perk.”

I can’t keep continuing to talk about this unless I’m willing to risk confessing details I shouldn’t. “You want to dance?”

Cora puts both palms on the side of her face and squeals. “Really?” She immediately grabs onto me and tugs me toward the steady moving group of people. “I’m not letting you change your mind.”

The music gets louder the closer we get; the temperature rises under the strobe lights.

I shift my gaze to where Cohen once was, but struggle to spot him. It’s not that I mean to obey him, but he did tell me to



stay in his line of sight. Surely, he didn't expect me to stay in one place all night.

Cora weaves us through the swaying bodies and further into the center of the floor. She spots an opening and settles us right into it. Spinning me in a circle, she lets go and laces her hands up her neck and into her hair, her hips immediately finding a groove with the song. Her heather grey crop top has a plunging neckline and draws the attention of nearly every surrounding human with a thing for females. Between my skimpy dress and her high-waisted, short black skirt, we have people gravitating toward us within moments of stepping foot onto the dance floor.

Cora beams, her bright white smile glowing with happiness.

A decent-looking man approaches her from behind, his body floating along with hers to the beat.

A cute, short, curly-haired brunette steps in front of me, grabbing my hands and putting them on her shoulders. We finish out the song and both the girl and the guy flutter away and out of sight.

Cora laughs and continues dancing her little heart out.

Two more guys get closer, more attractive than the last. One with dark brown skin, a jawline to die for, and beautiful green eyes. The other with fiery red hair and freckles galore. They take turns circling us, their hands gripping our waists and dancing along with us. They stick around longer than our last partners.

Every time I spin around, I scan the crowd for Cohen, never once spotting him. I shouldn't care, and yet I can't help but wonder what he's doing, who he's talking to, if he's miserable by himself. Is he watching me? Fuming over the sexy men giving me their attention?

A hand latches onto my wrist, tugging me toward the person it's attached to.

My sights raise, settling on the man I was looking for. "Co. What the hell?"

“We need to talk.” He continues to pull me, his expression unreadable given he’s always in a grumpy mood.

Now? Of all the fucking opportunities he’s had, he’s choosing to communicate at this very moment?

I turn toward Cora and the guys. “I’ll be right back,” I call out to them, because it’s not like I have another choice; Cohen is practically dragging me away.

We thrash through the crowd, Cohen not giving a shit about the shoulders he’s bumping into and people he’s disregarding. He leads me down the hallway that’s labeled bathrooms, walking us past the few couples lining the space and making out. He stops at the very end of the dimly lit corridor.

“J.” His expression is hard and stern. He grabs onto my hand, spinning me toward him and pinning me up against the wall with his body. One hand slams the surface beside my head, the other hovering just along my face. “You think this is a game?”

I blink in an attempt to figure out his angle here. “No. Do you?”

Cohen’s gaze trails mine, frantically glancing back and forth. His jaw is tighter than anything I’ve seen before, something that can’t be good on his pretty teeth.

People don’t pay us any attention when they pass, probably because they’re drunk or assuming we’re another one of the duos trying to get a little privacy.

“Do you have no idea what you’re doing to me?” Cohen’s nostrils flare.

“Considering you won’t speak to me, no, Co, I don’t. Care to fucking enlighten me?”

His breath grazes my skin, a mixture of bourbon and mint. “I will not allow you to flaunt your ass around here and disrespect yourself by letting any random man put his hands on you.”

“I have needs, Cohen, desires that you know nothing about.” I take a step, but he pushes me back.

He brings his palm on the side of my cheek, his touch warm and electric.

I can't be this close to him. Not if I stand any chance of maintaining my resolve.

Cohen runs his thumb down over my bottom lip, his fingers wrapped around the base of my chin and neck.

“What are you doing?” My body comes alive with his every movement. The undeniable chemistry is still there despite our aversion to each other.

He continues his descent, tracing the area between my collarbone and my practically exposed breasts. “What I've wanted to do for years.”

I have no will left to make him stop, because it's the last thing I truly want. He was the first person I ever longed for, and that craving never went away, no matter how hard I try to fuck it out of my system with anyone but him.

Cohen makes his way over my waist and to the bottom of my dress, his body shifting to block the view from anyone who might glance our way. His growing hardness presses against my leg. He snakes his hand up and glides it over my panties. “Tell me to stop.”

I exhale and bite my bottom lip, my body hungry with the need for more. I eye his mouth, the same one I've kissed a million times.

He stares at me, his eyes pleading like they're begging me to put an end to whatever is about to happen next. Because once we open those flood gates, what if there's no going back? It's been over a decade and yet I lust for him like no time had passed at all.

My body gravitates toward him, inching forward for just a little more.

He obeys, slipping his fingers under the hem of my panties and gliding them down. Cohen's dick throbs against me as he

feels my eager wetness. He presses a digit on my aching clit and slides it further until it's resting just along my hole.

I pulsate, my pussy impatient for him to penetrate me.

"Last chance," he tells me, moving his fist from the wall onto the base of my skull and tangling it in my hair.

My eyes roll at the layers of pleasure he's already providing with minimal effort. "Kiss me before I change my mind."

Cohen brings his face closer, floating it next to mine. "I've missed you," he murmurs and finally closes the void between us.

His lips are everything I remember, except the passion has increased, like they're yearning to erase all the lost time. An endless apology in his kiss. Our tongues reacquaint themselves—two old lovers finally reunited at last.

I gasp as he inches his finger into me, slow at first, but then he shoves another one in, filling me a bit more.

We continue to make out without a care for anyone who might witness this indecent public act. The only thing on my mind is scratching that figurative itch that has plagued me for so long.

He rocks the base of his hand while sliding his fingers in further, inching them back and forth.

I pivot toward him to give him a silent approval to keep going, my leg raising and wrapping around the bottom of his to give us both a better angle. I grip his waist and pull him toward me, dying for him to be closer. If only there was a way to actually fuck in this hallway without causing too much of a scene.

Cohen fills me with a third digit and positions his palm to apply pressure to my clit.

I dig my fingers into him and stifle a moan, my orgasm already growing near.

He's well aware of it, too, moving in just the right ways to keep me on that decadent path to explosion. His tongue goes

deeper into my mouth, mine into his, the frenzy we've created becoming more out of control with each passing second.

Cohen clenches onto my hair, pulling it tightly and kissing me harder.

I come undone in this dark hallway, my pussy clasp and pulsating around him while drunken people walk on by. I bite at his lip with a bit too much pressure and whimper as the pleasure of the entire experience cascades over me.

He carefully pulls himself out from under my dress and breaks away from our heated kiss. Cohen brings his fingers to his mouth, gliding them in and sucking me off them, his blue gaze piercing through me. "You are not to flirt with another man in this bar. Do you hear me?"

If I weren't riding this wave, I'd protest, but watching him taste me, the little bit of blood I drew from his lip mixed with my lust, I find myself unable to object.

After all, I got what I wanted anyway—we can argue about my disobedience later.

I'll allow him to think he's in control for now.

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## JUNE



*I* just got finger-banged in public, and I kinda loved it.

Maybe it's the booze running through my veins, or the craving I've had for Cohen since the first time we kissed when we were kids, but the adrenaline coursing through me makes me feel more alive than ever. Something is enticing about the line of danger we dance along, and it makes me want to dip my toes further on the other side, perhaps see how much risk-taking I can actually get away with.

Cohen pulls his phone out of his pocket—Dominic's contact lighting up the screen. He presses the green button and puts it to his ear. "Yeah?" Cohen flits his gaze to me. "She's fine." He winks and grins, the smile only lasting a second before Dom continues talking. "Of course, he's already on his way?" He pauses. "Right, I will."

"Who's on their way?" I ask him, not caring that it's probably not my business.

"An...associate."

"Simon?"

"No. He knows better than that."

I exhale, not quite sure why I was holding my breath on that one. The guys have made it clear that Simon is their rival—a threat—the man potentially responsible for what happened to me. It's a natural reaction to internally cringe at the thought of him just showing up out of the blue.

“Is everything okay?” I study the way his face hardens and returns to the cold and distant man from earlier. The robotic Cohen, void of all emotions other than anger, unlike the soft and sweet boy I remember from my childhood.

“It will be. I’ll make sure of it.” Cohen turns back to me fully. “Just because I will be distracted, does not mean I won’t be watching. If you want to dance, that’s fine, but tread lightly with who you choose to join you. Do not underestimate whether I will cut the throat of a stranger if they touch you. I don’t care who sees it.”

And somehow, despite it not aligning with the Cohen I once knew, I believe him, because neither one of us are that person from forever ago.

“Got it.” I adjust the necklaces on my chest.

Cohen picks up my discarded clutch from the ground, something I didn’t even realize I had dropped during our heated time together. I was more focused on his lips, his touch, his fingers sliding in and out of my pussy.

He hands it to me and leaves his palm hovering there for me to take.

I clasp onto it and allow him to guide me down the make-out hallway, passing the bathrooms and back out into the blaring nightlife. The music seems louder than it was, the crowd easily doubled in size while we were busy.

Cohen points ahead to the blonde shaking her ass with another girl. “Your friend is there.” He brings my knuckles to his lips, kissing them gently and releasing me to join her.

He walks away, a strange abyss filling me with the increasing distance. Regret sets in with it, reminding me that I potentially fucked up by allowing us to cross that line. I wanted it, he wanted it, but did we go too far? Did we reopen a wound impossible of closing? Something that will take us both down because of our complicated past and our unresolved feelings for each other?

Cora spots me and waves her arm to get my attention.

I'll leave the potential consequences of my few minutes of pleasure behind and worry about it another day. Tonight is for having fun with my friend.

I glide over to her, stepping around the many moving bodies and joining her on the dance floor. I lean in close. "Want to grab a drink?" I could use a minute to catch my breath and some booze to numb me.

"Um, yes." Cora latches on to my elbow and takes me with her.

I go with her, grateful that I've gotten used to these shoes by now. Otherwise, I might have just face-planted or twisted an ankle. I pretend they're an extension of my body, adopting the whole *fake-it-till-you-make-it* motto. I refuse to let a few inches make me look bad.

Cora pulls me to her side. "Was lover-boy pissed?"

"What?" I glance over at her. "Oh, Co? Well, when isn't he mad?"

"So that's his type." Cora squeezes into a spot at the bar.

The bartender looks directly at us and holds up a finger. She finishes pouring the drink she's working on and comes right over. "What can I get you?"

A couple dude-bros a few people down throw a few choice words our direction and shake their heads. I don't blame them, considering they were waiting ahead of us.

Cohen must have used his influence to ensure our prompt customer service.

I step forward. "Can we get four Washington Apple shots and two Flokis on draft?"

Cora smiles and squeezes my hand, excitement running through her at the renewed alcohol source.

"What happened to those guys?" I ask her when the bartender starts making our drinks.

"I think your man scared them away." She shrugs. "Shit happens."



“He’s not my man.” And yet I scan the crowd for him anyway.

He’s leaning against the wall in the corner, his arms crossed, staring directly at me. He pushes off, breaking eye contact with me, and shakes the hand of a man who approaches. They exchange pleasantries and Cohen gestures toward a table for them to sit at.

“Ohh, who is *that?*” Cora joins me in watching them, her attention on the man with Cohen.

“I don’t know.”

Decently tall, with soft features, a hint of red in his ashy hair. He follows the path where Cohen was looking, grazing his focus on me for a second before settling on Cora. He appears young, too much so to be in that line of business.

“OMG, am I having a moment right now?” Cora nudges me with her elbow and continues to eye-fuck Cohen’s *associate*.

“Miller,” Cohen mouths, but I can’t quite make out what he says next.

“His name is Miller,” I tell Cora once she stops staring.

Her cheeks blush and she turns her back to the two of them.

“J,” she grabs onto me. “Will you introduce us?”

“Introduce you? I don’t even know that man, Cor.” I reach for the drinks the bartender sets out for us. I hand one to Cora and keep another.

“Please?” Cora juts out her bottom lip.

“Let them do their business and if they’re still over there when we’re done with these, I’ll consider it.”

She holds out her shot glass. “Deal.” She tips it back and downs it, not even making a face. That girl is on a mission.

I swallow mine, too, and leave the empty glass on the counter. I grab her the other shot and her beer, and take my own. “Thank you,” I tell the bartender as we walk away and

give room to whoever else needs to order something. I find another abandoned but dirty high-top and make a beeline for it.

“Listen, J, I know you have a way with the fellas, but you are seriously pulling some quality eye candy lately.” Cora flips her hair off her shoulder. “What devil did you sell your soul to, because I’m ready to trade mine in, too?”

“Dumb luck?” I sip the beer and scan the crowd. “Enough about me. How was your week? How did the test go?”

Cora dramatically exhales. “Dumb. Super dumb. I mean, I probably did fine, but I swear, nothing from the study guide was on it. That should be illegal.”

“One hell of a bait and switch.”

“You’re telling me. I scoured that thing for like three days straight.” Her gaze locks onto something across the room. “Cohen’s friend is super hot.”

I push her shot glass toward her. “They’re business associates, Cor. I don’t know if they have a relationship outside that.” And I’m not sure if they’re even on the same side of the war they’re battling. Allowing Cora to get involved with someone from that line of work would be irresponsible of me.

But if she did, then I wouldn’t have to hide anything from her, and could tell her the truth about what actually happened to me. It would be selfish, but I wouldn’t have to lie to her.

“You’ll find out though, right?” She picks up the glass and brings it to her lips, waiting for me to do the same.

“For you, yes.” I’ll get the scoop on whoever this Miller guy is, and see if he’s worthy of my best friend.

Cohen is protective of me, so I have no doubt he would tell me if Miller would be a threat to Cora.

“Otherwise, you’re going to have to learn how to share.” Cora tosses her shot back and immediately reaches for her beer to chase it down. “I’m starting to feel it, are you?”

The alcohol warms my chest and settles in my belly, spreading a residual warmth over my body. I expect my vision to blur or my speech to slur, but instead, I'm just slightly buzzed, an overall contentment flowing through me. "Not really."

Cora's eyes widen and she cups her hand around her mouth. "Boner alert. Don't look now, but Damon is heading this way." She averts her gaze and scratches at her neck like she didn't blatantly announce his arrival. It's safe to say the intoxication is hitting her harder than it is me.

I casually pick up my glass and hope that her drunken state is causing her to see shit that isn't there.

A hand on my lower back tells me otherwise. "Fancy seeing you here." The Damon lookalike comes between me and Cora. His black jacket hugs his shoulders, a matching shirt clinging to his chest. The darkness of his brows intensifies his stare, reinforcing that bad boy look he's going for. There's something dangerously seductive about him I can't quite put my finger on.

He scans my face, his gaze falling on my brow, my lip, my chin. All the places I tried my best to apply the expensive makeup that one of the guys I live with provided me. "What happened?"

I note his jaw tensing, a rather weird reaction from a stranger.

His last few words he spoke to me float through my head. *You will be mine.*

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Cohen comes out of nowhere and shoves Damon away from me. He positions his body in front of me like this guy might be some kind of threat.

"Co." I reach out and place my hand on his shoulder. "Everything is fine." I step around him. "You two know each other?"

Damon smirks and crosses his arms. "Yeah, Co, we were just having a chat."

“The fuck you were.” Cohen brings his hand around toward his back, gripping the handle of a gun I didn’t realize was there until now.

“Whoa.” I leap to stop him. “Not the time or place.”

Cora sips her beer and watches the drama unfold.

A few other people had turned to watch, but once their attention span deemed it less than exciting, they stopped observing.

Damon speaks up. “You should really take better care of her, unless you want someone else to step in and do it for you.”

“I should end you right here for your part in this.” Cohen’s hands form fists, a rage like no other consuming him.

Damon tilts his head. “Wait, you think I had something to do with that?” He points toward me.

“I thought you fell,” Cora adds.

I shake my head at her, silently pleading with her to stay out of this. My Spidey-senses tell me this is not the appropriate time to be an innocent bystander. The last thing I want is for Cora to get caught in the crossfire.

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on?” I motion between the two guys.

“I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure.” Damon turns to Cora. “Simon, Simon Beckett, and you are?”

My heart stops. My mouth drops open. Without thinking, I take a step back, all fight or flight buzzers going off inside me. My chest tightens and for a second, I forget how to breathe. All of it comes into focus when I see their hands touch.

“I’m Cora.” She has no idea of the threat at the end of her grasp. “Anyone ever told you that you bear a striking resemblance to Damon Salvatore?”

Simon pivots his head toward me. “Doesn’t he get the girl in the end?”

Cohen charges forward. “So, help me God.”

Simon throws his hands up in the air. “Now, now. Don’t forget the level of amnesty we have in places like this.”

“Cor, babe.” I put on my best mom voice. “Hey. When was the last time you peed? Do you need to use the bathroom?”

She blinks at me and nods. “I do, actually.” Her words slur a little. “Good idea. You want to come?”

“I’ll meet you in there, okay?” Anything to get her away from the evil men in her close proximity.

“Okie.” Cora walks off without any other coaxing. Her full bladder doing the work for me.

Once she’s out of earshot, I turn to Simon. “You leave her out of this.”

Cohen extends his arm in front of me. “Let me do the talking.”

Simon laughs. “What kind of man do you think I am?” He flips his thumb toward where Cora had disappeared. “You think I’d hurt blondie?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you,” I say despite being told to basically shut up.

Simon brings his fingers over his mouth. “I’m offended. You barely know me, *June*.”

“Don’t you say her name.” Cohen continues to clench his fist.

“I know enough. And to order this.” I point to my face. “That makes you a sick fuck.”

Simon drops his faux wounded persona. “I had nothing to do with that. I swear it on my life.”

“It was one of your men,” Cohen adds. “Claims the command came from you.”

Simon steps closer. “I might see the same thing you do in her, but I would *never*.”

Cohen bridges the gap, too. “One day, you’ll drop your guard, and when you do, I’ll be there to put a bullet right

there.” He presses his finger into Simon’s forehead.

“Who was it?” Simon swats Cohen’s hand away. “Who did this to you? Tell me their name.”

“I don’t know.” Because truly, I don’t. And if I’m being honest, he doesn’t either.

“Vincent,” Cohen says through gritted teeth.

Simon shifts to Cohen. “You’re sure?”

“Deadly.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of it.” Simon rubs his neck. “I’ll deliver him by nightfall tomorrow. Give me thirty-six hours of a truce.”

What the fuck is going on?

“Why?” Cohen asks the question in my own mind.

“Because I want to see this fucker dead as much as you do.” Simon extends his hand. “Day and a half?”

I flinch when Cohen reaches into his pocket.

He pulls out his phone, pushing Dominic’s contact. It rings once and connects. “Thirty-six-hour cease-fire, going into effect now. I’ll explain later. Beckett is off-limits, get the word out.” Cohen hangs up and glares at Simon. “Make the call.”

Simon does as he’s told, doing the same thing Cohen did. The two of them shake hands and I brace myself for the world to implode.

“Oh, what did I miss?” Cora says as she stumbles over.

For the second time tonight, I’m unsure where to begin with her. She requests information I’m not capable of providing. Luckily though, she’s too drunk to put much thought into it.

“I was just ordering you an Uber,” I tell her. “It’s getting late.”

Cora pouts and grabs at her beer. “What? It’s barely...” She reaches between her boobs. “Shit, I think I left my phone

in the bathroom. BRB.” She staggers back where she came from.

Cohen tips his head down and glares at Simon. “If you so much as think of betraying this agreement, I will tie you up, peel off every inch of your skin as slowly as I possibly can until you beg me to end you.”

Simon pats Cohen’s arm. “I expect nothing less outta you, Hayes.” He walks around him and grazes his finger up my chin. “Don’t worry, love. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

He strolls past us and through the crowd, out the front door of the bar, leaving me with more questions than I have answers.

Cohen slowly faces me. “J, please tell me you and Beckett...”

I shake my head, for no good reason desperate for him to know the truth. “No, absolutely not.”

“You messing around with the wrong men, June.” He runs both hands up his neck and through his hair. “It’s dangerous enough that you’re involved with Dom, Bryant, and me...but Simon. I won’t allow it. The guys won’t either. They’ll kill you and him both before they let that happen.” Those familiar baby blue eyes of his stare at me. “I never wanted this for you. None of it. And now here you are, thrown right into the snake pit.”

“Hey.” I take his hands in mine. “I’ve made it this far on my own, put a little faith in me.”

It’s not me that I’m worried about anyway. Simon made it clear that he meant me no harm. And as long as I steer clear of him, the others won’t either. But Cohen, he’s lost, a darkness has consumed his soul and it’s only a matter of time until every ounce of his humanity is gone for good. I might have a mysterious killer after me, and four men doing what they can to track him down and end his life, but who’s looking out for them? Protecting them from the lengths they’re willing to go to get their revenge.

Cohen is clearly battling a plethora of things I've yet to uncover.

Magnus is attention-starved and dying for companionship.

And Dom acts like he's unworthy of affection and understanding.

They're all broken in their own ways and none of them are equipped to handle it themselves.

Each one of them is stressed, under an insane pressure to constantly be vigilant to what's going on in their work-life because if they're not careful, it could mean the end to everything. Their lives, their livelihood, everything they've worked to achieve.

I feel this strange sense of obligation to help them see their situation through, because whether I want to admit it or not, I do care about them, and even when I push their buttons, they continue to keep me around, protecting me, providing for me. They offered me shelter when I had nowhere else to turn. They've given me more than I deserve and ask next to nothing in exchange for their generosity. I've defied them, gone against their wishes, and yet they have been noble and kind, despite their ruthless and brutal ways.

It doesn't mean I have to stick around forever, but the time I have left with them, I want to use it wisely and do what I can to provide them a little more value than what I have to offer between my legs. After all, I can't exactly leave without their war coming to an end anyway.



## DOMINIC



“*Y*ou have some explaining to do.” I grip the edge of the countertop. “Should she be in here?”

“Listen, this whole talking about me like I’m not in the room thing has to stop.” June crosses her arms across her chest, making her cleavage plump up even more than it already was.

A distraction I cannot allow right now.

“Can you at least change first?”

She drops her hands to the side and looks down. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

Bryant speaks up for all the men in the room. “J, princess...come on. You’re a walking boner magnet.” He gestures to his groin. “I’ve got one.” Then at me. “Dom’s got one.” He glances at Hayes. “All three of us, a freaking sausage fest in here.”

He’s not wrong.

“Take off your shirt then,” June tells Bryant.

“Uh, what?”

June pulls the strap of her dress up and over her head and allows the dainty fabric to fall to the floor, leaving her in nothing other than her panties and heels. “Your shirt.” She holds out her hand and waits for him to comply. “What? It’s not like all of you haven’t been up in this at one point or another, no sense in acting modestly.”

“Bryant, shirt, now,” I order. Because if I continue watching this spectacle, I’m going to bend her over the counter, slide her panties to the side, and fuck her in front of both of them without a single care in the world other than feeling her pussy around my cock.

Bryant drags the white thing over his head and tosses it to her, leaving himself topless with a shirt of tattoos covering his torso.

“Better?” She asks once it’s hanging loosely on her body.

Somehow, it’s not. Her nipples show through the white fabric, giving off an entirely new provocative appearance. Leave it to her to be sexy in whatever she puts on.

“Not really.” Bryant goes over to the couch and pulls off the throw blanket. He walks to June and drapes it around her shoulders. “Here. Try to stop being so hot so we can focus.”

“You know, there’s an easy solution to the problem here.” June leans against the counter opposite of me.

I recognize immediately where her train of thought is going. “June. Please. Save it for another day.”

She grins and raises her brow at me. “So, the option is on the table.” June bobs her head up and down with a smug look caked on her face. “Interesting.”

“Are we talking about what I think we’re talking about?” Bryant drops his mouth open. “Because I am *so* down.”

“Guys,” Hayes interjects. “Focus for fucks sake.”

“Right. Group sex is on the back burner.” Bryant makes an imaginary checkmark in the air.

June tugs the blanket around her. “I met Simon tonight. Well, I sort of met him once before, didn’t know it though. Anyway, that part’s irrelevant. Tonight, he made it pretty damn clear that he had nothing to do with what happened. Seemed just as pissed as you guys are. So, Co agreed to do that thing where you don’t kill each other for a short window of time and Simon said he’d find the dude responsible.”

I rub my temple. “How? Why? I…”

Hayes speaks up. “He snuck in when I was meeting with Miller. Must have noticed I was preoccupied.”

So much for the head of security being on top of things.

“Legit surprised you didn’t kill him right there.” Bryant leans back in his chair. “I would have.”

Hayes smacks Bryant’s shoes off the table. “No, you fucking wouldn’t have.”

Bryant shrugs. “Guess we’ll never know.”

“He was going to.” June chimes in. “I stopped him.”

No one stops Hayes from killing anyone. That’s an impossible task. And yet June somehow managed to pull it off, only further proving the power she has over us. The entire situation never should have transpired, but it’s brought a few key points to light.

According to June and Hayes, Beckett wasn’t involved. If that’s the case, then who was? How could June have provoked someone else to do what they did to her? And why? It makes no sense at all, unless...unless he’s working for another person. Beckett and I have been battling for the throne, but other factions have tried to overpower both of us. That couldn’t be possible though, could it? Between the two of us, I was under the impression we killed off the other threats. Could some of them have slipped through the cracks?

“Hello.” June waves her hand in front of my face. “You in there?”

I blink at her and catch her wrist in my grasp. “Yeah. Stop doing that.”

Her soft skin is warm, inviting, and does wonders on completely consuming my attention. My cock throbs in my tailored suit pants, reminding me just how badly it wants to ravish this stunning creature standing in front of me.

“What are you thinking about?” June raises a brow at me.

“Strategizing,” I lie.

She flits her gaze at my hand still gripping her arm. “Right.”

Bryant clears his throat. “I could literally cut the sexual tension with a knife.”

I glance over at him. “I could cut *you* with a knife.”

He throws his tattooed arms in the air. “Just stating the obvious.”

“You’re all fucking terrible. Can we focus for five fucking minutes?” Hayes smacks his palm against the counter.

I drop June’s wrist, immediately regretting the distance between her skin and mine. I shove away every thought of spreading her tightness wide with my cock and settle on the most pressing matter.

“Beckett claims he’ll find the man responsible and deliver him by tomorrow night.” Hayes continues going over business. “I named Vincent and he acted like he already knew the guy and how to find him. Making him that much more guilty in my opinion. Why else would he serve him up on a silver platter?”

June shifts her weight and tugs her bottom lip in between her teeth. “Um, well, that might be my fault.”

“What?” A bit of a growl escapes me with the word.

“He...” She rubs at her neck. “I think he *likes* me.”

My jaw tenses and I steady myself by taking in a breath. Despite my efforts, it doesn’t calm me in the slightest. “No.”

“I told you,” Hayes adds.

“Told her what?”

“That you wouldn’t approve.” Hayes crosses his arms.

“Approve? Are you fucking serious?” I close the little bit of space to stand before June, my large frame towering over her. I steady my gaze at hers and find myself trailing my hand up her arm and cupping her neck, tilting her chin toward me. “Never. I repeat, never, will you entertain the idea of being

with Simon Beckett, do you hear me?" I tighten my grip and wait for her to confirm.

Instead of the fear I expect to see from her, there's something else, perhaps intrigue, lining her features. June watches me through her lashes, her cheeks turning upward in a grin. "Harder," she breathes and licks her lips.

My erection betrays me, pushing through my pants and up against her leg.

How can I be the one physically dominating her, and yet she's in complete control? Never in all my years have I met someone who had this kind of power over me. Women typically cower to my darker side, but with June, it's like it matches and brings out hers. A deadly combination that will no doubt end disastrously. We are both raging fires that are doused in a gasoline of desire that will burn us to the ground.

"I have to go." Hayes pushes a button on his phone, disconnecting from the call I wasn't paying attention to. "There's been a breach at one of our buildings. I'll take care of it since I'm no use here."

"You're really going to miss the show? It's about to get good." Bryant states from his spot in plain sight of me and June.

June breaks away from my hold on her and turns to Hayes as he walks toward the door. "I could think of something useful you could do, Co." She drops the blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Hayes glances back at her. "Maybe another time, J." He continues on his path, grabbing a set of keys and disappearing into the garage, leaving the three of us behind.

"As you were saying." June reaches down, latching onto my hand and returning it to her neck.

Oh, she knows exactly what she's doing and she's having fun testing me.

I glide my thumb along her chin and grip the base of her neck.

“Is this where you punish me for being a bad girl?” June’s wild eyes bore into me, furthering the sarcastic teasing she’s doing.

“Stop talking,” I tell her, wasting not another second by forcing my mouth onto hers. I part her lips with my tongue, caressing it possessively. Claiming her, willing her to understand that she belongs to no one outside of this house. Sure, I’ll share her with Hayes and Bryant, but if she thinks for a second that she can be with anyone else, she’s mistaken. I will happily murder every single person who tries to blur that boundary.

I break away from June’s luscious lips for only a moment when I notice Bryant’s presence come toward us.

He approaches her from behind and reaches for the hem of the shirt he let her borrow, dragging it up and over her head.

She spins from my grasp and faces Bryant. Her fingertips skim his chest and settle on his neck, pulling him down to crash her lips on his.

He moans into her mouth and tugs her nearly naked body into him.

I drop to my knees, yanking her panties down and over her ass. They land along the last thing she’s wearing, the heels I personally picked out for her.

Savoring the touch of her skin, I glide my calloused hands up her thighs and part her ass. I leave a trail of kisses in their wake and tease my tongue over her soaked folds.

June arches toward me, her body inviting and begging me for more. I want to stop, to slow down time and please her over and over, but I need her to know, to understand, who she belongs to.

I stand, unbuttoning my pants and reaching in to free my cock. “Mine.” I rub the tip of it against her and she backs into it while sliding her own hand up and down Bryant’s shaft, her mouth still on his.

His palms massage her breasts; his eyes unknowing of the sight from behind the woman that’s pleasuring him.

I grip her waist and line myself up, shoving inside of her with a bit of force.

June lets out a whimper and Bryant pulls away, blood on his lip. His tongue darts out and skims the red spot. He grins and melts back into her for another heated kiss.

I thrust into her again, sparing no regard for how much of her I'm filling. Every single inch of her needs to comprehend how serious I am.

"Fuck," she mutters into him. June reaches between her legs, her fingers grazing her wetness and feeling my cock pounding in and out of her. She takes that same hand and with its new moisture, she returns to pleasing Bryant.

June rocks her body into mine, matching my intensity in a way that only blows my mind.

I shove my cock deeper and change the tempo.

She reaches around to place her hand on my stomach. "Stop."

Immediately, without another thought, my body halts completely. Did I hurt her? Was it too much? Was this all more than she bargained for? Did she finally realize the magnitude of the situation?

"What's wrong?" Bryant asks her first.

June slides me out of her and takes a step to the side. She lowers herself onto the sheepskin rug only a few feet away. "Nothing." She spreads her legs and pivots onto all fours, licking her lips and smirking. "Just getting more comfortable."

Bryant returns to his place in front of her, except he's on his knees now, too.

She grips him in one hand and runs her tongue along his length, bringing his erection back in full force. June swirls her mouth over his tip before gliding him into her.

Bryant collects her jet-black hair in his hands and pulls it away from her face. His fists guide her head deeper and deeper until she's almost choking on him.

I get into position between her legs, taking a moment to taste her first. This is for me, not for her. I lick at her dripping lust and glide my finger over her throbbing nub. I don't give her the satisfaction of lingering too long. She doesn't need much to send her spiraling over the edge and right now, I refuse to give her that.

When I don't continue, she groans and positions her hand on her clit. Instead of allowing her to finish herself off, I grab both of her arms and hold them with my left hand behind her back. She mumbles into Bryant's dick, but he continues to guide her with the control he has over her.

I shove inside of her, filling her once again with every inch of me. My need for release matches hers with each forceful thrust I slam into her.

Her body relaxes and tightens all at the same time, her legs widening to give me better access to fuck her. June slams her ass into me and her mouth opens wider to take more of Bryant in.

Bryant's eyes roll at the new sensation and his grip on her hair tightens. "Jesus, princess."

June moans and gags but we continue to ruin her pretty little holes in tandem. Her body, hungry for more.

I dip my thumb into my mouth and moisten the tip, resting it gently against her tight ass.

Bryant lets out one final moan and explodes in her, pulling out and stroking every ounce of his orgasm into her mouth and onto her face.

She gobbles it up greedily and tenses around my shaft.

I drop her hands and remove myself, shoving her to the side and onto her back. I return my hardness to where it belongs and grip her hands over her head while fucking her slow and hard. "No one else, June." I slam into her. "Do you hear me?"

She licks the remains of Bryant off her bottom lip. "I hear you."



“But do you swear it?”

Her eyes stare at mine, questioning them as if they’re trying to figure out just how serious I am. Perhaps they’re wondering if there will be consequences to her actions if she chooses to lie.

Her core tightens, her orgasm just on the brink, exactly where I mean to keep it if she won’t comply.

Like a final remaining puzzle piece locks into place, she parts her lips and mutters, “I swear.”

“Good girl,” I tell her, the weight lifting from my shoulders at her submission. I position myself lower, my body lining up to grind against her in the exact spot I know she needs.

Her grip tightens on my hands, her nails digging into my skin and mixing with the pleasure of her cunt pulsating with my cock buried deep inside her. I allow her the pleasure of completion, cherishing the scream that leaves her at her climax.

With her body still shaking, she blinks up at me. “I want you to finish in my mouth.”

How can I deny such a request?

I release her hands and she brings herself to her elbows as I slide my aching cock out of her. Bryant, watching us intensely, strokes his length.

June moves elegantly, her ass going toward Bryant this time, and her hand and mouth finding me.

He drops his dick from his hand and mimics her position, getting himself a face full of her sweetness.

She moans as she takes me into her small grasp and plunges the tip of my shaft between her lips. Gliding her tongue along the bottom, she grips the base and twirls her thumb and index finger in a perfect motion to bring me a heightened sense of pleasure.

Despite knowing I could finish at any moment, I hold off and let Bryant build her closer to oblivion. It doesn’t take long

until her labored breaths and hungry mouth alert me to her near completion.

I weave my fingers in her hair and orgasm into her mouth, allowing her to swallow down every bit of me while she climaxes against Bryant's lips.

I thought I'd have more control around her, that her living here wouldn't change things. But here we are, fucking on the rug in the middle of our house.

Here's to hoping that will satisfy us enough to focus our attention on pressing matters.

The war we're in.

Claiming the throne is that much more imperative now that her life depends on it.

If Beckett thinks he stands a chance to be with June, he'll have to come through me first.

The stakes are somehow higher than they've ever been.

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## MAGNUS



“*Y*ou’re not going.” Hayes crosses his arms tight over his chest like that will somehow convince June of changing her mind.

“You can’t stop me.” She folds her arms, too, and juts out her hip.

“Yeah, not happening,” Dominic adds.

I shrug when she glances my way. “Don’t look at me.”

“What the fuck. I’m not a prisoner.” June snatches Hayes’ phone off the counter and brings it to his face before he can comprehend what she’s doing. The thing unlocks with facial recognition and she pushes a few buttons while backing away.

“J, give me my phone.” Hayes steps toward her.

“No, Co.” With one more flick of a finger, she puts the device to her ear.

Hayes snatches it from her and disconnects the call. “Are you fucking crazy?” Immediately, the cell rings. Hayes sighs and pushes a button. “Sorry about that, Beckett, pocket dialed you. We’ll be there soon.” He hangs up and shoves it into his pocket, out of her reach.

June takes in a breath and exhales slowly. “Okay. I will give you guys two options. Either I go with you, or I wait until you’re gone and follow you, which seems risky, given the circumstances. The choice is yours. I won’t mind if you’d like to do things the hard way.”

I walk over and put my arm around her shoulder. “I’m voting on the easy way.”

“This isn’t a fucking democracy.” Dominic glares at me and if looks could kill, I’d be brutally dead.

“Maybe it should be.” June grips my waist and tugs me closer. “Two against two.”

“Listen,” I add. “I hate the dude as much as you do, but I get the vibe he’s not going to hurt her. I mean, he’s fucking obsessed with her.” I glance down at the sweet-faced vixen. “Can you blame him?”

“And you have what, like twelve hours or so with your truce?” June continues to stand her ground in front of two of the deadliest men I’ve ever met. “I won’t forgive you if you don’t let me go.”

Her last statement cuts like a knife despite it not being aimed at me. Something about being on her bad side is enough to make my heart ache. How the fuck Hayes deals with it on a daily basis is lost on me.

“God knows how you hold a grudge,” Hayes mutters under his breath.

“Oh.” June tilts her head. “You’re going *there*? Now? Okay. Let’s do this then.” She pushes his shoulder. “Come on, tell me what you really think, Cohen. Share with the whole group how you made a bunch of empty promises and left, like a fucking coward. You couldn’t be bothered to call, to check-in, to be a man, and maybe just admit you moved the fuck on? You know, I should have known you’d betray me, that you’d leave me without a second fucking thought.” June shakes her head. “You knew what that meant to me. To be abandoned. And you did it anyway. Did you ever fucking care about me at all?” Her voice lowers. “Was I a joke to you? A quest?”

I knew it was bad, but I didn’t realize how deep the wound was until I could *feel* the pain in each of June’s words. She prides herself on being shut off, not letting anyone in to see her for who she truly is. She was damaged when she and Hayes got together, but he was the one person she decided to

let in. She trusted him and he did the unspeakable. The unforgivable.

“It’s not his fault.” Dominic runs his hand through his hair. “If you want to be mad at someone, take it out on me. Not him.”

“What are you talking about?” June asks the question in my own mind.

“Stay out of it, Dom,” Hayes barks. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me. She deserves the truth.”

“Someone better start talking.” June grips the edge of the counter.

Dominic looks directly at her. “It’s my fault. I’m the reason he never came back to you.”

June flits her attention from Dom to Hayes. “Co?”

For the first time ever, at least for my witnessing, tears well in Hayes’ bright blue eyes. “I thought I was protecting you, J.”

The excuse for leaving her behind, the most selfless of them all. June thinks her first love abandoned her because he didn’t care, when in reality, he did it to save her from this dangerous life he would never escape. He put her in the past so she would never be put in harm’s way. It’s no wonder he’s been so fucking mad at us for carelessly bringing her into it.

Hayes keeps his gaze trained on June; his tone hushed. “I never stopped loving you. Not for a second.”

June wipes at a rogue tear that cascades down her cheek. “I, um, think we should talk about this later.” She snuffles and regains her composure. “This has nothing to do with tonight. And if either one of you ever wants to be forgiven...” She points to Hayes and Dominic. “You won’t stand in my way anymore.”

“Okay.” Hayes nods, accepting that maybe, just maybe, he has a chance of getting back in her good graces.

Dominic drives his SUV while Hayes rides shotgun. June and I silently behind them.

I study her while she stares blankly out the window at the passing scenery. I can't quite tell what she's thinking or feeling, a tornado of emotions and thoughts more than likely devastating her with each second. I can only imagine the torment she's going through at finding out something so haunting about her past and present, the two colliding and wreaking havoc on her life.

I don't want to overstep, but my soul begs for hers to understand that I'm here if she needs me. We haven't known each other long, and yet there's this undeniable connection we have, an invisible thread linking our fates to one another. It's cliché as fuck, I totally get that. Still, I'm convinced our paths crossed for a reason, that we were meant to meet. I'm equal parts powerful and vulnerable with her around, and if I'm not mistaken, I think she experiences that, too. Not just with me, but with all three of us. I never imagined someone like June would find me. I had accepted my fate of meaningless one-night stands and surface-level conversation. I never saw her coming, and somehow the first time I laid my eyes on her, it was like the heavens opened and quite literally dropped an angel into my life.

A beautifully broken one.

She is no damsel in distress. No. June is a walking enigma of beauty and strength and a dark femininity that only she could exude. She's been hardened by her past. She's guarded. She's smart. She's dangerous. She took everything that ever hurt her and molded herself into the most badass woman I've ever known. She strolls head-on into danger not because she's a fool, but because she can overcome anything this world throws at her.

She will absolutely be our saving grace, or our demise. Definitely one or the other.

Does she realize that the three men in this vehicle would literally do anything in their power for her? Give her anything she could ever wish for. Satisfy her every desire and still never

shy away from wanting to do more for her to prove how much she means to them?

“We’re here.” Dominic glances at us in the rear-view mirror.

June grips the handle, tugging at it harder when it doesn’t budge. “What the fuck, let me out.”

Hayes turns to face us. “June. I ask that you put aside our differences for the next hour or so.” His voice is calm and calculated, like he’s talking his way through detonating a live bomb. “Our number one priority is all of us getting out of here unharmed, and we can’t do that when you jump out of the car while it’s still moving.”

She exhales and leans back into the seat. “Fine. What’s the plan?”

Hayes continues. “I’m going to get out first, assess the surroundings. Then, and only then, when I have assured it is safe, you may come.”

“And you expect me to trust you that you’ll come back?”

Ouch. That burn even stung me.

“He will.” Dominic cuts the engine and looks at Hayes. “Now, go.”

“You’re one to talk,” June mouths off.

Dominic doesn’t bother taking the bait, he knows better than to add any fuel to this raging fire. Dom backs down to no one, but this calculated risk is more than he’d like to bargain with right now. I don’t exactly blame him. The idea of June flying off the handle and doing something to get herself hurt or potentially decide she’s had enough and leave us for good is what keeps me walking on eggshells. She can be mad at them, but if I lose her too, will she have no reason left to stay?

It’s obvious she’s not here for the money, or the financial security we provide. June is resourceful, and if I hadn’t stepped in when I did, there’s no doubt in my mind she would have found some other way to survive with the little she had. She has no shortage of male suitors, either. Any man on the

west coast does a double-take when she walks by. Perhaps it's the safety we provide...the security. But that couldn't be, because June somehow outmaneuvered one of our kind and managed to escape with her life. Which only reinforces the fact that she can handle shit most people can't. Further proving that maybe, just maybe, she could survive this deadly world we live in.

June needs no one.

But what if it's that after all. What if June *wants* us?

Despite her past with Hayes, and her present anger with Dominic, deep down, she has feelings for them, for me, for us.

Would she be here if she didn't?

Hayes knocks on the window, snapping me out of my heavy train of thought.

June immediately grabs the handle, but I reach out and stop her.

"Hey," I say in my softest, most gentle voice ever.

"Don't try to stop me."

I shake my head. "I'm not trying to. I just wanted to tell you, at any point, if you want to leave, let me know. I'm here for you."

The one thing she's never had from an outside source. Stability. Someone who would actually be there, no matter what.

"Oh." She blinks at me a few times. "Thanks."

Half of my face turns up in a grin. "Of course, princess."

"I'm going to kick your ass." June chuckles gently, the tenseness in her shoulders leaving momentarily.

"Don't tease me with a good time."

We both hop out of our respective sides of the SUV and join Dominic and Hayes. The two of them are chatting but stop when we approach. Another thing for June to get mad about. Can these idiots be any stupider? Am I the only one



who thinks the key to this entire thing with June is including her, not making her feel like an outcast? Why would anyone want to stick around when people treat them that way?

I guess if they can't get their shit together, I'll confess my love to her, and we can run away, just me and her.

"What's so funny?" Hayes asks when I let out a laugh I didn't realize was audible.

Oh, just imagining a fantasy life where June and I live happily ever after. Something that could never be possible, for a multitude of reasons.

"Was thinking about this cat meme I saw earlier."

"Get your fucking head in the game, Bryant." Dominic turns to Hayes. "Tell them what you told me."

Hayes glances between the three of us. "Perimeter is clear. Beckett and the suspected man inside." His jaw tenses before he continues. "He's asked for a few minutes alone with June."

The figurative rug is pulled out from under my feet. My heart thuds wildly in my chest. The idea of not being there, not having eyes on her, to confirm her safety, it nearly ruins me. But then an idea sparks, one that will give him what he wants, while maintaining some level of control. "Do you have your phone?"

June pats her pockets, coming up empty-handed. "No, I didn't think I'd need it. Why?"

I point to the other two. "Either of you have yours?" I pull mine out and unlock the screen. Grabbing Dominic's from his hand, I glance toward the building where Beckett is currently hanging out with a soon to be dead man.

"What are you doing?" June asks me.

The rest of our little group succumbs to whatever plan I haven't filled them in on yet.

"Give me a second." I push the video chat button on mine, connecting it to Dom's. I hit the mute button on my end and look at June from head to toe. "Turn around."

Her front pockets are small, too small. Women's clothing is stupid. Maybe if they had bigger pockets they wouldn't have to carry purses or juggle fifteen things in their dainty hands.

I run my hand over her ass, sliding the phone into her back pocket, leaving the camera part exposed to the outside world. I'd rather have a different vantage point, but this should allow us to hear everything that does go down and give us the advantage we need to intervene if Beckett goes against the truce and pulls something. Granted June wasn't necessarily written into the rules, it's obvious if he harms her, consequences will follow.

"You done feeling my ass up?" June looks over her shoulder at me.

"Never, princess."

The sound echoes through the cell in my hand, confirming that there's a decent probability this will work.

"We need a safe word; in case you want us to come in sooner." I shut out the sexual thoughts that come to my mind.

"I can handle Simon. Don't you think you guys are overreacting?"

Does June still not realize how dangerous the men in her life are? Or does she, and simply not care?

Dominic clears his throat. "June. There is a man in there, tied to a chair, waiting for death to come from any one of the guys standing in front of you. I assure you, we will find great satisfaction from ending his life. It won't be our first, and it won't be our last. The guy who brought him here is no different than us. He is a ruthless, dangerous, selfish criminal, and has little regard for human decency. He may have some fixation on you, but if you think for a second that it's comparable to an innocent crush, you are wrong. Men like us, we are possessive. When we see something we want, we take it. If we can't have it, no one else can. Beckett is no exception." He steadies his intense gaze on her. "Do you understand?"

June slowly nods her head. "Yeah, I..."

Dominic adds, “Do not forget, Beckett is the enemy. He will use his cunning and charm to persuade you otherwise. He cannot be trusted.”

“And why should I trust any of you?”

“Don’t.” Dominic grips June’s shoulder. “It’s better that way.”

June studies his hardened face and I wish I could do a deep dive into what she’s thinking. Each second she spends with us is another that she learns the truth about how brutal we can be. How we have been. How we will continue to be. This life isn’t something you ever escape from. The things that we’ve done—the sheer number of people we’ve tortured, killed, left for dead. All in the name of maintaining our reputation, keeping the business at the forefront of our priorities. The reason we’re still standing when so many others have fallen is because we do what it takes to stay on top.

We are feared, we are powerful, we are lethal.

June has only gotten a taste of what it means to be with us, and yet she’s never once shied away in the face of the unknown. She’s either a fool or a perfect match for our chaotic disaster.

“Are we done here, or is this where you continue to try to ‘scare me straight?’” June uses her fingers to wrap air quotes around her last few words.

I bite at my bottom lip to hide the smirk that would give away the immense satisfaction coursing through me. I fucking adore how she challenges each one of us and refuses to be a sheep, blindly walking its way to slaughter.

“Pineapple,” Hayes announces out of nowhere. “The code word.”

June runs her palm against Hayes’ face. “Cute.” She walks away without another glance and disappears into the old, abandoned warehouse that is identical to the countless others surrounding it.

Far enough from the city limits that people won’t notice the screams of agony of those being tortured inside. We keep

local police's pockets lined and they stay out of our hair. At the end of the day, everyone has a price for keeping their mouth shut. And luckily for us, we have plenty of funds to grease whatever hands we need to.

"You sure know how to keep a man waiting." Simon Beckett.

"What can I say, I'm a busy woman." June walks further into the building, the door latching shut behind her. She stops, her body tensing slightly.

My fingertips turn white from the grasp I have on the phone in my hand. Dominic and Hayes both peer over my shoulders, watching the minimal contents of the building we can see from this vantage point.

Beckett's footsteps approach June, his shadow cast over her. "Is it him? The man who hurt you?"

June sucks in a breath and exhales. "Mmhm."

"I'm glad I could find him for you." Beckett pauses. "Something the men you spend your time with were clearly unable to do." He shuffles closer. "You know...I could give you anything you wanted."

June stands her ground, unmoving from his advance.

All three of us tense and wait for this to be over. The clock to tick the seconds away and for him to finally reach the point of why he wanted to see her alone.

"Why did you request I come in without them?" June asks the question we're all thinking.

"A couple reasons, really." The volume of his voice changes as if he shifts his position. "One, to see the satisfaction on your face at having this man tied up and ready for you. That is definitely something I didn't want to share with *them*."

"And the other?"

Beckett lowers his tone. "Well, you, of course. You're heavily guarded. They even tag along when you go to work. And you haven't been to your apartment lately, which could

only make a man assume you've shacked up with them permanently. Leaving me minimal options if I want to see you. Of course, I could rely on your weekly girl's night outs."

The sick fuck is stalking her. But am I at all surprised? We're kindred in that sense.

"Here I am. What do you want?"

Oh June, never ask a man like Beckett something so loaded like that.

Hayes whispers, "We need to get in there."

"Let him play his cards. She's got it under control," I reassure him.

Not to mention, Beckett won't harm her, not today. He wants the same pleasure we all do. To see the man who hurt June suffer.

Beckett continues. "I want to give you a choice. It's a simple one, really."

"Yeah?" June fakes intrigue.

"Be with me."

June laughs. "You know that will never happen."

"I don't know. I can be pretty persuasive."

"What makes you think I'd ever choose you?"

"It's me, or death."

June doesn't back down, instead, she steps toward him. "Then fucking kill me."

And on that note, the three of us bolt through the door and enter the building.

Beckett cautiously backs away and throws his hands up in the air. "Easy now, fellas. The truce is still very much intact."

June turns to us. "Seriously? I was fine."

I guess June's definition of *fine* is telling a psychopath she'd rather die than be with him. No big deal, totally normal.

If it weren't for the cease-fire and thirst for revenge, she'd probably already be dead.

Actually, from the smug look on Beckett's stupid face, I'd say she just activated some ultimate challenge in his mind. A quest that he will spend the rest of his days on until he finally claims her as his own.

Does he not realize June is an untamable woman? Even if she didn't care for Dom or Hayes or me, I doubt she'd ever settle for this douche of a guy. Simon Beckett could never be man enough for a woman like June, let alone the vixen that she is. That won't stop him from trying though.

Hayes positions himself in front of June, his body like a shield blocking the douche rays coming from Beckett.

"You sure you're okay?" I ask her, my hand resting on the small of her back. I slide it down and click the button on the side of Dom's phone to shut the screen off.

She nods and watches Dominic while he approaches the man tied to the chair. A single bulb dangling from the air, illuminating the disgusting unconscious prick.

June should leave, she should go sit in the car, wait for us to do what we do best. She shouldn't see what's about to happen, for it might actually make her change her mind about how merciless we are.

"Love, you might not want to watch what happens next." Beckett approaches June but Hayes blocks his path.

"Don't tell me what to do." She walks over to where Dom stands and eyes the small cloth on the ground with a few shiny, sharp objects. Kneeling, she hovers her fingertips over them, grasping the switchblade on the end.

Her breath catches, something I'm not sure if the others notice.

Is that the weapon he used on her? The one that sliced through the delicate skin on her jaw. The same one she impaled in his thigh before fleeing his captivity?

I yearn to take it from her grasp and filet him over and over, allowing him to beg for mercy, only to be met with endless slices of the blade until he bleeds to death at my hands. A death that would never be justice enough for what he did to her.

Beckett takes a few steps toward her. “I can wake him, if you’d like.”

A growl leaves Dominic’s chest, something I’m not sure he intended on doing. His possessiveness is almost animalistic at this point. He extends his hand. “Give it to me.”

“Very well.” Beckett drops a small white packet into Dom’s palm.

“What is that?” June asks him.

Dominic pinches the thing between his fingers and puts it under the captive man’s nose.

The guy wrenches his head back, his eyes wide, his mouth gasping for air. “Fuck.” He blinks a few times and steadies his gaze around the room, his sights lingering on June and then Dominic. “This can’t be good.” He wets his dry and cracked lips and relaxes into his chair.

June rises to her feet, the knife clutched in her small hand.

Dominic plants his arm in her path to block her from getting any closer. “Not yet.”

I rush over to her, hoping that because I’m the only person in the room she’s not pissed at, it will calm her a bit. This man has it coming, but first, Dominic would like to question him.

“It’s no use.” Beckett chimes in. “Already worked Vincent over. He’s not spilling.”

Dom tilts his head at Beckett. “Sounds pretty convenient coming from you.”

“Have at it then.” Beckett motions for Dom to go on.

“Oh, how cute. You think I’m working for Beckett.” Vincent laughs. “While you two play a pathetic game of cat

and mouse, you're none the wiser to what's really going on out here."

Dominic kneels where June was, grabbing the handle of a knife off the fabric laid on the concrete floor. He lightly points it on Vincent's thigh. "Which one was it, this one? The other? You know, doesn't matter." Dominic shoves the sharp edge through the man's jeans and into the fleshy part of his upper leg.

Vincent screams, a salve to my soul knowing he's in pain. "Fucking bastard."

"Who are you working for?" Dominic slowly pulls the serrated thing out of his leg and lines it up against the other.

"Like I'd fucking tell you." Vincent wretches back and forcefully spits at Dominic.

Dominic doesn't flinch. He slams his fist down, driving the knife into the man's leg.

I side-eye June, an unreadable expression on her beautiful face.

"Get her out of here." Dominic doesn't bother turning around.

"No." June comes to life, stepping around in his peripheral.

Dominic stands, this bloody knife remaining in his grasp, and wipes his face on his sleeve. His jaw tenses before he looks at June. "You're not going to want to witness this."

June calmly touches his shoulder, nudging him aside. "Allow me."

Vincent loudly laughs through his pain. "This ought to be good. Sending a *girl* to do a man's job."

June isn't just *some girl*. She's fucking fierce. And this fucking idiot has no idea what's in store for him. To be honest, none of us really know what June's capable of. Will she end him quickly? Will she decide it's too much and let one of us finish him off? Will she do what any rational person would do? Call the cops and let the system do its job?



I eye her every move, my heart steady as I prepare myself for what's about to happen next.

Using caution, June raises her knife-wielding hand toward the man.

Vincent glances down at the blade and then up at her. He snaps his head forward, biting at the air in his attempt to rattle her.

Just like Dominic, June doesn't budge. She inches the blade closer, dragging it along the man's cheek. At first, it's a small prick of blood, but she drives the thing in, sending a trail of red pouring down his chin. Her body relaxes, almost like she's done this before in another life.

"Fucking bitch," Vincent blurts out, ripping his head away from her.

June clicks her tongue and runs the blade along the other side of his face. Sloppier this time but still effective. "Someone hold him for me."

When the other three fail to act, I move, rushing over to latch onto Vincent's head and secure it as best I can. Now I can watch her face while she carves into his flesh.

He wiggles under my hands. "What the fuck, you're going to let this bitch do this?"

"Shut the fuck up unless you want me to cut your tongue out," I tell him.

June digs the thing into his forehead, slicing some kind of pattern I can't see from behind him. Not that I care. The satisfaction of witnessing this so intimately is enough to make my dick throb in my pants. What kind of sick fuck am I for being turned on by watching my girl inflict bodily harm on someone who deserves it?

"Shirt." She points the knife at his chest.

This time it's Dominic that steps up, ripping the collar of this man's top and exposing the thick, hairy grossness underneath.

Blood trickles onto his skin.

“Think I could cut out his heart?” June rocks on her hip, sizing up the potential in front of her.

Beckett approaches. “I’ll do it for you.”

“Wh-what? No. You people are fucking crazy.” Vincent twists to get away.

“What did I say?” I grip his hair and tilt his head up to look at me. “Now you lose the ability to speak.” I release him with a shove forward and come around to where Dom and June stand. “Anyone have any pliers?”

Beckett holds up his finger. “Hold please.” He walks over to a nearby workbench and fumbles through a small bag. “Here we are.” He pulls out a rusty pair that will do the job. Coming back, he asks, “I can do the honors, if you’d like?”

I glance over to June, noticing Hayes standing off by himself, a look of complete surprise on his face. Is he in shock? I never pegged him to be one to shy from bloodshed, especially with him being the man that he is, but with June involved, it must be rocking his world at how naturally she has adapted to this lifestyle. It’s a bit mind-blowing for me, too, but I’m choosing to ride this wave of euphoria while it lasts.

Hayes clears his throat, getting June’s attention. “He might lose a lot of blood when you cut out his tongue.”

“You’re not serious.” Vincent continues to struggle despite being tied to his death chair. “I barely touched you. You made your point.”

June turns back to him. “And what if I didn’t get away? What would you have done then? Continued to carve me like a pumpkin? Would you have gone so far as to rape me? Do vulgar things to my corpse? The possibilities are endless, aren’t they? Who’s to say when you would have stopped? If this doesn’t end tonight, when does it? What other innocent people have you hurt because no one thought to put you down?”

“I-I...I’m no different than them.” Vincent flashes his gaze at the guys in the room and then at June. “Than you.”

“Maybe.” June agrees. “But that’s not why we’re here. No. This is your doing. You are a sick and twisted man, and this world will be a much better place without you taking up one more breath of air.”

His mouth drops open in disbelief.

June looks over her shoulder at me. “Do it.”

I nod to Beckett, who moves forward and rips Vincent’s chin open and latches onto his tongue with the pliers. He tugs it out of his mouth while Vincent writhes.

Dominic places the knife in my hand and I waste no time slicing it across the thick, meaty thing, partially separating it from where it spent at least forty years. I drag the blade back and forth to cut all the way through. With a final tug from Beckett and a gurgled scream, it flops onto the ground, and blood pools in Vincent’s mouth, overflowing onto his exposed stomach and coating his lap.

Tears roll down the man’s cheeks, either from the pain or the realization that he fucked with the wrong woman. June alone is wicked enough but mixing the four of us men into this is a nightmare he never could have imagined.

“Finish him,” Hayes tells her.

June glides behind the man, taking a fistful of his hair into her hand. She shifts her gaze briefly to each of us, settling on me last.

Is it approval she’s after?

I nod and semi expect her to hesitate, to process what she’s done, and come to the realization that we’ve corrupted her. To stop and run out of here, getting as far from the madmen in this room as possible.

Instead, she continues to confirm just how well she fits into this madness.

June tilts Vincent’s head up and with one final movement, she slices the blade across his neck, cutting him open from side to side. Blood gushes out, a bit of it spraying onto her

face. Her crimson-soaked hand, still gripping the knife like she'll never let it go.

Is this when the other shoe drops? The recognition of the magnitude of what she's done setting in? Or maybe this is the evolution of June stepping into the new chapter of her life?

I felt it from the first moment I saw her. The darkness, the torment, the thirst for something more. There's this softness about her that people might confuse for weakness.

June isn't weak, she is no sheep, she is the wolf disguised to blend in and strike at a moment's notice. The force that no one saw coming.

She isn't fragile like a flower or a butterfly, no, June is fragile like a bomb. Explosive. Powerful. Capable of destroying anything she sets her sights on. Deadly. Like the four men standing here in complete awe of just how fierce she is.

"That was..." Beckett speaks first. "Hot."

He seems to snap the rest of us out of our stupor and get to action.

Dominic points to Hayes. "Weapons, now. I'll make the call." He tugs the handkerchief out of the pocket of his suit jacket folded neatly on the workbench and gives it to me. "Get her cleaned up."

Beckett walks toward us. "What do I do?"

"Shut up, that would be useful." Dominic reaches for his phone but it's still in June's back pocket.

I grab it for him and toss it over. Turning my attention to June, I take in her blood-splattered face. "You okay?"

She snatches the fabric from me with her one free hand and wipes at her cheeks. "I'm fine."

If I didn't know better, I'd assume June had an accident with a kitchen blender or something much more innocent than the wrath she just inflicted on the dead man beside her. But I do know better, and she killed a man. Sure, that's something that might be taken lightly by us, but for June, it was her first

time. Shouldn't she be panicking or shutting down or showing *something* other than annoyance at me asking her if she's okay?

"It's done, a crew is on their way." Dominic puts his phone away and approaches. A bit of apprehension in his every move.

Hayes tosses all the weapons in a pile and hesitantly comes over to June. He eyes the switchblade still clutched in her hand. "J..."

"Oh, right." She extends her arm. "Here."

"Shall we discuss the elephant in the room?" Beckett shoves his thumbs in his pockets and taps his foot on the floor.

"The truce stands," Dominic confirms. "We are men of our word."

Beckett shakes his head. "No, not that. I'm referring to this sad sack of shit." He points to the dead guy. "Wasn't working for me, or you."

"Make your point, Beckett."

June states the obvious. "Someone else is trying to outplay both of you and you're too focused on each other to notice the power move to gain control."

Beckett smirks and Dominic clenches his jaw.

Dom tilts his head toward June. "When did you become an expert on these types of matters?"

She shrugs. "I'm a business major, it's not rocket science."

Beckett laughs. "A feisty one at that."

"Stop fucking looking at her." Hayes steps between June and Beckett, doing the thing that Dom and I both want to do, block her from that asshole.

I pivot my body to obstruct his view, too.

"You're all a bunch of children." June sighs and wipes her hands on Dominic's hankie.

We assisted her in murdering a man for harming her and somehow, we're juvenile? Has she completely lost touch with what just transpired?

"I do enjoy getting under all of your skin." Beckett cranes his neck to see June. "But, considering we all have a vested interest in that murderous vixen, I think it's best if we put our differences aside for the time being."

Dominic slides his arms into his jacket carefully. "What do you propose?"

Is he seriously considering this? Has he lost his mind? Has his obsession with June fucked with his head so much that he's actually contemplating aligning with Simon fucking Beckett?

"An extension on our amnesty while we get the riffraff under control."

"And you want to work together to accomplish this?"

Beckett bobs his head up and down. "I do think it would be wise to pull resources, yes. Eliminate the target swiftly so we can return to the task at hand, gunning for one another."

This isn't a decision to be made in the heat of things. It's something we should discuss as a group, *without* the sneaky little shit present. Hayes and I both know that, hence why we're keeping our mouths shut and not giving Beckett the satisfaction of a reaction.

"We'll need a moment or two." Dominic joins me and Hayes where we block June from Beckett.

"Of course." Beckett glances at his watch. "Although, the clock is ticking. Do get ahold of me prior to our truce expiring if you'd like to extend the agreement and strategize."

"We'll be in touch." Dominic tilts his head toward the mess June made. "Think you can handle this?"

"Oh, this? This is nothing. Who's coming?"

"Drew and his guys."

"Perfect."

One thing our clean-up crews don't do, and that's choose sides. They're there for the entire organization regardless of affiliation and don't ask questions or play middleman. If they're getting paid, they don't give a shit about the political stuff. Because at the end of the day, whoever wins, there will always be bloodshed, meaning job security for them. It would be foolish of them to play favorites when the power dynamic can so easily shift.

I place my hand on the small of June's back and guide her behind the broad shoulders of Hayes and Dominic. "Let's get you out of here, princess."

Despite our best attempt to shield her, Beckett still manages to find a gap. "My offer still stands." He winks at her and watches us march her out of the old-dusty warehouse that many men have died in prior to tonight.

Vincent wasn't the first, and he won't be the last.

As I study her seemingly normal expression coated in the remnants of someone else's blood, I can't help but wonder, will he be June's last?

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## JUNE



I didn't realize killing a man would be so...easy.

Each of these guys keeps staring at me like I'll break at a moment's notice. That my spirit will shatter, and I'll have some kind of breakdown. If anything, I feel empowered at having ended that life. I made him fear me, made him wish he never laid a single fucking finger on me. And then, I made sure he stood no chance of ever seeing the light of day again. I regained the power he thought he had over me and I loved every second of it.

Does that make me a monster?

And if it does, does that change the way these men feel about me?

Does it matter either way? Isn't this all a means to an end? A temporary safe haven while they claim their throne and get Simon out of the picture for good?

"Stop fucking looking at me like that," I tell them.

We stand around the kitchen counter in their massive house, a place we often congregate. Each of us spaced apart, exchanging glances at one another. Cohen won't meet my gaze, almost like he's ashamed of me, afraid to go eye to eye and confirm I am the same woman from that warehouse.

"You're covered in blood, princess." Magnus reaches over and places his hand on mine. "Why don't you get cleaned up?"

"I don't get it. This is *normal* for you." I pull at my speckled tank top. "You act like I have a tail or something."



“We’re...processing.” Magnus sighs and squeezes me.

“You want to have your little meeting without me.” I tug my arm away and cross it over my chest with the other. “Why, so you can talk about how disgusted you are with me?”

Dominic shifts his attention toward me. “Do you not recall our first *major* interaction?”

“I do, actually, so why is this any different?” Whether or not he killed that guy, I’m entirely unsure, but that minor detail is unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

“You don’t get it, J.” Hayes keeps his sights locked on the counter. “We didn’t want this for you.” He slowly looks up. “What we are, who we are, we don’t want that for you.”

“Simon sure as hell didn’t mind.” I bite at the inside of my cheek knowing damn well I shouldn’t have said that. It was a low, hurtful blow in an attempt to get them to understand.

Dominic grips the edge of the stone “So help me God, if you even think...” He moves from his spot, stopping right in front of me. He grabs my chin and tilts it up toward him. “Do you think this is some kind of game?”

I lick my bottom lip. “Do you?”

I’m playing with fucking fire by taunting him like this. It’s dangerous, but it’s the only way I can seem to get them to respond in any other way than staring blankly.

Magnus shoves both of his forearms between Dom and me, breaking us apart. “Okay, okay. Take a breath. Both of you.” He moves me a little further away. “How about we all try a bit of honesty at this point? Huh? I’ll go first.” He glances at Dom and then at me. “What happened tonight was...unexpected, but not entirely surprising. Can we all agree?” He doesn’t wait for anyone to respond. “I think it’s safe to say we knew June had a dark side, the shade of that darkness perhaps feeling a hair too familiar? That’s probably why we’re all in shock, because we didn’t think we’d ever find someone to match our level of crazy. Or remotely come close.” Magnus pauses and holds out his hand to me. “No offense, princess.”

I shrug. “None taken.”

Magnus continues, focusing on Cohen. “You’ve known her the longest, I get it. You wanted to protect her. We all do. But did you ever consider the fact that maybe, just maybe, she can fucking handle her own?”

Finally, someone fucking gets it.

Cohen meets my gaze, his jaw clenches, and his brows bunch, pain in every inch of the expression. “I didn’t want this for you, J.”

“You don’t choose my fate, Co.” I turn to Dominic. “None of you do. The sooner you accept that, the better. I won’t be some second-class citizen here. Not when I’m fine on my own. If you want me to stay, you have to treat me as an equal.”

“You’re thinking of leaving?” Dominic’s hardened exterior softens like I just kicked his puppy.

I want to reach out, smooth the worries from his face and press my small frame against his strong chest. To see such a brutal man show this side of himself jumpstarts my cold, black heart. “Should I?”

“No, of course not. You’re safer here, with me.” He exhales. “With us.”

“Is that all this is about? My safety? You feel obligated to protect me?”

Dominic runs his hand over his salt and pepper beard. “Do you really not see what you do to us, June? We care about nothing aside from our jobs. We don’t take charity cases. This isn’t some fucking obligation out of guilt, it’s because we...we fucking care about you.”

I narrow my gaze at him. “You...*care*? Like you care about your expensive suits and fancy bourbon?”

Dominic grunts and looks to Magnus. “Can you help me here for Christ’s sake?”

Magnus grins. “I think what he’s trying to say is that we’re all in love with you.”

My mouth drops open, my heart sputtering more than it did when I sliced that man's throat from ear to ear. "Um, what?"

"Bryant, what the fuck?" Dominic rakes his fingers through his hair.

"J...I..." Cohen starts to speak but he's cut off by the phone ringing in Dominic's pocket.

Dom pulls it out, his cold, hard expression returning to his face. "Shh."

Who could be calling Dom to make him react that way?

"Winnie, hi. Is everything all right?" Dominic says into the speaker. He sets the thing on the counter and flashes his serious gaze at Cohen and Magnus.

Magnus leans in close and whispers into my ear. "Don't say a word, princess."

The woman clears her throat. "Why yes, of course. You know I prefer the night hours to conduct business." She comes across formal, mannerly, like she's in charge of something.

"Very well. What can I help you with?"

"Actually, I'll keep this rather brief, but I wanted to call you personally to inform you before you heard from someone else." The speaker muffles as if she's switched it to the other ear. "There will be a gathering in three days where I will make a final decision on who is to take over. I have some rather pressing family matters to attend to out of town, so you'll have to excuse the rush on things."

"That's understandable. Is there anything I can be of assistance with?"

"No, I'm afraid my hands are tied but I do appreciate the thoughtfulness." She pauses. "Dominic?"

"Yes?"

"While you have always been a favorite of mine, you must recognize that I'm not the only one on the council. This decision could be easily swayed in any which way. You must

bring a compelling argument if you'd like the reign to become yours. The wives are entertaining all parties."

The wives? What the fuck does that mean?

"Thank you, for the heads up. Please let me know if I can be of further help."

The woman sighs. "I'll be in touch with the details soon." The line disconnects and the room goes quiet.

"Someone want to explain?" I break through the silence. "And why did her voice sound so familiar? Who was that?"

"That was..." Magnus climbs onto a nearby stool and props his tattooed arms on the counter. "Winnie Sharp. Our late ruler's wife. The one who decides our fate."

Winnie Sharp? "Wait. Do you mean *Gwyneth* Sharp?" The puzzle pieces click into place.

"You know her?" Magnus perks up his eyebrow.

"Kind of, yeah. She lives over on Pinehurst?"

All the guys turn and stare at me.

"I take that as a yes?" I scratch at my arm, a bit of dried blood flaking off and going under my fingernail. Maybe I should take a shower and get these human remains off me.

"How?" Dominic asks the question I'm sure is on each of their minds.

"You forget I've worked at almost every takeout place around here. I've delivered food to her place like a dozen times." I nod to myself. "I was certain I knew her voice from somewhere." When they don't say anything, I continue. "Super nice lady. She adores me. Real *girl power* kind of woman." That's when it dawns on me. "Let me come to the event thingy she was talking about."

"What?" Dominic blurts out.

"No," Cohen says at the same time.

"Yeah, it's genius. No one would ever see it coming." I tell them. "A council full of women, and their leader already

loving me? It's a surefire way to get them to vote your direction."

"She has a point," Magnus adds on my behalf. "A pretty fucking good one."

"Absolutely fucking not." Cohen cracks his knuckles.

"You need an advantage over Simon, am I right?"

Dominic exhales and nods.

"Voila, me. What could possibly go wrong?" Famous last words?

Cohen leans against the counter behind him, crossing his arms over his chest. "Other than putting a permanent mark on your head for associating with us in a business setting? I could think of a few things, all of them resulting in danger to your life."

"Pretty sure me murdering someone in front of you and Simon tonight confirmed that."

"I don't know." Dominic rubs his chin.

"Extend your amnesty thingy with Simon. Get rid of your competitors, use the opportunity to get whatever leverage you can against him, and bring me to the event. You three are solid, Simon doesn't have that, but adding in a female element is something all of you are missing."

What the hell am I signing up for? Why am I so dead set on them allowing me to tag along? What if I'm wrong? What if they're a bunch of snobby bitches who don't give a shit about me? What if I'm completely misreading my cards and I'm setting us up for failure? Why does it matter to me that they claim the throne? How is it possible that the power dynamic of them being possessive over me has now flipped to me being possessive over them? The idea of them losing, and to such an arrogant shit like Simon, it's enough to make me play whatever role I need to ensure they win.

Even if that puts a target on my back. One that I will never escape.

For them, I'd do anything.

I owe them that much, at least, after everything they've done for me. If I help them with this, then we'll be even, and I can walk away without feeling like I owe them for saving me from the shit storm that consumes my life regularly.

In three days, I'll do my best acting performance ever and convince whoever needs to be swayed that they deserve to win this war.

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into, June." Dominic stares into my eyes, daring me to realize the severity of the situation.

It's like when he stood there silently in that bathroom, blood covering his face after beating that man who threatened me, and instead of running out of the door like most other women would have, I stood taller and pressed my lips to his, embracing the danger like it was an old friend.

Something stirs in my chest, that same feeling from that night, the one where I choose to walk right into his darkness instead of shying away from it.

"Let me prove myself."

"You have nothing to prove, princess." Magnus is the only one who thinks I can pull this off.

"To them I do." I tip my head toward Dominic and Cohen.

They're too busy worrying about sheltering me than helping me embrace this world I've been brought into. If they expect me to make it out alive, shouldn't they teach me how to survive, not cower in fear?

"J...can I have a moment alone with you?" Cohen surprises me with his forwardness. Usually, he does everything in his power to avoid me, except when he fingerbanged me in the club. That was definitely unexpected.

"Um, sure. Yeah."

Magnus stands and kisses my temple. "Goodnight, princess."

"Night." I make brief eye contact with Dom before following Cohen out of the room.

He leads me upstairs and into my bedroom, not stopping until he reaches my private bathroom. Grabbing a washcloth out of the cabinet, he says, “I can’t keep looking at you like that.” Cohen dampens it under the faucet and approaches me carefully. Dotting it on my cheek, he moistens the blood and wipes it away.

I point to the shower. “You know it would be easier in there.”

Cohen nods. “Yeah. You’re right. I’ll...” He drops the rag on the counter and turns to leave.

I catch his forearm. “Co?” I should let him go, let him leave this room, and not ask the question bubbling on the tip of my tongue. Nothing he could say could erase the damage he’s done. He betrayed me. He left. He did the very thing that ripped my heart out of my chest, causing irreparable damage that would mold me into the person I am today.

“Hm?” Those blue eyes of his bore into mine, and it’s like I’m taken back to all those years ago when I fell for him the first time. A million memories flutter through my mind, reminding me of a much simpler, happier time in our lives. When it was just me and him against the world. A teenage dream I never thought would end.

“Is it true?” My voice is barely a whisper.

Cohen pivots toward me, his body towering over mine. “Is what true?”

I swallow, suddenly feeling so small in his presence. Like I’m shrinking down to the girl I once was, standing on a rooftop of a local pizza place, giving her heart to the sad boy who understood her often misunderstood nature. “Any of it? All of it?” I glance between those bright blue orbs. “Did you want to come back?”

Cohen sighs, reaching up and brushing my hair off my face. “More than anything in the world.”

My heart constricts. The pain of his absence swelling and exploding, silent tears I’ve held at bay for far too long rolling down my cheeks. I don’t want to cry. Not here. Not right now.

But it's a waterfall I cannot control. A dam breaking with the immense pressure of being strong for far longer than it was made for.

"J..." Cohen brushes them away with his thumbs and pulls me to his chest. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I swear it." He rubs his hand along the top of my head and tries to shush the waterworks away.

I hold him close, breathing in his familiar scent. It's changed over time, but I'd still recognize the earthy aroma anywhere. Tilting my head, I glance up at him. "Kiss me." I'm caked in snot and blood at this point, but the desire to feel his lips on mine is overpowering.

He complies, only hesitating for a split second before lightly caressing our mouths together. It's soft at first, the fire burning brighter the longer they touch.

I lean into him, and him into me. Our bodies are not satisfied with the distance between them, no matter how small that gap becomes.

His tongue darts into my mouth, dancing along mine and tangling themselves together. It's been years and yet they remember each other like it was yesterday.

I skim my hands up under his shirt and run my fingers over the muscles rippling his body. My teenage attraction holds nothing to the torch I carry for him now. I grip the bottom of his top and drag it over his head, our lips parting for the brief moment to rid him of the thing. "I want you, Co," I breathe into him.

Cohen wraps his arm around my waist and hoists me into the air, guiding my legs around his torso. "I *need* you, J."

With each kiss, every delicate and passionate movement, I sense how desperate he is to make me understand, to realize the answer to all the questions that have haunted me since the day he left.

"It's you, June. It's always been you." Cohen slams my body against the glass wall to the shower. He reaches in and



turns the faucet, water cascading down, a beautiful soundtrack for our heated moment.

But is that all it will be? A fleeting moment? A taste of what we missed and what we will never be able to hold onto? I didn't plan on sticking around once I help them win this war, but how can I be the one to walk away from him, after all this time? How could I say goodbye to any of them when I finally feel like I've found my home?

He lowers me to the tiled floor gently and steam fills the large bathroom while Cohen and I remove our clothing. We don't take our eyes off each other, returning our mouths together the second we're fully undressed.

His erection presses into my stomach and he lifts me back into the air.

I grip his neck and lock my legs around him, reaching down to stroke his length in my free hand.

Cohen walks us into the shower, water flowing down our eager bodies. The temperature stings my skin at first but acclimates quickly.

The water runs dirty with the reminder of what I did tonight. The man I killed without a second thought. I didn't feel remorse, or guilt, or any doubts about ending him.

Cohen sets me onto the shower floor and reaches for the loofa hanging there. He pumps some soap out and lathers it up. "Here." Thoughtfully, he holds onto my hand and scrubs each of my arms until there is no more blood. He glides it over my chest, and neck, going lower and kneeling to clean my legs, too. "There, that's better."

I place my palms on the side of his head and pull him toward me. It's late and I can't decide if I'm exhausted or riding some adrenaline-infused rush from what went down tonight. Either way, I want what should have been mine a long time ago.

He breaks away and looks into my eyes. "Are you sure?"

I tug him closer and mutter against his lips. "Without a doubt."

Am I hurt? Yes. Does the wound of Cohen leaving all those years ago burn like it happened yesterday? Absolutely. But does knowing a bit of the truth help repair that bond that might have never been broken after all? Definitely.

Cohen kisses me back with a soft, gentle hunger. He weaves his fingers along my neck and into my damp hair. Gripping my hip, Cohen backs me into the cold tile wall. His cock presses against me and I reach down and stroke it, a soft moan escaping him. He separates my legs with his knee, positioning himself between them.

I comply completely, arching my body to get a better angle.

Cohen penetrates me slowly, the hot water tumbling down on us. Despite all the years spent apart, our chemistry is somehow fully intact, if not more than I remember. Time and space never stood a chance against us.

“I love you, June, I never stopped loving you,” Cohen mutters while thrusting into me.

His tongue dances with mine and it’s as though for once, all is right in the world.

Only, that couldn’t be further from the truth. But for now, I’m going to pretend.

## JUNE



*A*m I crazy for being more mind-blown about the fact that I had sex with Cohen than I am about having killed a man?

It's been three days, and yet I keep finding myself touching my fingers to spots on my body where his lips had touched. My neck. Just below my ear. My collarbone. Even the corner of my mouth. Soft, delicate, but full of a burning desire I thought was long forgotten.

I've officially had sex with every member of this house, and somehow, they're all okay with it. Or they're at least acting like they are. I've made it pretty damn clear that I'm not going to choose between them and although I thought that was pretty damn irrational, they haven't said a word about it. It's strange, really. I mention Simon and all three of them nearly jump out of their skin and bark off how they want to tear him apart, but I can openly sleep with any one of them without them batting an eye.

How did I go from never sticking around longer than a couple rumbles in between the sheets, to bunking up with three, I repeat, one, two, three men?

And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm not mad about it at all.

The thought of settling down with one man is unappealing. I'd go as far as to say it's suffocating to imagine. But with Dominic, Cohen, and Magnus, they each bring something else the others don't bring to the table. Dominic is a brute with a

dominant side. Totally fitting for his name. He's a softie, but only for me, which absolutely drives me wild. Magnus is a picture-perfect bad boy with the tattoos to go along with it. He has the sweetest heart and believes in me way more than the others do. His appearance and demeanor are the exact opposite of Cohen's which is hilarious because Cohen is supposedly this big tough guy, ruthless killer, and yet he looks like your typical surfer boy mixed with an Abercrombie model.

They're damaged, a darkness consuming their souls in an equal but somehow entirely unique way. It's familiar. Comfortable. And ignites a connection between us unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Each one of them treats me differently, even fucks differently, which provides a constant and well-rounded level of satisfaction.

Am I being greedy to not settle for just one? Is it unfair of me to keep them all on the hook and not choose between them?

What was it that Cora had mentioned at the bar that night? Reverse harem. Polyamory. Is that real? Something that would be doable for this odd situation I've found myself and three incredible men in?

"Princess." Magnus snaps his fingers in front of me. "You in there?"

I blink and nod. "Yeah, sorry, I..."

"Were you having a sex daydream?" Magnus plops himself onto my bed next to me. "Because...it could be arranged."

"You don't even know what it was." I teasingly bop his leg with my foot.

He catches and drags it across his waist. Magnus lowers his voice and raises his brows, giving off one hell of a seductive vibe. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

And somehow, I wouldn't put it past him to be telling the absolute truth.

“What?” Magnus tugs me even closer, pressing his lips against my ear. “You don’t believe me?” In an instant, he flips me over, his ink-covered body on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. His shirtless torso begging me to reach out and skim my fingertips along his bare skin.

I can’t help but stare up at him and admire his beauty. Instinctually, I bite at my bottom lip, endless ideas of what I’d like to do with him running through my mind.

A knock sounds on the frame of my bedroom door. A throat clears.

“Here.” Dominic.

Magnus rolls his eyes dramatically and falls onto the bed beside me. “Uh. You ruin everything.”

“The simple fact that you haven’t gotten used to it by now is your fault, not mine.” Dominic enters, his hand outreaching, a hanger dangling off his finger with a black dress attached to it.

“What’s this?” I scoot off the bed and stand, eyeing the offering.

“If you insist on attending tonight, you will be dressed appropriately.”

“Is that...” I softly touch the black fabric. “Armani?” I saw a dress similar to this a while back in one of those waiting room magazines that you browse mindlessly while wondering if your appointment will ever start on time.

Dominic scoffs. “Don’t insult me, June.”

“Armani is *under* you?” I glance up at him.

“You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to.” Dominic pauses before continuing. “But you can’t come if you don’t.”

“An ultimatum, that’s very like you.”

Magnus props himself up on his elbows. “Don’t worry, you’re not the only one he’s insisting on dressing. Hayes and I both have new suits.”

I jut out my bottom lip. “I want a suit.”

Dominic shakes his head. “Fine. Next time then. I’ll just throw this out.”

I catch his arm when he goes to turn away. “I’m teasing you. It’s fucking gorgeous, are you kidding? Gimme.” I wiggle my fingers to motion for him to hand it over.

“Do you need anything else?” Dominic folds his arms behind him, eager to be of service however he can be.

Is this nerves? The events of tonight finally exposing themselves in him as anxious jitters to fill the time between now and when the verdict comes in. I should have realized sooner how...*human* he is. Of course he’s worried. The fate of his entire future rides on a room full of women who could easily choose an incompetent fuck boy as the new leader of their organization. If I can just sway Gwyneth then maybe she can convince the others, too. Having a female around might give the guys the edge they need to gain the upper hand over Simon and his new-age ways.

Over the last few days, the men have teamed up and eliminated their other threats, getting the competition narrowed down to Simon and Dominic. Two ruthless men, both drastically different in every way other than them having the same goal in mind. Claiming the throne. And well, claiming me. The last part, I’m not sure anyone has the power to accomplish.

As for winning this war, I never considered what would happen if he lost. Would they exile him? Would they strip him of his title, his assets, everything he’s worked his whole life for? What happens to Cohen and Magnus? Would they all go their separate ways? Get other jobs? Who the fuck would employ them with their resume consisting of primarily illegal activities? If Simon gains total control, do these three have to work for him? Bow down and be his bitch?

Or would they be deemed unnecessary and killed in order to eliminate any potential threats they could pose to Simon following through with the new advancement in his career?

I can’t allow that to happen. None of it. There are too many variables if they lose. The only option is to ensure

Dominic maintains his position as the fearless leader he is. And with him giving everything he already has, I'm going to have to be the one to pull a Hail Mary out of my ass and figure out how to secure his victory.

I will do whatever it takes because I can't stomach the idea of any of these three men not getting what they rightfully deserve.

After all, I'm obligated to live in this house until the battle is over anyway. If I want to be free, I have to liberate them, too.

"No," I tell Dominic finally. I choose a softer, kinder tone. "Thank you, though." I shouldn't have teased him about the dress. It was a thoughtful gesture, even if it was laced with him being a dominant control freak over the situation.

He wants me to look good, and that makes perfect sense, considering I'm the pawn being used to advance him into checkmate. I've used my body and mind for a lot of things, but tonight will take my skills to a whole new level. What if I fail?

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Carefully, I step down the stairs, holding onto the railing for dear life. I've walked in heels countless other times, but I've never been so determined to not faceplant. I'd like to at least get out of the house and show this gorgeous dress off before I fall and ruin it. I suck in a breath and round the corner, swallowing every bit of my nerves and putting on my game face. I won't show my nerves, not to anyone.

My mindset for today is *fake it till you make it* because that will quite possibly be the only thing helping me keep it together. A few months ago, I was aware sketchy dealings were flying under the radar, but never did I imagine I'd be tagging along to one of the very events where a change in leadership would be decided. Let alone on the arm of the man who will hopefully take that reign.

I'm in over my head and if I allow it to show, everyone will see me as a weak link, not the rare driving force I need to appear to be. I will not be the flaw that loses this for them.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Magnus is the first to speak when I appear.

"Yeah?" I continue toward them, a sly grin on my face and one foot in front of the other. The strings on the gold heels that wrap around my ankle are the perfect contrast to the jet-black dress I'm privileged to be wearing tonight. Slits all the way up on both sides of the dark fabric leave a strip between my legs, showing them off with each step. Going commando was the only viable choice since the cuts go so fucking high up my thigh.

The entire thing fits like a glove. Dominic outdid himself, clearly somehow having the gown fitted to my body seamlessly. I wouldn't put it past him to have used his advanced skills to eyeball my naked figure while we were fucking to get my measurements.

I take in each of them, my gaze not quite sure which one to settle on. All three of the handsome men stare at me, their own bodies decked out in hand-crafted designer suits. Matching, but with their own individual embellishments. They're fucking breathtaking, a sight I cannot believe I've been allowed to witness these last few weeks.

My heart sputters in my chest, a feeling I've never felt before. Not even with Cohen all those years ago. Sure, I loved him then, but this...this is something different altogether.

Now it's more...whole. And for once in my life, I don't want to run away from it.

What the fuck is happening to me? I'm going soft. I need to get my head back in the game and focus on the task at hand—helping them win this war.

Dominic slides a felt black box off the counter and opens it, holding it out toward me. "You didn't think I'd allow you to wear those department store earrings, did you?"



But he didn't just stop there. Next to the solid gold hoops are a matching necklace and tennis bracelet. I stifle the gasp at just how stunning each piece is. Handcrafted for sure, and probably more expensive than I could even imagine. What hasn't he thought of? At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if Dominic pulled out a tiara to go with the entire ensemble.

"When did you have time to do all of this?" I glance from the jewelry up to him.

The wrinkles beside his eyes crease and I'd wager to say under his salt and pepper beard his cheeks flush. "I have my ways."

"You do, don't you?" These three, it's like they can pull anything off, no matter how extreme. Getting away with murder, securing the perfect dress and embellishments, mind-blowing orgasms...you name it, they deliver.

"May I?" Cohen motions towards the box and waits for Dominic's nod before reaching in and gently taking the long delicate chain.

I scoop my hair to the side and make way for him to secure the thing around my neck. A section of it clings to me like a choker, while another layer creates a soft point a few inches below my collarbone, a long dangling piece comes off that making a home between my breasts, complimenting the plunging neckline effortlessly. A chill runs down my spine at Cohen's fingertips brushing my skin as he finishes clasping it in place.

Magnus plucks the bracelet out without Dominic's approval, obviously not wanting to be excluded from this interaction. "You look radiant, princess."

I roll my eyes at him. "Haven't you had enough of the princess thing?"

Magnus smirks. "Never. Although tonight, you're more fit to be a queen."

"You sure you're up for this, J?" Cohen skims my arm with the knuckle of his index finger.

It's not like I could back out now even if I wasn't. Sure, using me could definitely be a make or break for them, but they planned on doing this without me from the start. My fear of letting them down far outweighs going face to face with a criminal organization. Does that make me a fool? More than likely. Do I care? Not really. What do I have to lose? Aside from Cora, these guys standing in front of me have become the most important thing in my life. I'd do anything to secure their win, regardless of how dangerous and potentially idiotic it is.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned about what happens if they *do* win. What will that mean for us? For me? Will they no longer need me or feel obligated to keep me under their protection? Will I be tossed aside? A used-up pawn in a never-ending game of chess. It shouldn't matter though. My goal is to help them succeed, anything else is unimportant compared to the greater task at hand.

I managed just fine without them before all of this, I'll figure it out after. I can live with whatever the consequences are if I know I did my all to assist in this monumental battle.

Steadying myself for what's to come, I let out a breath. "Let's do this."

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**D**ominic extends his hand to help me out of the blacked-out car we arrived in. "Remember, this is an amnesty zone. There will be no violence or bloodshed while on these grounds."

I glance at the dark tinted glass separating us from the driver. "Does someone need to tip him or something?"

"He's on the payroll, princess." Magnus hops out of the other side and appears next to Dominic in a flash, his hand outreached, too.

I slip my palms into both of theirs, using what I can to support me onto the brick-paved driveway we arrived at. My sights skim the massive structure behind these two, and then on the numerous bodies getting out of other vehicles around

us. I swallow down the knee-jerk reaction to be intimidated and assume my fake it till you make it bravado. I refuse to allow these people to make me feel any less than them based on their status in this cold-blooded world.

I'm in over my head but they don't need to know that.

Cohen takes his time walking around and joining us, his gaze scanning everyone around us, too. It's then that I remember he's the head of their security and this is him in his element, doing what he does best.

Once I've adjusted my dress and gathered my bearings, I slide my hand around Dominic's offered elbow and allow him to set our pace.

He doesn't hurry us, yet he walks with purpose and intensity, something that causes people to pause and stare.

I glance over my shoulder at Magnus and Cohen leading up the rear, only further reinforcing how entirely badass we must appear. Pride swells in my chest. These men chose me to be here tonight, not some other female. It could have been anyone, but it's me. I'm either stupid or lucky, definitely one or the other. I'll decide that once this is all said and done.

"You okay?" Dominic mutters to me.

"Mhm." I'm being stared at by potentially murderous strangers, what more could a girl ask for?

"You keep shaking that ass..." Magnus whispers from his spot in my wake.

Cohen cuts him off. "Bryant, not the time or place."

I hide a smile that creeps up at their seemingly constant banter. Or well, Magnus being a perv at inopportune moments and Co snapping at him. If it's not Cohen, it's Dom telling Magnus to keep it in his pants. Either way, I adore the dynamic shared between these three, no matter how serious or light-hearted it becomes.

We approach a rather large entrance with numerous men standing guard. I note the little clear earpieces they wear and

their matching brandless black attire. One guy who looks like all the others nods approval to the couple ahead of us.

“Mr. Adler.” The nameless man closest to us says.

Dominic tips his head only slightly, acknowledging him.

Is that Dom’s last name? I guess I never paid much attention to the fact that they use Magnus and Cohen’s last names, but Dom’s first.

“Your guest is aware of the house rules?” The man doesn’t meet my gaze.

“Yes,” is all Dom replies.

“You may enter.”

Two of the men hold the large, oversized double doors open for us.

The air is thick with expensive leather and a plethora of other decadent scents. Rich tobacco, the finest perfumes, and something resembling apple pie. It’s a bit overkill if you ask me. But who am I to judge in this mansion full of people way more accomplished than me? I’m a no-one here; my opinion doesn’t matter.

Heads continue to turn, some of their sights lingering longer than others. It’s almost as though people are surprised Dominic brought a date with him.

The number of men outweighs the women two to one, each of them wearing some kind of overpriced suit or dress. Between the luxurious vehicles they arrived in and their attire, I can only imagine the sheer amount of money spent by those in attendance tonight.

A few older women catch my eye. They chatter among themselves while staring right at us as we walk further through the massive foyer. One of them breaks away and comes directly toward us. It’s not until she’s within a foot of me that I realize who it is.

*Gwyneth Sharp.*

I steady my nerves, engaging every ounce of acting skill I have. I have to prove myself to her in order to secure her vote, to be sly enough to get her to convince the others, too.

“Oh my.” She smiles kindly. “You bunch look handsome as ever. I’m not at all surprised.” Winnie tilts her head around to glance at Magnus and Hayes behind me.

“Winnie, it’s great to see you.” Dominic releases me to kiss the older woman’s cheek.

I run the numbers in my head, recognizing that they’re probably closer in age than me and Dom are. Yet imagining the two of them together seems much more far-fetched.

“And who might we have here?” She continues to gawk at me.

“Winnie, this is June.”

Winnie narrows her gaze. “June...” It comes across as more of a question than anything. “Your face is so familiar.”

“Croissants, toasted, chicken salad with extra grapes on the side.” I spit out the last order I delivered to her.

An imaginary light bulb flicks on above her head. Her cheeks turn up. “That’s right. I knew I recognized you from somewhere.” She reaches for me, tugging my hands toward her. “Come. We have much to discuss.”

Holy shit, already? I didn’t think she’d pull me aside quite yet, if at all. I thought I’d have to slip subtle hints in here and there. I didn’t imagine she’d drag me away the first chance she got, giving me no time at all with my three guys watching over me so I don’t shove my foot in my mouth.

What better time than now, though?

I note how stiff each of these men gets at her persistence to separate me from them. It’s not about my safety, they made it clear that I wouldn’t be harmed here, not with the rules in place about making it a violence-free zone. Other than a truce, like the temporary one they made with Simon, this giant home is one of the few places all these enemies can gather and not worry about having their throat slit.

Winnie points into a room that's just off the foyer. "Go have a drink, relax. I'll take good care of her."

Dominic stands there, not giving much emotion away. He can't break character in front of all these watchful stares.

Magnus winks at me—a silent gesture that tells me I got this.

Cohen scans the crowd in search of any threat, even though I was told there would be none. His gaze halts and I follow it to see Simon leaning against the railing of a large arched staircase that leads to what I can only imagine is a beautifully decorated second floor. Everything about this place screams, I have too much money and don't know what to do with it.

It's fitting though, considering the things I've seen Dom blow his cash on without a care in the world. Me specifically. He brought out ten thousand dollars to dinner that one evening and dropped it next to my plate like it was no big deal at all. That's a life-changing amount of money for someone as broke as I am.

Winnie, which is weird to refer to her by considering I barely know her, continues to pull me through the expansive foyer and down a long hallway. She leads me into a closed-off room, latching the door shut behind us. The noise from the crowd dies down immediately. Are those soundproof walls?

The new space is clearly an office, with a large dark wooden desk off to one side, and floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with books opposite of it. A patio door leads to a darkened area that I can't quite make out from my spot near the entrance.

"Come on in." Winnie glides over to an elaborate drink station that resembles the one in the living room of the house I'm currently living in. "May I make you a drink? Bourbon, whiskey, rum, vodka...pick your poison."

I clear my throat and take a few cautious steps toward her. "Bourbon, please. Neat."

She raises a brow and cocks her head to glance at me. “Has that always been your choice or have those boys converted you?”

“I’ve always preferred it.” Although I never knew what I was missing until I tasted a few of the brands they frequent.

“A woman with good taste.” She hands me a glass with two fingers of golden liquid and extends the one in her hands. “What shall we toast?”

“How about new beginnings?” Because isn’t she planning on being done with this life once someone else gains control? A strange retirement of sorts given her late husband is no longer ruling this criminal organization.

“To new beginnings, may they be worth the sacrifices.” Winnie maintains eye contact with me as we clink our glasses together. I don’t dare mention the old superstition about what would happen if you broke it. I’m not sure she’d get the humor in potentially having seven years of bad sex.

I bring the thick crystal to my lips, inhaling the delicious warmth of the bourbon. I take a sip and wait for her to make her next move. “Thank you, this is lovely.”

Winnie sits on the plush couch and pats her hand on the spot near hers. “Now that it’s just us girls, let’s chat.”

I do a quick scan of the room before sitting. I could easily dive right into how worthy Dominic is of claiming the throne but I decide to hold off and see where she goes with the conversation.

“That’s a rather exquisite gown you’re wearing tonight.” She reaches forward and grazes her fingers against the fabric. This woman definitely doesn’t know what personal space is.

I glance down at her aged hands. “I don’t disagree. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s in good company.” Winnie places her glass on the small table next to her side of the couch. “I saw one similar to it at an Armani show.”

I blink up at her and smile. “I think I know the one you’re referring to.”

“Fine bourbon, designer dresses. And what men you surround yourself with.”

“I credit them for this outfit. Dominic specifically.”

Winnie smirks. “He has an eye for detail, doesn’t he?” She pauses. “But you already knew that.”

An opening I can work with, despite it very much coming across like she’s baiting me. “Dominic has a refined skill set, that’s for sure. I’d venture to say it’s rare even.”

“Oh, June.” Winnie relaxes into her seat, facing me. “You don’t have to convince me of it. I’ve known Dominic since he was a boy. He’s always had a knack for coming out on top, no matter what. Resourceful...something that comes in handy in this line of work.

“Tell me, how did you manage to allow him to bring you tonight? In all the years I’ve spent hosting these events, Dominic has never once brought a plus one.”

I consider the question, determining which route I should take. I choose an authentic approach—honesty. “I insisted.”

Winnie snorts. “A woman with a hold on the fearless, ruthless, Dominic Adler. Interesting.”

His last name again. Somehow adding it makes him even sexier in my eyes.

“Is that a difficult feat?” I ask her, curious if I can run with this topic of conversation and use it to my advantage.

She inhales deeply. “Actually, yes. Taming any of the men here tonight is always an interesting task. There are some of the easier targets, obviously, but it takes a special kind of woman to stomach the things that happen in our world. Not just that, but maintaining their interest, that’s a challenge in itself. With wealth, the kind we experience, any one of us could have whatever we desire, whoever we desire. To find something worth holding onto, that’s rare for us.”

“I thought I saw plenty of couples when I arrived here.”



She shakes her head. “Most of them are keeping up appearances. Not many will maintain those relationships long term. Once the women realize how dangerous it is, they either leave or end up dead. Very few make it as long as I have, which leads me to wonder, do you plan on sticking around?”

What could be her reasoning for asking? Because she’s curious about the role I’ll play? If I’ll weaken Dominic’s ability to lead in the capacity he’s currently managing. Or perhaps because she cares for Dom and doesn’t want to witness me taking advantage of him?

“I’m not afraid.”

“I didn’t say you were.” Winnie runs her finger along her jaw and then points at me. “That looks new. How did it happen?”

I avert my gaze, recalling the night where I was kidnapped and held captive by a man wielding a knife and threatening to carve me like a pumpkin. The same man I tortured and killed, spilling his blood without a second thought.

“This?” I touch the puckered scar. “This is nothing.”

“And it will be...compared to what you might endure if you stick around.”

“Are you trying to convince me otherwise?”

Winnie reaches for her glass. “No.” She sips the liquid then places it back on the table. “I’m simply warning you of the risks associated with being with men like Dominic. There’s only so much he can do to protect you.”

“I can handle my own.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Winnie’s cheeks turn up. “Considering you’re sleeping with three ruthless men.”

My lips part, unsure of what to say to her blatant calling me out.

Winnie chuckles at having caught me off guard. “Oh, it’s obvious. The way those three tensed up when I took you away from them. I’m not sure which one of them has it the worst.” When I don’t speak, she continues. “I’m intrigued, really. How

they all fancy you and seem to be okay with it. And I mean, to each their own.” She holds up her hands. “In this day and age, people can do what they want.” She lowers them. “If you were any other woman who walked in here tonight, I wouldn’t have pulled you aside. But watching them watch you, and having felt your presence personally in the past...there’s something about you, June. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. You bring something different out in them, like you’ve uncovered a layer of those three I didn’t think was possible. You very well could be their secret weapon, but it’s possible you could also be their kryptonite.”

What happened to me coming in here and pitching myself as an asset? This woman has dominated the conversation and managed to shock me with her candor. I need to reel it in and show I can be of use, that I won’t be their downfall.

I recall the question I sidestepped earlier. “You had asked me earlier, if I had planned on sticking around.”

“Mmhm.” Winnie waits for me to continue.

The one thing I’ve been sure of this entire time, that no matter what, when all was said and done, I would help them win their war, and I would leave. I don’t stick around. It’s not what I do. It’s not in my DNA to commit myself to a person or situation. My job and relationship history speaks volumes for my inability to linger longer than necessary. Whether it’s self-sabotage masked as a coping mechanism to keep myself safe, or not ever finding anything worth staying for, I’m not entirely sure. But that’s not what she wants to hear right now. She’s looking for confirmation that I’m not going anywhere. I’m not certain whether it’s a good or bad thing in her eyes.

“I do.” Am I lying to her or to myself? Am I capable of planting roots?

The idea of being without them somehow painfully outweighs any desire I have to run.

“June, the last time I saw you, you were delivering food for some mediocre restaurant. Now, you’re wearing a twenty-thousand-dollar dress and hundreds of thousands of dollars in jewelry. Drastic change if I may say so.”

“It’s not about the money, if that’s what you’re getting at. I didn’t ask for any of this.” I glance down at the elaborate clothes clearly not fooling anyone. I don’t fit in here and it’s blatantly obvious.

“What is it then? Humor me.”

“I...” I don’t want to say anything else. I barely know her. Then I remember why I’m here. “I care. About each one of them. For many different reasons. I feel safe with them, but not in the way you might think.” I shake my head. “They understand me.” I glance off into space. “I’ve never really had much. Never needed much, if I’m being honest.” I let out a breath. “Never really had a home, a constant. With them, I have that. Not their literal house, but *with* them, if that makes sense at all.”

Winnie nods. “It does.”

I swallow. “I guess for once in my life, it’s like I’m looking in the mirror when I look at them. I see dark pieces of me in each of them, but with that darkness, they bring out my light. And if I’m not mistaken, I do the same for them. It’s not one-sided. You might think they’re protecting me, that I’m a liability, but who’s looking out for them? Who has their best interest in mind? They’re constantly fixing problems and cleaning up messes, always on edge and needing to think ten steps ahead. Other than themselves, there’s no one watching their back. Not a single person, that would do all of that for them.”

Winnie tips the drink back that I didn’t realize she had grabbed. She watches me carefully. “And you’re saying *you*, you’d be that?”

I never meant for any of this to happen. I thought Dominic would be a random hookup in the bathroom at the shitty dive bar I worked at. I thought Magnus was a stranger I would spend one glorious night with. And Cohen...I thought he was gone years ago. If someone would have told me six months ago that Co and I would stumble into each other’s paths, and that I’d get tangled up in Magnus’ and Dom’s, too, I’d never believe them.

And yet here I am, fully prepared to put myself on the line in the most dangerous of ways to ensure they get what they deserve. Because if it's not me, who will do it for them?

"Yes, without a doubt." I lift my drink to drain the rest of the contents into my mouth.

A knock sounds on the door, a second later, it cracks open and one of the women's heads from earlier pops in. "Winnie, we're ready for you. Dom is up."

"I'll be right there." She stands and smooths out the wrinkles in her pantsuit from sitting.

"It's starting already?" My heart picks up its pace.

"Ah, yes, dear. We thought it would be better to meet with the contender's first thing, that way we can deliberate over dinner and drinks, and make a final decision before dessert."

Will I get a chance to talk to my men prior to them going in? To tell them how much I believe in them and how proud I am for all they've already accomplished. That no matter what, I'll be here, regardless of winning or losing. It wasn't their expensive bourbons or fancy suits that caught my attention, it was their souls, calling out to me and telling mine that we don't have to face the darkness alone.

Winnie downs the rest of her drink, too. "I think you know what needs to be done then." She lingers near her desk for a long second, like she's willing me to understand something deeper to her words.

I desperately try to figure out what she means, internally punching myself to decipher the clue. Maybe it's nothing after all, and I'm just grasping for straws because of how badly I botched this meeting with her.

I failed. I massively fucking failed. I was supposed to convince her and all I did was stumble around my words and grow uncertain of my control of the situation.

"June?" Winnie says while walking toward the door we entered through. "We had spoken briefly in the past, during one of your deliveries. I recall you mentioning you're a business major?"

Was a business major. Now I'm just a dropout, but she doesn't need to know that. "A few credits from graduation, yes."

Winnie points her finger at me. "While they don't exactly teach our kind of profession, those skills will come in handy." She winks. "Don't be afraid to use them." Winnie slips out the door, leaving me behind in her office alone.

I suck in a breath and settle the raging nerves threatening to destroy me.

"Get it together, June," I say under my breath while I brace myself on the elaborately carved wood desk.

Opening my eyes, my sights fall on the case perched just inches away from me. I blink a few times and step closer, glancing back at where Winnie disappeared only seconds prior. Is this what she was trying to show me? To tell me? It can't be. This mansion is a violence-free area, why would she alert me to the weapon sitting here in plain sight? Is this a test? Some kind of game she's playing to see how far I'd be willing to go? If so, how do I know which is the right decision to make? I've been informed of the sanctity of the rules numerous times, it would be downright disrespectful and foolish of me to disregard them, wouldn't it?

When have I ever played by the rules anyway?

Carefully, I press my fingers against the glass and tip the lid to the case. I lower it gently onto the desk, careful not to make a sound, all while keeping my eyes trained on the dagger inside. I reach in and pull it out, somehow already feeling more powerful with it in my grasp.

The hilt is dark blue and could even be mistaken for black. On the end, a round, golden insignia. But where the handle meets the blade, there's a small skull, the same color, just a bit shinier. I run my finger along the length of the weapon, noting how sharp it is. I swivel the end of it on the tip of my index finger, pricking the smallest amount of blood. The entire thing is no more than ten inches but could do loads of damage.

With the door still ajar, commotion from outside the room gets louder. Instead of putting the thing back where I found it, I find myself flipping it upward and holding it out of sight against my arm.

I keep my arm tucked close to my side, careful not to draw attention to it or myself, and even more so not to slice my forearm open. I slip out of the room, immediately catching Cohen's stare from across the room as he chats while walking with a man I haven't been introduced to yet. I turn, dipping into another place full of people, scanning the crowd for the person I'm trying to find.

There are only two people at this party that can alter the outcome tonight, and I will do anything in my power to make sure my men are on the winning side.

Dominic bumps shoulders with me. "You okay?"

I nod and force a smile. "Yeah. You?"

"A bit stuffy in here." His gaze flits around then lands back on me. "I've been summoned. I'll see you after, okay?"

A million thoughts cross my mind. The countless things I want to tell him. I bottle them up and save them for later, knowing we have plenty of time to say all the unspoken things between us. I reach out and grip his shoulder with my free hand, saying exactly what he needs to hear right now. "You've got this."

Either way, he'll have won fair and square, or I'll make damn sure of it.

Dom leans forward and brushes his lips on my cheek. "Thanks, June." He leaves me with the lingering touch of him along my skin, a feeling more overpowering than the one of the cold knife I'm still holding onto.

I continue through the rooms, everyone unsuspecting of the small, dark-haired girl wielding a weapon capable of slitting all their throats. To them, I'm just another pretty face wearing a dress way too expensive and sleeping with the three deadliest men in here. Little do they know, the reason we go so well together is because I'm their perfect match.

I spot my target up ahead, and he locks his gaze onto mine. He's surrounded by a group of his men, various sizes and statures. He stops his conversation abruptly, raising his hand to signal them to hush, and leaves them in the dust to approach me. I knew this would be easy. Like taking candy from a baby.

Turning on my heel, I glide out of the room, around a corner and into a quieter area. People are still coming and going, but nothing like the crowds out there. Here, I can talk, and he can listen.

"You couldn't stay away, could you..." He follows me exactly where I want him to, but when he steps into the space, I draw the knife and hold it to his neck, backing him against the wall.

"Simon."

"June." A wicked grin forms on his face.

I press the dagger further, pricking the skin and letting him know how serious I am.

"Such foreplay, I like it." He keeps his arms to his sides.

I lick my lips and slide the knife down and over where his heart is located. "Do you recall the time you told me...what was it...I could choose *you* or death?"

"Vividly." His wild green eyes stare into mine. "Having second thoughts, are you?"

"Not at all." I steady my footing. Who's fucking idea was it for me to wear stilettos?

"Oh?"

"I'd like to give you a similar offer. Back down, or die."

Simon tips his head. "You can't be serious." He glances in the direction we came. "Did they put you up to this?"

I push the blade through the fitted jacket he's wearing. It pierces through with ease. "Does it look like I'm joking?" I continue until the tip penetrates his skin.

He stifles a wince and clenches his jaw. "You know I can't do that."

“Then I have no other choice.” I push it a little more.

Simon stares at me, really into my eyes. “Do what you have to do.” It’s like he’s accepting this fate because the idea of backing down just isn’t an option.

And because I refuse to accept the possibility of defeat, I apply my weight onto the handle and plunge it into his chest.

Only, a flash of light and a loud cracking stops me in my tracks.

Simon’s expression shifts to confusion, something that I assume matches mine.

Pain ripples through my body, but that makes no sense. I was the one stabbing Simon. How could it be possible for me to be in pain?

I lower my gaze, along with the dagger, wondering how blood could be flowing from my chest instead of his?

Simon reaches forward, and while I expect him to take my weapon, he presses his palm onto the spot seeping red. “June. Fuck. June.”

My legs fail me, buckling out from under my frame.

Simon softens the blow, holding onto me as I diminish to the floor of this elaborate mansion, ruining whatever upholstery I must be gushing onto. “No, no. Hang on. You’re going to be fine.” Genuine concern rattles his features, another thing that doesn’t add up. “Help,” he calls out. “Someone help.”

A moment ago, I had a dagger posed on his heart and now, he’s trying to prevent me from bleeding out.

My eyes close against my will, dizziness consuming me, darkness pulling me under.

“Stay with me, June. Come on.” Simon tugs me to his chest.

I cough, the taste of iron filling my mouth. That can’t be good. Each breath is labored and more difficult than the last,



like there's a limited amount of air left in my lungs and there isn't enough left to survive.

I don't want to die like this. Here. In his arms. In the arms of the man that was supposed to die. Him. Not me. But I guess that's the thing about fate, you have no control over what that bitch has in store. And for me, this is it. Dying without the three men I love more than anything in this world and with the guy who could potentially take everything from them.

Me along with it.

"Please, I'll do anything." Simon brushes my hair out of my face. "June."

"Promise me..." I can barely spit the blood-soaked words out.

"Anything, just stay with me."

"Back down." I cough again. If I'm going to die tonight, I must make sure I go down with a fight, doing everything I can to secure Dominic's win.

"I concede, do you hear that?" Simon pushes harder in my chest. "June, I fucking give up. Now stay with me, okay? They can have the throne you crazy woman, don't die on me over it."

"Get out of the way," Dominic growls.

A thud hits the wall, people curse, and wind blows against my skin.

"What did you do?" Dominic's voice grows near.

"J..." Cohen drops to the ground next to me.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Dominic tells what I can only assume is Simon.

"Stop it, please," Magnus yells somewhere between them. "He's probably the only thing keeping her alive. Look."

I try to open my eyes, to see what Magnus is talking about, but everything is heavy, dark, too much for me to control. The world spins and hot and cold take turns alternating through my body. My mind only focused on one thing—the words Simon

said. He gives up. And if his word counts for anything, Dominic has officially won, meaning my job here tonight is complete. It didn't necessarily go as planned, but the end result was all the same.

With that overwhelming relief, I lose what remaining strength I have to hold on, my entire world fading to black. I do everything I can to claw my way awake, to stay a little longer, but the pull to go into the darkness is far too strong.

"I..." I want to tell them how much they mean to me. To apologize for taking so long to realize it. To congratulate them for their win and kiss all of them one last time. I'd even settle for a hug, or a simple hand squeeze to bid farewell. Any gesture to make them understand I didn't want things to end this way—bleeding out in the lap of their enemy.

Instead, I dive deep into the abyss as it welcomes me with open arms.

For once in my life, I don't want to leave, but I don't have any other choice than to go.

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COHEN



*I* rise to my feet, June's blood coated on my hands.  
Rage, unlike anything I've ever felt, consumes me.

My world goes strictly into tunnel vision, the only thing on my mind is eliminating anyone and everything that could have been responsible for what happened.

Spotting a shiny and sharp object at the base of where June's body lays, I snatch it off the ground and go to work, doing what I do best. I swing my arm, slicing one man's throat immediately, more blood splattering and filling this hallway.

Screams let out, people scurry, but I have my sights set on my next target and they won't get away.

The guy backs into the wall, dropping his gun and throwing his hands in the air. "Dude, it wasn't me. I didn't—"

But I don't care that it wasn't him that shot June. It could have been, and for that alone, he must die.

I shove the dagger into his throat and yank it out. His eyes go wide and then he drops to the ground, clutching the spot that's gushing red.

I pivot, not caring about the continued muffled screams.

An arm reaches for me, but I shrug it off.

I snatch the man's discarded pistol and blast off two shots into another guy who looks a bit too guilty. One in the chest, another in the middle of his forehead.

“Who was it?” I scream. The voice sounds foreign and unfamiliar. “Who shot her?” I scan the gun through the crowd. Women duck and some drop to their knees, black tears streaking their cheeks. Some men remain, a few of them using their bodies to shield their dates. Others being cowards and hiding between their legs. Fucking pathetic.

I don’t give a fuck about any of them. They can all burn for all I care. There’s only one person in this house my heart beats for, and she’s currently bleeding out in Simon Beckett’s lap.

“Cohen. Put the weapon down.” Winnie Sharp. “You’re making an already bad situation worse.”

I turn toward her voice. “Someone better tell me who shot her, or I will end every person in here until I’m certain they’re dead.” My head pounds and my heart thumps wildly, an overwhelming helplessness taking hold of me.

I’ve only just gotten her back and now I’m going to lose her again because of this dangerous world I never wanted her to get involved with. This is the very reason I stayed away, because I never wanted her to get hurt. I didn’t want this lifestyle to corrupt and damage her, let alone steal her from this earth prematurely. June deserves far better than to die like this—in a room full of sadistic criminals who don’t give a shit about human decency. They’re only in it for the power, the lucrative paychecks, and lavish existences. They don’t get to live if June doesn’t. None of us do. And I will make sure not a single person makes it out alive if June dies here tonight.

I blast another shot off at a man standing nearby, his hand resting in a position to conceal the gun in his other. Did he think he could hide that from me? My senses are heightened, and despite his best effort, he never could have kept that from me.

His stupid frame thuds against the hardwood floor.

Winnie flashes her gaze past me, a tell she’s old and wise enough to know better than to give away.

I drop to my knees, turning and pointing my weapon behind me, firing off two shots into the chest of the man who approached me. I quickly lower it and fire another round into his partners. Dead bodies litter the floor and bring me back to a time when I was killing my way to freedom. Or at least, that's what I thought I was doing. Little did I know, I was setting myself up for a lifetime of misery with each life I ended. I killed with no mercy, finally collapsing onto the cold, hard concrete of that building, blood soaking through my clothes. I'm uncertain how long I was there until Dominic had found me and told me that there was no going back. I could either die or accept the role that was given to me.

I was too much of a coward to take the easy way out, essentially signing my soul away to be a murderous psychopath for the rest of time. I left June in the past as my only means to keep her safe. And look at her now. My efforts were wasted. The infinite torture of leaving her had haunted me every day, but it's nothing compared to the anguish I feel in this moment. Knowing that I could have had her in my life this whole time eats away at my soul. We lost time that we can never get back, and now I'm going to lose her for good because Dominic and Bryant couldn't just leave her the fuck out of it.

I should fucking kill them, too, for bringing her into this mess despite being well aware of the danger it would put her in.

I allow myself too much time in my thoughts, faltering slightly when I catch something moving in my peripheral. I don't react quick enough and the next thing I know, something blunt and hard smacks me in the side of the head, knocking my legs out from under me and dropping me like all the bodies I've destroyed tonight. My eyelids slow and become heavier as I fight the urge to get back up and annihilate whoever managed to land a blow to take me down.

Despite my best efforts, my world goes black.

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“You can’t fucking keep me here.” I pound my fist on the metal door. The sound echoes into the small room I’m being held in. There are no windows, just the one exit I must have been brought through after I was rendered unconscious.

How I’m still alive, that’s lost on me.

I should have been killed on the spot. I never should have lived past inflicting an ounce of pain on a single person in that house. Those are the rules, and they’re pretty damn cut and dry. And yet, here I am, having killed a half dozen people or so and living to tell the tale. Although, considering my confinements, it’s safe to say I won’t be getting off easy.

They’d be doing me a favor if they followed through with protocol and ended my life, too. The idea of living in a world without June is unbearable, something I’m not capable of doing. It’s one thing to not be with someone but still exist on the same planet as them. It’s shitty, that’s for sure, but it’s tolerable knowing they’re out there somewhere, potentially happy and healthy and safe. But for her to be gone, no longer breathing the same, looking up at the same night sky, I cannot accept that reality. I’d rather be dead.

June isn’t just my first love, she’s my fucking soul mate. She brings out the best and worst in me and never fails to make my heart beat a little harder and slower at the same time. She’s a rare mix of daring and adventurous and manages to have a hidden softer side that she doesn’t show often. She fools everyone into thinking she doesn’t care and isn’t bothered when in reality, she’s one of the kindest and selfless people I’ve ever met. I’ve personally witnessed her give her last dollar to a homeless person on numerous occasions. One time she rummaged through what little clothes she did have to see what she could spare to an old lady who was living in the trees out behind a discount store.

Not many notice how she hates watching others suffer, and does what she can to help them, even if she doesn’t think it’s much. And maybe that’s because she’s never really had anyone looking out for her. Instead of allowing her hardships

to make her bitter and cold, it's formed this protectiveness over those she cares about that she keeps concealed.

June has changed over the years, there's no doubt about that, but she's still that same girl who pitied me for crying at my mother's gravestone when we were kids. I knew from that very first moment that June had claimed my heart for all of time. We formed a bond over shared trauma and being misunderstood and I can't imagine getting that close to someone ever again. It's been almost a decade and I've never once felt anything remotely similar to the spark I feel with June. I thought it was gone forever until I saw her in that bar a few months ago, the flame reigniting and burning brighter than ever before.

I need answers, I need to know if she's okay. If she made it. Or if the pit in my chest means that she really is gone forever.

I slam my fist against the door again and tug at the handle. "You're making a mistake by keeping me here." I run my fingers through my hair and let out an exasperated breath. Scanning the room, I search for any way out of this imprisonment.

A dingy twin mattress is pressed up along one wall and a bucket sits on the opposite. There is no toilet or sink, and the bed doesn't even have a pillow, just a ratty excuse of a blanket balled up in its center.

I glance down at my body, the tailored suit that Dominic had custom made still clings to my body, although now it's speckled with the dried remains of those I killed. The crusty dark red coats my hands, too, and no doubt if there was a mirror, I'd find some on my face.

Some of this is June's blood. My sweet, tortured girl.

"Focus, Co. You can do this." I tell myself while trying to gain control over my unruly emotions. "Everything has a weakness. Find this one."

I shove my hands into my pockets, turning them inside out and coming up empty. They rid me of my wallet and phone,

which is no surprise at all. I pat all my hidden compartments, each one of them empty. Whoever stripped me of my belongings was thorough, and for that, it makes me want to add another person to my hit list. Anyone who stands in the way of me getting to June must die.

Skimming my hands over the wall, I check for any inconsistencies. Any fractures or hollowed spots that could assist in my escape. I spend what must be a half-hour on the first one, finding not a single thing to help me.

I unbutton my jacket and toss it onto the concrete. Dominic would scold me for that, but I'm sure I'm already in deep enough shit for going on a killing spree in an amnesty zone. I roll up my sleeves and get back to work on the second wall, hoping like hell something will budge.

Thoughts of June lying there, bleeding out in Simon's arms, continue to float through my mind and it's everything I can do to stay standing and not collapse to the ground. My heart aches at not being there for her in her final moments. My anger had taken hold and the only thing my body knew to do, was to react. To kill. To somehow manage to tip the scales and get even for what had happened.

As I finish up the second wall, the sound of metal from the door catches my attention. I rush over, but not quick enough. The person was able to shove a small plastic cup of clear liquid through and set it on a tray extended from the door.

"Fuck," I scream while slicing my hand at the cup and sending it flying across the room. Do I need to stay hydrated? Probably. But there's no telling if they laced that water with something to sedate or poison me.

I grip at the tray and do my best to pry it off. If I can detach it, maybe I can use it to force open the door. Wiggling it back and forth and up and down, the stupid fucking thing doesn't budge at all. Whoever designed it had considered that the person held captive might try brute force to remove and utilize it. This room was carefully planned and executed—a solid, unescapable chamber.



“How long are you going to keep me here?” I pound both of my fists into the door. “Someone just tell me if she’s okay.” I hit it harder. “Please.” I rest my forehead on the cold surface, my aching hands still pressed against the impenetrable thing.

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Countless hours go by and time becomes this strange elusive construct I can no longer keep a hold of. When the exhaustion is too much, I doze in and out, my nightmares no better refuge for my mind than my waking reality. I see red no matter what. June’s blood, her dying body. I close my eyes and it’s burned into my memory. Her demise haunts my dreams. I never get there in time, always running but never fast enough. She dies a thousand deaths, and I am not capable of saving her no matter what I do.

It’s been at least a day. My internal clock is sure of that. I have no idea how much longer, but despite the protests of not eating or drinking anything I’m served, my body is fatiguing hard. Between the immense stress and lack of basic human needs, I find myself no longer functioning at my peak. I’m weakened, tired, and wish that someone would just put me out of my misery. Is this my punishment for what I’ve done? Leave me here to rot while I never know the truth about whether June lived or died?

It’s fitting, really. Because this is the worst thing they ever could have done to me outside of hurting her, which they’ve already done. To rob me of the truth of June’s condition is the ultimate torture.

Each time the little opening on the door creaks, I desperately plead with the person delivering what measly offerings they bring. Not once have they replied or hinted at what their plans with me are. No one will tell me anything. I tried to reach through the gap but was met with a crowbar smashing down on my hand. I was able to pull it away from doing any major damage, but the thing made contact with my index finger, breaking the bone and leaving a wound that

wouldn't stop bleeding until I ripped off a part of my undershirt and tied it around it.

It's strange how numb I was to the pain. I *knew* it should hurt. But when you're already consumed with an incomprehensible agony, it's hard to feel much of anything else.

A mechanism sounds from outside the door, something I haven't heard this entire time I've been in here.

I push up from the floor and rise to my feet, readying my fists for whatever fight I'm about to face. I plant my feet and suck in a breath, eyeing the room to find anything I can use to overcome my contenders. I snatch my jacket off the ground and grip both sides of it, twisting it into a rope of sorts. It's not much, but if I can get it around the person's throat, maybe I can strangle them with it.

"Hurry up," a thick and familiar voice floats into my confined space.

My eyes widen and my grip on the designer thing loosens. Am I hearing shit or was that really him?

"Hayes," another person calls to me through the small gap that's formed when the door cracks open. He shoves it harder and steps into the space.

And for once in my life, I've never been so fucking grateful to see that tattooed idiot and that brute old man.

My dried lips part and regardless of my efforts, my voice comes out fractured. "June?"

"She's alive." Magnus nods. "She's alive."

I clutch at my chest, the wind knocked out of me. His repeated words offer me an immense relief I can barely process. I drop to my knees, the weight of everything caving in on me all at once. Tears I cannot control stream down my cheeks. "She's alive," I echo.

## JUNE



“*F*uck,” the word leaves my mouth without my approval. It’s followed by a groan and my labored attempt to open my heavy eyes.

“June.” A warm hand wraps tighter around mine. “You’re awake.”

I blink and grow impatient as my vision adjusts from nothing to the bright fluorescent lighting overhead. “Dom.” I try to sit up, but he gently restrains me.

“Shh. You’re okay. Don’t rush it.”

I wince, glancing down and spotting the bandage wrapping my chest under my thin hospital gown. “What happened?” I try to recall what caused all of this, but it’s a giant blur.

“One of Simon’s men, they shot you. You underwent surgery to repair the damage.” Dominic swallows and a side of him I’ve never seen before shows through. “We weren’t sure if you’d pull through.”

I painfully take in a breath and relax into the bed. “I’m like a cockroach, you can’t kill me that easily.”

He forces a fake toothless smile. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

I give his hand a gentle squeeze. “Hey. I’m good, don’t worry about me.” Scanning the rest of the room, I focus back on him. “Where are Magnus and Co?”

Dominic’s jaw tenses. “Bryant is getting you a change of clothes, and Hayes is...”

My eyes go wide, my heart immediately picking up its pace. “No...”

Dom shakes his head. “No, he’s not dead. Although, he probably wishes he was.” He pauses. “He’s being punished.”

Once I catch my panicked breath, I process what he said. “Punished? Why?”

“Hayes broke house rules. Honestly, he’s lucky he’s still alive. Anyone else would have been murdered on the spot. But considering the circumstances, Winnie convinced the council to grant him a bit of leniency.” Dom rubs my palm with his thumb. “The outcome of his sentence would be determined by your condition.”

“What does that mean?” What does any of this mean?

“Well...” Dom repositions himself in his chair but maintains a grip on my hand. “Given Hayes’ abilities...”

Can he just get to the fucking point already?

“If you died, Hayes would have, too.”

“What? Why? How does that make any sense?” I drag my free arm up to rest my palm against my chest. Getting worked up is not cooperating with the gaping hole in my chest.

“June, please try to remain calm.” Dom glances at the monitors. “Hayes is a flight risk. He’s dangerous, and while that might be a surprise to you, it’s not to us who *know* him. If something happened to you, I mean, permanently, there’s no stopping the lengths he would go to avenge you. He made that clear when he openly fired in an amnesty zone and took down those who were innocent and guilty.”

Cohen did what? He went on a rampage and murdered a bunch of people? Because someone shot me? It was my fault. I’m the one who was going to plunge a dagger into Simon’s chest because he refused to give up. Shouldn’t I be the one who’s being punished? Not him.

“Wait.” Bits and pieces start to come back to me. “Who won? Please tell me...”

Dominic sighs. “Simon Beckett might be a vile excuse for a human, but he is a man of his word.”

“He is?”

“He conceded. Thanks to whatever it is you said to him, he made damn sure I and everyone else knew that he was stepping down from his position against me.”

I may have almost died, but I did it, I fucking did it. I got Simon Beckett to admit defeat.

“I’m so proud of you,” I whisper.

“I’ve wanted this most of my life.” Dom stares at our intertwined hands. “I’ve never worked harder for anything. But the second I saw you bleeding out, I would have traded it all just to make sure you lived to see another day. I need you to know that, June. I don’t know what tomorrow brings, but I refuse to ignore what I can no longer control. And maybe I didn’t fully realize it until that moment, when I would have given up everything to save you from this nightmare. Or maybe it confirmed what I already suspected.” He exhales and slowly meets my gaze. “Either way, the fact is, I’m in love with you.”

I’m stunned by his declaration despite having the same exact one myself.

He continues. “I’m not expecting you to reciprocate those feelings. I know you and Hayes have a long history that far exceeds the time we’ve spent together. And Bryant has already made his intentions clear. I would never make you choose between us, but just know, I’ll be here for you no matter what decision you make. I need to be a part of your life, no matter how big or small.”

I open my mouth to speak but am interrupted by the door opening and a beautiful, tattooed man walking in.

His eyes light up the second he realizes I’m awake. “Princess.” Magnus rushes over to my other side.

I narrow my gaze at him. “Seriously, still with that?”

“What? It’s perfect. You’re like a Disney Princess, but in a dark and twisted kinda way.” He reaches over and brushes the hair off my cheek. “How are you feeling?”

I flit my attention briefly at Dom. I didn’t get a chance to let him know that there is no way I could ever choose between the three of them. That the only way I can be happy is if I’m with all of them. That each one brings something different to the table and that for the first time in my life, I’m not scared of not knowing what the future holds.

Being with these three men is everything I want but didn’t know I needed.

And now that I’ve had a taste, there’s no way I could ever imagine my life without them.

I had my doubts about what would happen when Dominic won the throne, but he’s made it clear that he wants me to be a part of this next chapter of his life. And if I had to guess, Magnus and Cohen want that, too.

“Not bad, considering.” I try to push myself up again, but my arms give out without much effort. “Does this thing move?”

“Yeah, here.” Magnus pushes a button on the little remote off to the side. “That better?”

“Much.” Although, there’s one thing missing from making me feel complete.

“What is it?” Dominic stares at me like he can read my mind.

“Get Cohen, please.”

“Of course.” Dominic releases my hand and stands, accepting the task I gave him without hesitation.

“Wait.” I extend both of my arms toward him, hungry for his touch to remain.

His resolve softens and he complies, leaning down and as carefully as he can, hugs me. He presses his lips to my cheek and breathes in deeply.

“The feeling is mutual,” I mutter into his ear.

He sighs, the tension in his body relaxing with the expelled air. “I’ll get him back for you, I promise.”

That alone tells me that Dominic will do whatever it takes to free Cohen from the hell he’s currently experiencing during his punishment.

“This is...fucking adorable.” Magnus allows Dom to finish hugging me and then plants a kiss on my forehead.

A light knock rattles the door.

Magnus gets there first, granting entry to the person.

Simon Beckett walks into my decently sized hospital room.

Something that will probably end up costing me a fucking fortune. Part of the reason I didn’t go to the hospital after I was attacked was because I didn’t have insurance and couldn’t afford the gnarly bill they would no doubt stick me with. A gunshot wound and an emergency surgery will likely cost me an arm and a leg but that’s a problem for another day.

“Beckett.” Dominic positions himself between me and the newcomer.

“Dominic.” Simon nods at him and then at Magnus. “Bryant.” He points and tilts his head to look around Dom. “May I?”

Is he politely asking for approval? What the fuck did I miss when I was busy almost dying? I guess Simon did concede. Does this mean that there is no more weird rivalry?

“He’s fine, let him through.” I tug my stiff hospital issue blanket a little higher and cover my chest with my gown. “Magnus, you should go with Dom to get Co.”

“It’s going to take both of you.” Simon cautiously steps closer. “Pretty sure the council wants his head to set an example.”

“Seriously?” Magnus glares at Simon. “You’re going to stress her out.”

“I’m good. I pushed that little red button for more drugs and they’re starting to kick in. I’ll be better once you’re back, so hurry up.” It’s not a lie. I am feeling a bit loopy, a warmth coursing through me and tugging at my eyelids to carry me off to sleep. And the idea of knowing Dom will do everything he can to get Cohen out of his imprisonment sets my soul at ease.

Soon enough I’ll have my three men at my side, and then, there isn’t anything we can’t face together.

“Your phone.” Dominic turns toward me. “It’s at your side, under your blanket. Call me if you need anything. Okay?”

I nod and offer what I can of a smile.

“And you…” Dominic pokes his finger into Simon’s shoulder. “I don’t need to tell you what will happen if you pull anything.”

Magnus slaps Dom on the back playfully. “He practically saved her life; he’s not going to do anything. Come on, you heard the lady. Hate on Beckett some other time.” He glances over at me on his way out the door. “Love you, princess.” He disappears before I can even process his words.

Did he mean to say that? Was it some knee jerk reaction? Either way, my emotions swell with wanting to say it back. To him. To Dominic. To Cohen. Each second my heart beats, my love for them grows. How did I go from never wanting to say those three words to anyone, to wanting to scream them from the rooftops?

Simon sits down in the seat Dominic had been in and scoots it forward. “You had us all scared.”

“That’s what I heard.” I study his face, comparing the details to what Cora had said, that he resembled Damon Salvatore.

Same pronounced jawline, dark eyebrows, and captivating eyes. A touch of mysterious bad boy thrown into the mix with his leather jacket and devious stare. He’s handsome, to say the least, but nothing compared to the three men who have ruined me for anyone else.



The old me would have slept with Simon in a heartbeat. Gone headfirst into the allure of his penetrating gaze and seductive tone. I would have eaten him up and spit him out, not a care in the world. But now? All I see when I look at him is someone who almost took everything away from the men I care most for.

The pain medication coursing through my IV and into my veins threatens to pull me under like a warm blanket and a sweet lullaby.

Simon runs his hand through his brown hair and leans back into the chair. “I don’t know what it is about you, but you have us all captivated.” He folds his arms across his chest. “I’m just the only one stuck on the outside.”

A part of me feels sorry for him. Now that I’ve embraced the connection I feel to each of my men, to be on the opposite end of those feelings and not have them reciprocated, I’m sure that’s a difficult truth to stomach. It would be a betrayal to my guys if I even considered bringing Simon into our circle. I’ve been fortunate enough that they haven’t put up a fight sharing me between the three of them, introducing an outsider would only be a surefire way to make the whole arrangement implode.

“What was Magnus saying?” I ask him.

Simon rubs his temple. “About what?”

“You saved me?”

“Yeah. That. Um, well. After you tried to kill me...” He breathes in and leans forward. “One of my guys shot you, and I maintained pressure on the wound until help arrived. You lost a lot of blood, but it would have been a lot worse if I hadn’t. You probably would have died.”

“Why would you do it?” I shake my head. “I was going to stab you.”

Simon laughs but the humor doesn’t meet his eyes. “You did, actually.” He raises his shirt to reveal a small, stitched section of his chest, right where his heart is.

And I'd do it again if it meant the same outcome—Dominic winning their war.

“They were going to crown him anyway, you know. There's no way I would have won against Dominic.” Simon pats out the wrinkles on his top. “He has far more experience, obviously. The dude is like sixty.”

“Fifty, but whatever,” I correct him.

“Either way, the entire thing was a long shot. He's had Winnie wrapped around his finger for as long as I can remember.”

“It wasn't just up to her though, there are others on the council.”

Simon nods. “That's the angle I was playing, but her sway is still more powerful in the end. Especially with you added to the dynamic. She adores the shit out of you. Not that I blame her.”

“You still didn't answer my question.” I blink slowly as the medicine continues to take its hold of me.

“I couldn't do nothing, June. I couldn't watch you die, not when every inch of me was screaming to save you.” Simon glances at his hands, rolling his thumbs along his fingertips. “There was so much blood.” He lowers his voice. “I'm no stranger to violence, but that...that was something else entirely.”

“For what it's worth...” I lick at my dry lips, my eyes shutting without my consent. “Thank you.”

Simon reaches forward cautiously and pats my hand. “I'll wait...forever if I have to.”

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*I* wake up alone, the lights in the room dimmed and not a soul in sight. I blink through the fog and reach for that remote to raise my bed back into the

upright position. Simon or one of the nurses must have lowered it when I dozed off earlier.

Sipping from the cup of water left on my tray table, I reposition myself slightly. Something hard catches my attention and I lift the blanket to find my cell phone in the spot Dominic had told me it was earlier.

I have seven missed calls from Cora and thirteen text messages. I know I should click the button and return her call, but what am I supposed to say?

*Oh hey, bestie, my bad for not answering when you reached out, I was just hanging out with a bunch of criminals at this semisecret event where the fate of their illegal organization was decided by a group of old ladies who have entirely too much money. Plus, the whole, me commandeering a dagger and almost killing a man, then being shot and nearly dying in said man's arms while one of the men I'm in love with went on a murderous rampage to avenge me. No big deal. I have a gunshot wound to the chest and I have no idea how long recovery will be, let alone how expensive my hospital bill will add up to, but I'm totally fine, how are you?*

Yeah, I doubt that would go over very well.

I skim her last few messages and decide to send one anyway.

**Me: Sorry I've been MIA, super hungover. I'll call you tomorrow.**

I sprinkle in a few choice emojis and hit the send button, hoping it will grant me a bit of reprieve from being a completely shit friend.

I was shot after all, I deserve a tiny bit of slack, right?

If anything, it will buy me a little time to figure out what the fuck I'm actually going to say to her. She's going to find out I'm injured one way or the other. We meet once a week, there's no way I'll be healed by our next one and it'll raise too much suspicion if I blow her off for too long, especially now that she knows the guys are funding our girl's nights.

I set the phone down and lay my head back, taking in a breath that makes me wince a bit. My hand reflexively goes to my chest, hovering over the place I almost bled out from. If it weren't for Simon, I would have. Although, if it weren't for Simon, I never would have been in that situation to begin with. I cannot blame him—it was my choice to risk threatening him. I knew there would be consequences, I just didn't think I'd get fucking shot.

The doorknob to the hospital room I'm posted up in jiggles and turns. Is it a nurse coming to check on me? Is it someone coming to finish me off?

I squint to see better through the dim light. Magnus pops his head in and spots me awake, opening the door even more. "She's up."

"Get out of my way." Cohen shoves past him, wearing the same outfit from the other night.

What's it been, one, two, three days? I have no idea how long I was out after my surgery.

Blood coats him from head to toe—speckling his face and caking his hands. There's something wrapped around one of them, potentially splinting it in place. Dried tears remain on his cheeks and his hair is a mess. Somehow, he's more beautiful than ever. His blue gaze frantically searches my body.

"J..." He drops to his knees beside the bed and takes my hand in his, pressing his lips over and over on my skin. His sobs wreck me as new tears fall down his face.

"Co, come here." I tug at him despite how weak I am.

Cohen complies, planting his butt next to me while still holding onto my palm. "I thought..."

"Shh. You thought wrong. I'm fine." I cup his face with my free hand. "What did they do to you?" I glance over at Dominic and Magnus, then back at Cohen.

He swallows and kisses my fingers. "Nothing that knowing you're okay can't fix."

I drag him closer to me and hold him as tightly as my injuries will allow. Patting his head, I whisper into his ear, “I love you, Cohen.”

He snuffles into my shoulder and sighs. “You have no idea how long I’ve needed to hear that.”

“It’s true,” I tell him. I lift my head toward Dominic and Magnus standing at the foot of my bed. “I love you all, more than anything.”

Dominic reaches down and squeezes my foot, a look of relief plastered across his face.

Magnus grins from ear to ear and comes to the side opposite of Cohen. “I knew you couldn’t help but fall for us.” He leans down and plants his lips on my cheek and then grips Cohen’s shoulder like he’s letting him know that he’s there for him, too.

I never thought it would be possible to fall for anyone, and here I am, head over heels, quite literally, irrevocably in love with these three men.

I nearly died for them, and I would do it all again in a heartbeat if they ever needed me to.

I guess that’s the thing about love—you don’t know it until it’s knocked you on your ass and made you completely change your mind about everything you believed in up to that point.

If this is what it means to finally have something worth fighting for, I’ll burn this city down and start a war to keep what we have alive.

## EPILOGUE – JUNE



“Are you excited?” Cora sits across the booth from me, her head resting on her hand, her elbow propped on the table.

I sip my coffee and shrug. “Kind of.”

She reaches for me. “You’re graduating, J, that’s a huge accomplishment.”

Six months after I should have, though.

I had originally taken time off school because of finances, but once the guys found out I was so close to finishing my degree, they insisted I put pen to paper and mark that off my to-do list before fully jumping into the business side of their lives. In a way, I think they were trying to prolong the inevitable at my joining them in their endeavors—forever doing what they think is protecting me. Not only did they pay my tuition, but each one of them took turns helping me study my way into getting a nearly perfect score on all of my remaining classes.

An achievement I’m lucky to have completed between getting shot and committing a huge no-no in the criminal world. Fortunately for me, Simon had no hard feelings for my attempt to kill him, and he put up a rather convincing case to the council that I actually didn’t hurt him and it was, in fact, his men that were in the wrong for shooting me. And given the circumstances, Cohen got off the hook too, based on him acting in self-defense on my behalf. His reaction was deemed acceptable despite him brutally murdering numerous people

that night during his rampage. Acceptable is a subjective term in that world.

“Yeah.” The ache in my chest remains, an injury that will probably take years until I feel remotely like myself again.

“Are the guys doing anything special for you?” Cora takes a bite of her banana-nut muffin.

“I’m not sure.” I pause. “I doubt it. They’re really busy with work.”

The whole, managing a criminal enterprise thing. All of which they’re complete naturals at. The darkness suits them well.

I change the subject. “What about you? How’s the new job?”

Cora smiles and it warms my heart. “Really great. I love it so much. They tasked me with doing the interior design of that new condominium complex across town. You know the one I’m talking about? It’s super high-end, very exclusive.”

“Damn, Cor, that sounds incredible.”

She nods. “Minus Jenn, she’s a total bitch.”

I drink another swig of Bram’s locally famous coffee. “What’s up with her?”

Cora exhales dramatically. “So for this project, we had to submit portfolios, but the company requested a blind approach, meaning it wasn’t clear who got the gig until they announced it. I’ve been there a whopping couple of months and Jenn’s been there three years. Safe to say she was pissed when I got it over her.”

I tilt my head. “But, clearly, you’re better qualified then?”

“Exactly.” Cora waves as someone comes through the door of Bram’s diner. “She accused me of cheating the system.”

Magnus slides into the seat next to mine and throws his arm over my shoulder. “Princess.” He presses an aggressive kiss on my temple and turns to Cora. “What’re we talking about?”

“Some bitch at Cora’s new job,” I tell him while leaning into his strong frame.

I’m still not quite used to being in a relationship, but my three men make it feel like second nature.

“Ohh.” Magnus brings my mug to his lips and has a taste. “Want me to kill her for you?”

I throttle my reaction and elbow him in the ribs.

“What?” He looks over at me and then at Cora. “It could be arranged.”

Cora breaks off another section of her muffin. “I love this kind of energy.” She plops the bite into her mouth.

“Speaking of...” Magnus glances at the watch on his wrist. “I have a surprise for you, so I’m afraid I have to cut your little meeting short.”

“You know, I’m not even going to ask how those two things are related.” Cora continues to chew her food.

“It’s probably best you don’t.” I roll my eyes at Magnus and poke him.

He grabs my finger and brings it to his lips, kissing it gently. “You love me.”

Cora speaks up, “Magnus, hey, since you’re giving out favors.”

Oh shit, what is she about to ask him?

“Happy to be of service, what can I do for you?” He gives her his attention while continuing to hold onto my hand.

“I’ve asked June like twelve million times, but I was hoping to get an in with Cohen’s friend Miller. I think June said you guys were business associates. We’ve never formally met, but I think we shared a moment.”

Magnus tenses slightly next to me.

Fuck. I’ve been meaning to tell her that Miller is off-limits, but haven’t found the right time or way of getting that across without hurting her feelings. It’s not like I can just tell her the



truth, that he's one of the leads of the east coast market and that he's enemies with my men's old boss. Granted, that guy is dead and no longer in charge, it still adds a weird dynamic and isn't something I'd allow Cora to get involved with. He might be a decent man, but decent doesn't cut it with my best friend. I may have gotten lucky with the three dangerous guys in my life, but I was made from the same dark cloth. Cora is soft, bubbly, too fucking happy, and kind. The world I am now involved with would swallow her whole. What kind of friend would I be if I exposed her to that?

"About that..." Magnus drinks more of my coffee, almost like he's coming up with some kind of story. "I have a better chance with him than you do."

I blink at him, not fully processing the angle he's playing.

"He's...gay?" Cora leaves her question hanging in the air.

Magnus nods. "Yep. Super gay. The dude loves dick."

"Oh." Cora's shoulders slump. "Well, that's cool."

"Yeah. He's not fully out though, so it might be a sensitive topic if you bring it up to him."

Cora crosses her arms. "Of course, no, that makes sense."

Magnus checks his watch again. "Listen, don't beat yourself up about it. Plenty other men would be lucky to have you."

Cora glances up at Magnus and then at me. "Think so?"

Shit, the whole reason I refused to introduce her to Miller was because I didn't think he was good enough for her.

"Absolutely," I reassure her. "Without a doubt."

The smile returns to her face as Magnus bobs his head and agrees with me.

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"Where are we going?" I ask Magnus once we're outside Bram's diner.

“It’s a surprise, princess. Keyword, surprise.” He tugs me closer to his body as we continue to stroll down the sidewalk.

“Miller isn’t gay, is he?” Because there was no denying that he was checking Cora out when the two of them first saw each other.

“Super straight, but she doesn’t need to know that.” Magnus glances behind him. “He’s not ruthless like we are, that’s for sure. Still, he’s involved with shit that is way too shady for that sweet girl.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“You were right in not hooking them up.” Magnus steers me across the street. “Be different if you didn’t care about her, but you do.”

We approach a dark alley, slipping into the shade and walking until the shape of a man appears.

Cohen kicks off the wall when we get closer and comes over to us. “Only a few more minutes, give or take.” He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear and looks over at Magnus. “Dom should be here any second.”

And like clockwork, the brute steps into the alley with us.

“Someone want to fill me in on what we’re doing?”

Dom winks and presses his finger to his lips, signaling me to be quiet. He points the direction he came, toward a few run-down buildings on this sketchier side of town.

I shove my hands in my pockets and wait impatiently. Don’t they know by now that I hate surprises?

Any normal person would be concerned about being led into a weird alley and yet here I am wondering what kind of fun these men have in store for me?

Magnus nudges my arm and nods ahead for me to focus.

It takes my eyes a second to adjust, but once they do, I lock them on a familiar figure ahead.

*Carter.* My piece of shit ex-roommate who made my life a living hell while I was stuck sharing an apartment with him

and the rest of those losers. The pathetic douche who stole my rent money, propositioned me numerous times, didn't care when I came home brutally beaten up, and managed to convince his equally worthless girlfriend to change the locks and kick me out after I'd already given them my share of that month's rent.

My jaw clenches, along with my fists. With this new world I'm living in, I feel stronger than ever, and the idea of letting him off the hook is one I'm not willing to consider. He's gone long enough without having any repercussions for his actions and that stops here and now.

Except when I take a step forward, Dominic catches me from going any further. "Give it a minute."

I glare at him, part of me wanting to rip myself free from his grasp and making a beeline straight toward that fuckboy in the near distance.

"Trust the process, princess," Magnus whispers into my ear.

A year ago, I'd never put my faith in anyone except me, or maybe Cora, but things have changed. Hell, everything has changed. No longer am I a loner who refuses to settle down with a man. Instead, I'm romantically involved with three ruthless men who claim me as their queen.

And there's nowhere I'd rather be than at their side.

Carter turns his back to us, cowering in a nook of an old building stoop. He fumbles with something and does a terrible job at concealing himself from the outside world. Facing us, he presses his thumb to his nose and inhales numerous times, his gaze darting around at anyone who might be watching. He shoves his finger into the baggie in his grip, and then pops it into his mouth, rubbing the thing along his gums.

Leaning against the building, he tilts his head up and braces himself.

"Did he just do cocaine?" I ask quietly.

"Wait for it..."

Carter slumps against the wall, his body dropping out from under him. He falls onto his ass hard and steadies himself with his hands.

I hold in a laugh that threatens to expose our concealed position and continue to watch him have what must be one hell of a high.

A hand gently rests on my lower back, and when I steal a glance, Magnus's strong frame inches closer to me. I lean into him but glue my gaze back on Carter.

If the guys went through the trouble to bring me here, it must be for a reason.

Carter starts shaking. It begins slowly, then turns into a more violent rattle, like he's having a seizure. Wait, is that what's happening? Is he having a bad reaction to the drugs? Or is this something more serious—an overdose?

From my spot across the way, I still see the foam bubble up and out of his mouth, a look of terror caked across his hardened face.

All of a sudden, his body stops flailing and he goes limp. The entire process only takes a short moment, not long enough for anyone to walk by and notice and potentially offer help. This is probably why he comes to this location to do drugs out in the open, because he won't get caught. Little did he know, that very detail could have been the difference between him living and dying. For this sad sack of shit, his poor decision-making resulted in the worst possible outcome for him.

And the best for me.

A warm hand tugs me backward, further away from the lifeless body and into the shadows.

"Is he...?" I squint to keep my gaze trained on the still man who did his best to ruin my life.

"Yes."

A wave of triumph courses through me. It's sick of me to feel this way, I'm well aware of that, but Carter had it coming. Each day he continued to breathe was more than he deserved.

My men continue to guide me back in the direction we came, leaving Carter to lie there alone while his soul leaves his body. A death that still wasn't as cruel as he was.

“How did you know he'd...?”

Cohen is the first to speak up. “He's predictable. Wasn't difficult at all to find a pattern.”

Leave it to Mr. Head of Security to figure out Carter's every move.

“Or to give him a hot batch.” Dominic runs his hand over his salt and pepper beard.

“I have to say, this is the most thoughtful gift I've ever gotten.” I glance between them.

Magnus nudges me. “Just wait until your birthday.”

A statement that would have normally turned me off and made me run for the hills. Planning for the future with someone was never in the cards for me. But now?

I want nothing more than to spend however many days I have left with these three men.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kind of crazy to think that this is my 11th published book. For those of you that have been here through the whole journey, I adore the shit out of you. If you're new here, I hope you stick around to see what the next 11 books bring! I appreciate every single one of you and am grateful you choose to spend your time reading the crazy stories that form in my wild brain!

Writing June was an entirely new experience for me, and I am honored to have told her story. She is bold and confident and fierce, and I admire her thick skin and wild heart.

To my alpha readers (Sam, Michelle, Autumn)—thank you for putting up with my sporadic updates and giving me incredible feedback.

My AMAZING assistant Tiffany Hernandez, I cannot imagine going forward in my career without you!

My Patrons over on Patreon—Clayton, James, Tyler, and Victoria—your support means the world to me. THANK YOU.

Kate Hall, for being so damn helpful in so many ways.

My bestie, Victoria, for checking in to make sure I wasn't dead from time to time while on this massive deadline. Ilysm.

Mini me—you're the coolest kid I've ever met and I am thrilled to be your mom.

Speaking of moms...to mine, despite what the world has thrown at you, I still look at you in awe of everything you've

overcome. Your continued perseverance is inspiring. Don't give up.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tessa James is the author of dark contemporary romance. She adores writing broken characters you won't help but fall for on their journey to find themselves and fight for what they love. Her stories are for the hopelessly romantic who enjoy grit, angst, and passion.

When she's not writing, you'll find her consuming way too much coffee, making endless to-do lists, and spending time with her daughter and cats in small-town Ohio.

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