

LOVE LOCKED DOWN BOOK 1



*Young
Truly*

JESSICA
BROWN

Yours Truly

Jessica Brown

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For M. I.

(and the countless times I drove her nuts while
juggling several pieces of writing at once)

Content Warning

Yours Truly is a contemporary romantic thriller/suspense and while a work of fiction, contains elements not suitable for some readers. This book contains material that should only be read by mature readers (18+).

This book contains triggers including profanity, sexually explicit scenes/graphic sex, stalking, physical violence and assault, abduction, sexual harassment, suggested sexual assault, torture (not between FMC and MMC), blood, violence, and mention of murder.

Reader discretion is advised.

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November 27, 12:54 pm

I step into the back room of The Amazing Anslar headquarters and study her station. Meticulous. Clean. Even the mirror is spotless. Perfect, just like her.

She'll be sitting there in an hour, applying sparkling black eyeshadow that accents her emerald eyes. She'll curl her walnut-colored locks into ringlets and fluff them until they are full-bodied, framing her oval face and prominent cheekbones. Then she'll slip behind the dressing screen as she finishes getting ready for the show.

But the real magic will happen when she first walks into the room. When she sees my next gift.

The pause in her breath. The stagger in her step. It makes the wait worthwhile. Fun even.

As I stride across the room, I glance around, ensuring I'm the only one there. Every step of my process must be exact. If she finds out who I am too soon...

No. I can't think about that now.

The chair slides out from the station with a scrape. I remove a glove, and my fingers caress her vanity. The smoothness of the wood will be no match against the softness of her skin, but I accept the imagined closeness... for now. I take a luxurious breath, almost certain her scent lingers in the air where I stand.

After putting my glove back on, I reach into my jacket, remove the crisp, stark white envelope, and lean it against her spotless mirror.

A smile creeps across my face.

“Soon, Alice. Soon.”

November 27, 2:06 pm

-Alice-

Even the most famous stage illusionists rarely have threats against their lives, but Mark is convinced someone wants him dead. Or maybe he wants others to think that's the case.

Gods... universe... whatever controls life... thank you for making my boss illogically eager to be a victim of a crazed stalker and bringing Jack Walker here.

Because I don't actually care if Mark is insane. Jack is looking right at me. And, to be honest, I'm ok if Mark really does have a psycho killer after him if it means Jack sticks around for a bit.

Jack's attention is pulled away from the conversation he is having with Mark when I step into The Amazing Anslar headquarters. His electric blue eyes bore into mine. They remind me of Arctic ice. Crystalline and reflective. Captivating and so perfectly coastal in color.

My cheeks warm from the attention. Everything about this man sends the most pleasurable shivers through my body. I swear I end up panting and drooling every time I see him. Then again, so was every other woman working for Mark. Some of the men, too.

I strip off my puffy knee-length coat, the one that transforms me into a gigantic soot-colored marshmallow every time I wear it. But then I remove it and *POOF!* Like magic, I reappear as my normal self, revealing skinny jeans and a close-fitting green sweater. At least the coat does its job during these cold months.

By the time I drape the coat over my arm, Jack's gaze has darkened.

"Hello, Alice." The deepest cadence of Jack's voice causes my nerve endings to go haywire. All of them. No longer am I at this godawful shitshow I call a job. Nope. For a brief moment, I'm tangled in sheets and wrapped up in Jack's strong arms as he trails the tip of his tongue over my collarbone. Two simple words and I'm suddenly aware of how long it's been since I've had sex.

The inner edge of my lip finds its way between my teeth. Jack's mouth twitches up on one side. Intimidating and sexy, he towers over Mark by several inches. Muscles push the boundaries of his tee. I wish it would just rip open already.

What I would give to get this man in my bed.

A heaviness grows between my legs.

Yeah... it's been way too long.

“You’re late.” Mark turns around, grabbing my attention. His glare freezes the heat from moments before. “It amazes me how irresponsible you are.”

Then fire me, asshole.

I peek at my watch. It’s only 1:58. I’m not late. I’m three minutes from being late.

“You implying I’m a liar?” Mark’s arms cross over his puffed-out chest. His lean, almost six-foot frame seems to grow a little. One manicured eyebrow cocks. A section of his dyed jet black, slicked-back hair flops over his forehead. Defeat slithers its way through my veins. He knows I’ll back down. I know it, too.

As much as I’d love for him to fire me, or better, to quit and leave him screwed for Friday’s show, I need the job. I keep looking for other work, but I have yet to hear back from anyone. I’ve considered going back to school, finishing my degree in social work, but I don’t have the money and loans are scary. What if I go through all that work, don’t find a job, and am stuck with a load of debt?

I sigh, ignoring the nagging desire to roll my eyes. “Not at all, Mark. And it won’t happen again. Being late, I mean.”

“It better not. I can’t have lazy assistants. You might have a nice ass and rack, and any guy in the audience might get a hard-on just looking at you in those outfits.” Mark pauses. His

eyes roam up and down my body, making me feel naked and cold.

I should've kept my marshmallow on a little longer.

Mark's glare shoots back up to my eyes. "But I have a show to deliver. Your lack of professionalism will get you fired."

Please.

"I'm sorry, Mark." My body tenses with annoyance. He's never disparaged me in front of others before, at least not like this, but I hold my head high. I know I wasn't late. My boss is simply a pigheaded idiot up his own ass. "Strip off your clothes and get in costume. You better be ready for rehearsal in fifteen minutes."

Mark sneers before heading toward the back area of the building.

I can't bring myself to look at Jack. If I do and see pity in his eyes, or worse, I'll crawl under the nearest rock and willingly die. *I don't need anyone's pity.*

The blood-colored carpet, darker where I stand from the snow I dragged in, becomes my focal point. Outdated speckled tiles peek out from under a stream of synthetic crimson textiles. Frayed edges from the runner reach out like tiny zombie arms through a chain-link fence.

It's only a matter of seconds before a strong hand cups my arms, thumb rubbing gently over my wool sweater. Heat sings through the material, burning desire into my skin. My pulse moves into hyperdrive at Jack's closeness.

Holy crap.

A light pressure pushes up under my chin, and I let my head lift. Two piercing eyes stare back. My breath catches in my throat, and I swallow it down.

“You’re not irresponsible.” His words are so soothingly smooth. I nod. I know I’m not. I know the problem isn’t me. But hearing the confirmation eases my ache. Only one other person has ever confirmed that, but he’s gone now.

“Thank you. Mark’s an ass, but nothing I can’t handle.” I pause, getting lost in Jack’s gaze. Shaky legs barely keep me standing. The intimacy of this moment engulfs my soul. I try to dig up some level of poise. “I should get to work.”

Jack drops his hand. The loss is enough to make me beg for his touch again. He shifts to the side, opening a path for me to head on back, but I don’t move right away. Amusement flits across his face.

Walk, Alice. Move your freakin’ legs.

Finally, they obey. As I pass him, Jack’s fingers gently catch my hand. Tingles surge through my skin, and I pause in step.

“And Alice?” His voice is low, deep in the most delicious way. *Say my name again.* “You let me know if that asshole says anything about your body again,” he growls.

“Ok,” I whisper.

His fingers linger on mine for a second longer before he lets go. Every inch of my body is alive right now. It’s radiating

with heat and want. I might as well run outside and throw myself in the snow to cool down.

I move down the long hallway. *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* blares from my bag. As I pull my cell out, Sam's picture fills the screen.

"Hey, roomie," I answer. "The house is lonely without you."

"Babe! Are you sure you don't want to come out to Cancun? Daddy promised to pay for your flight." My best friend and amazing roommate has been begging me for days to drop work and fly out.

"You know I have to work. Are you having fun?" I continue down the hallway.

"It would be more fun if you were here, but I can't complain. Weather's gorgeous!"

"Yeah, yeah. Just rub it in." I enter the back room and freeze. Even from twenty feet away, I can see the white envelope against my mirror. My name, in perfectly scrawled script, taunts me from a distance.

Not another one. Why another one?

"Alice? Where'd you go?" Sam's distant voice drags me from my paralysis. My phone, held loosely in my palm, dangles next to my leg. I raise the cell to my ear again. My gaze never leaves the letter.

"I need to go, Sam." I rush the words out. "Call you later. Love you!" I hang up before Sam can respond.

It's been over a week since the last letter, which now sits in the bottom drawer of the vanity with the others. I was hoping the sender had given up, but obviously that's not happening. Whoever is sending them has no intention of stopping. Not if letter number seven waits for me on my vanity. I take a step toward my station, scrutinizing the room. My coworkers mingle. Some rush around preparing for rehearsal.

Someone has to have delivered it.

But whenever I ask my coworkers, no one seems to know how it ended up on my station or who sent it. It's always a dead end.

I make my way to my vanity, watching the others in the room through peripherals, waiting for someone to give themselves away. No one does.

I lift the white envelope, flip it over, and rip open the seal. It falls to the vanity as a short, quiet gasp escapes my mouth. My heart rate speeds. My breathing stops. Tears prickle behind my eyelids.

My gaze darts around the room again, mouth agape ever so slightly. Still, no one watches.

Staring back at the paper, my eyes graze the lowest point of writing. Once again, the meticulously penned signature taunts me.

BEAUTIFUL ALICE,
OFTEN, DARKNESS IS MORE THAN MERE SHADOWS.
PULL BACK THE CURTAINS IF YOU DARE.
I'LL BE THERE, WATCHING.
WAITING.

Yours Truly

November 27, 2:08 pm

-Jack-

Usually, I'd have one of my underdogs take on-site security detail. As Elite's founder and CEO, I have more important things to do. Maintain a presence back at the main offices. Develop protection plans. Communicate with the PD. Train my men. Hell, at this exact moment, Elite is providing safe houses for two domestic abuse victims. Not to mention Belleview PD notified us of potential sex trafficking in surrounding areas. All of these things are more important than babysitting a self-deluded illusionist claiming someone wants to kill him.

Anslar's not in any real danger. He just likes to imagine he is, playing victim to the idea that his small-level local fame puts him at risk.

I sigh and look around the building. The lack of cameras and high-tech locks that would better protect Anslar, his employees, and anyone else coming through the door, is so evident that if Anslar did have a stalker wanting to kill him, he'd be dead by now.

Anslar's only redeeming quality, which isn't much of one, is referring Elite to other clients – real clients.

I watch Alice walk into the back room and know I need to be here. Gorgeous green eyes. Plump lips. A melodic voice that contradicts the sassy personality I'm positive is hiding beneath the exterior. I have a gut feeling she's hiding secrets, ones I'm dying to uncover.

After a follow-up meeting with Anslar a month ago, he started babbling about strange things happening to one of his assistants before turning it back to himself. It prickled at the back of my head and knotted in my stomach. My intuition is rarely wrong.

So now I'm here for a short time to figure out what, if anything, is going on.

I can't help if the gorgeous, green-eyed twenty-one-year-old makes the days here seem less like a waste of time.

She lingers on my skin. I shouldn't have gotten so close. As beautiful as Alice is, she's an employee of my client. I have a business to maintain.

But, fuck. When Anslar treats her like he just did, I have zero qualms about being here. He's begging for a black eye and a broken nose. Men don't just get to treat women that way.

My jaw ticks at the memory of Anslar's condescending words, his roaming eyes undressing Alice from across the room. Had Anslar taken even a single step toward her, I

would've laid him flat on the carpet. Maybe let his head accidentally hit the tile just beyond the runner's edge.

I run my boot over the fraying edge of the crimson runner.
Screw professionalism.

Anslar walks back toward the front entrances.

“That Alice chick... she's a wreck, but she'd be a good lay.”
Anslar laughs. “One of these days, I'll have her tied up in my bed screaming my name instead of on stage for an audience.”

My hands ache to wrap around Anslar's throat. I stretch them to relieve tension. The asshole won't get his hands on her if I have anything to say about it. Other than my cramping fist, I keep my outward appearance neutral.

“She wasn't late,” I say.

“I know. But I make the rules around here. If I say she's late, she's late.” A shit-eating grin takes up the lower half of Anslar's face. He reminds me of the Joker. The cartoon version. Slicked back black hair. Straight, pointy nose. Narrow eyes. Except Anslar's teeth are disgustingly white. “Besides, she's sexy when she's flustered and annoyed.”

“We need to talk about tech for the building.” Changing the course of the conversation will help me avoid an attempted murder charge. “We can set up some simple cameras and install a security system.”

Anslar waves his hand through the air as though he's shooing away the idea. “We're not spending money on that. We don't need it.”

“You hired Elite because you’re worried about your safety and the security of your business.”

“You’re right. I did. And that’s why you or one of your men is here during open hours. You do your job and don’t waste my money, or you won’t have a job.”

The click from my teeth shutting reverberates in my jaw. *My job isn’t to be your bouncer, fucker.*

Anslar’s threat is not the worst idea. Not having to deal with the delusional magician would make several hours of my day less frustrating. The words creep to the tip of my tongue: *I quit*. Two easy words being made even easier by the asshole in front of me.

My gut sinks, and my mind wanders to Alice. I’m pulled in by her, sure, but there’s something more. Strange things are happening to one of Anslar’s assistants; that’s what he said. I am sure he meant Alice. I want to keep her safe. Need to. At least until I can pacify this uneasy, restless feeling that there is more happening at The Amazing Anslar than meets the eye.

“We’ll leave it for now,” I say. Anslar turns on his heels and walks down the hallway.



Several of Anslar’s employees drag themselves out the doors six hours later. I’m always the last one out of the building, turning off lights and locking up.

Making my rounds, I enter the backroom. Alice sits at her station, a piece of stationary clutched in her hand. Her brows pinch together, eyes glistening, as she chews on her lower lip.

“Everything ok?”

With a gasp, Alice jumps from the chair, spinning to face me. “Oh, my goodness. You scared me.”

She presses a hand to her chest while the other clutches the paper she’d been reading. She takes a few deep, steadying breaths before leaning against the vanity.

“Is everything ok?”

Instinctively, my eyes gaze over the room before landing back on Alice. She glances at the crumpled paper in her hands. I step closer to her. She lifts her head, and I freeze when jade-colored eyes stare back at me. Her smile grows on her face but doesn’t reach beyond her lips. Alice shakes her head and tosses the paper in the trash can beside her station.

What are you hiding, dove?

“Yeah, everything is fine,” she reassures. “Am I the last one here?”

“Looks like it.” I smile back.

“I’ll grab my stuff and get out of your way then.”

“You’re never in my way.” Alice’s cheeks pink. “I’ll walk you out.”

She grabs her coat from her chair, throws it on, and zips it up. Bending at the knee, Alice picks up her bag and swings it

over her shoulder. When she looks up at me, the edge of her lip is caught between her teeth.

Damn, that's hot.

I place a hand in the center of Alice's back and lead her through the building, flipping lights off as we go. My palm never leaves the small of her back. Even though her puffy coat creates a barrier between us, I've never enjoyed escorting a woman more.

I shouldn't be doing this.

But I can't pull away. She feels perfect.

"Are you parked far away?" I ask. It's dark, and the streets are less busy on a Tuesday night.

"Oh, I walk to work. Sometimes I take the bus. Well, busses."

"I'll give you a ride."

"No, don't be silly. I'll be ok. I don't want to inconvenience you."

"It's not an inconvenience. It's practically my job to make sure you get home safe." The moment the words leave my lips, I realize how much truth is behind them.

Alice's lips turn up. After a brief moment of hesitation, she nods. "Ok. I'd appreciate that."

I flip the final light switches. The entryway dims though it doesn't fully darken. When I turn back toward Alice, I can't

help but smile. I place a hand on her back again and lead her out the front door.

December 1, 5:32 pm

-Alice-

“Mark’s on a rampage again.” Mandy, one of the other two magician’s assistants, says as I step into the dressing room. She stands in front of her reflection, fluffing her blonde hair. Glenn, one of the tech guys, leans next to her. The poor guy is trying so hard to get her to notice him.

“Thanks for the heads up.” I sigh. She doesn’t mean Mark’s on a rampage against everyone, only me. He’s been sniping at me since I came in ‘late’ four days ago. His acting up before a show never bodes well for me. For one, he always seems to tie the restraints tighter when he’s annoyed. Mandy and the third magician’s assistant, Tessa, never seem to be part of the illusions that require a rope. Always me. “Hopefully, he’ll calm down before showtime.”

“Good luck with that, doll.” Tessa walks up to her vanity, pulling her makeup bag from a drawer.

“I swear, Mark has it out for you,” a male voice interjects. Looking at the reflection in the mirror, Ramsey, the other tech guy, walks up behind us as we get ready. The guys lean on my

and Mandy's stations. Ramsey crosses his arms. "I don't know why you put up with it."

"Money, for one," I respond.

"Oh, please. He doesn't pay us what we're worth. For how much he charges his customers, he could afford to give us a raise," Mandy scoffs. "The only reason I keep this job is because I'm going to school. It's not full-time, and it works with my class schedule. Otherwise, I wouldn't put up with Mark's shit."

Glenn nods along and leans in a little closer to her.

"Yes, well, we don't all have that luxury," Tessa claims, leaning into her mirror and applying eyeshadow. Her red hair falls effortlessly over one shoulder.

I drag my makeup from the bag and sort it on the vanity. Ramsey picks up my concealer, shakes his head, and gives me a what-is-this-shit look. I laugh, taking it from his hand.

"I hear there's a storm coming tonight," I say, not wanting to talk about Mark one more second.

"I heard that, too," Ramsey says. The others join in with their own affirmations. "If anyone needs a ride home, I'm happy to take them. Knowing Anslar, we won't get out on time after tonight's show."

The rest of us groan, knowing he's right.

"So," Mandy turns toward me. "What's going on between you and that security guy?"

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, please! I see the way he looks at you.” Mandy and Tessa giggle. “He’s sexy.”

Glenn’s face falls at Mandy’s comment. “Really? You think the security guard is sexy?”

“Oh god, yes. That man is pure sex.” Mandy swipes a deep red lipstick across her lips. “And he wants Alice. You should totally go for it.”

My skin heats from both embarrassment and the thrill of the thought. I wouldn’t mind being naked in Jack’s bed, but I also don’t need my coworkers commenting on it.

“Leave her alone, Mandy,” Ramsey pipes in. “Maybe she isn’t interested.”

The lights dim three times, letting us know the show is beginning in fifteen minutes and to get to the stage. Mark expects everyone in their places ahead of showtime.

“That’s our cue.” I’m thankful for the excuse to end the conversation.

“Ugh, already?” Tessa bemoans. She swipes a clear gloss over her lips, smacks them, and hurries off.

I fluff my hair once more before walking down the dark hallway leading to the stage and taking my place in the wings.

You’re not to be seen until I open the show. I’m first on stage, the one people come to watch. You are an accessory.

Anslar's words echo through my head. He reminds me without cause at least once a month.

Waiting backstage for my cue, I watch the light flood the empty stage as the crew pulls the curtains back, revealing the audience. Music pounds through the speakers, and the chatter among patrons silences. In a matter of seconds, a spark ignites the front center stage. The audience gasps as a cloud of smoke blankets the small area. When the smoke dissipates, Mark stands, arms stretched like a savior welcoming praise from his followers. The audience cheers. A cheesy smile stretches across his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Amazing Anslar!" he bellows through the theater. The mic hidden in his hair amplifies his voice. "Tonight, I bring to you mystifying and daring acts never seen before in our city."

"Oh, please. He's been doing the same shit for the past five years." Mandy rolls her eyes with her barely-there whisper, and I suppress a laugh. "He's lucky the audience hasn't caught on. Or doesn't care."

Eighty minutes into Mark's predictable show, I prepare for the final illusion. Mark stands once again center stage in front of the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Our time together tonight is, unfortunately, coming to an end." The audience moans with disappointment. "But don't you worry! I, the Amazing Anslar, have one final extraordinary act to share with you! For this final trick, I will need the assistance of my assistant! Alice?"

And that's my cue.

My heels click across the stage as I walk toward Mark. The red and black corset constricting my torso shimmers in the light. Though a modest size C, my breasts threaten to overflow the lace edge. Mark insists we wear the skimpiest outfits possible.

The audience applauds my entrance.

Mark's eyes never leave my body when he addresses the audience next. "Isn't she a sexy little thing? I believe she's single, guys."

Mark winks at me and then at the audience. A few guys in the crowd respond with whistles. One guy yells that he'd be happy to remedy my situation.

My skin shudders at the attention, and annoyance creeps into my chest. I force a bright smile on my face. When I reach Mark, his arm slides around my waist, pulling me close, and plants a kiss on my cheek. He smells like B.O. and Axe body spray.

I swallow a gag.

One more act, and then you can go home. No work tomorrow. No work Monday. Just get through one more act.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen. I am sure you've enjoyed your evening, but when you leave tonight, this is the trick you will be talking about. This act will make you realize that The Amazing Anslar is the greatest illusionist in the region!" Mark releases his hold on me and throws his hands in the air,

welcoming the applause the audience was tricked into giving. Body odor assaults my nostrils. He lowers his hands and says, “For this next trick, I will make my beautiful assistant... DISAPPEAR!”

Hoots and hollers, loud cheering and clapping, echo through the theater. Mark basks in his moment of glory extra long this evening, waiting for the noise to die down on its own rather than hush the audience into silence, but the audience is unrelenting.

How can these people buy into this crap?

The lights dim, and the music flares. The audience quiets. Ramsey and Glenn have my back, at least, pushing the show forward. Mark’s shoulders slump minutely, and I’m pretty sure he glares toward the back of the theater where the tech guys sit in their booth.

As quickly as Mark’s eyes narrow, he turns toward me. Some crew members bring out the wooden contraption that I’ll get into. In the two lower corners, cuffs are secured against the wood. At the top, ropes hang loosely from the center for now. The design looks medieval. A mechanism for torture. Mark says the audience gets more of a thrill when it appears his girls are in danger.

I push my shoulders back, preparing myself for this next trick, and step up to the vertical platform, turning toward the audience. Mark stands in front of me. His hand firmly presses against the top of my breasts, and his fingers trail a little too low before pushing me against the contraption.

I glare at him. He smirks.

Mark crouches low, first securing my ankles in the straps at the bottom. His hands linger on my ankles before dragging up my leg. A shiver crawls over me like a ghost. Lifting my arms, Mark brings my hands to the rope. Twisting the thick cord around and around my wrists, Anslar turns to the audience and tugs on his work, proving to them that I am restrained and unable to escape. When his arm lifts to showcase me, that's my cue to pretend to struggle.

I play my part. The rope rubs against my skin. Mark pulled it extra tight tonight.

With exaggerated movement, Mark moves to a large black cloth attached to a single pole that lies at my feet. Lifting it, Mark unhurriedly brings the fabric up. The light narrows in, and music crescendos with each inch until everything is black and quiet.

Above me, I hear the applause of the audience, exhilarated by the night's final performance. In less than a minute, Tessa stands in front of me with a flashlight, untying the knots and loosening the straps at my ankle.

"Thank you." I rub my wrists when I'm free.

"I don't envy you, that's for sure," Tessa says. "You should tell someone when he touches you like that."

"Who would I tell? We don't have an H.R. department."

"You could tell Jack." Tessa giggles. "I'm sure he'd be happy to have a little chat with Mark."

“Don’t you start now, too.” I roll my eyes and smile at her. “Let’s head on up. I’m sure Mark will want to tell us all what we did wrong tonight.”



A shudder accompanies the chill crawling up my spine as I reach the first alley. The route on the streets is significantly longer than cutting through alleyways. With Anslar making sure everyone knew what we did wrong and the threat of a massive winter storm looming in the very near future, cutting out twenty minutes is the better option. Besides, I’ve done this trek a hundred times at night.

Another ominous note signed *Yours Truly* had been delivered to my station at work sometime during the show. Between that and Mark’s wandering hands, I’m looking forward to being home. Behind a locked door. Relaxing with a hot bath and a glass of the cheapest whiskey I can find.

Wind brushes past my almost bare legs. The only shield against the cold is a pair of fishnet stockings that couldn’t keep a fire warm in this weather.

Shit, I’ll be an icicle by the time I get home.

Somehow, after changing for work, I misplaced my red work tote, the one complete with *The Amazing Anslar* scrolled across the front in dramatic black letters. The bag contained my everyday clothes and my gloves. I’m sure one of the other

girls grabbed mine by mistake before rushing out to beat the weather.

Unable to find my jeans and cozy oversized sweater in the makeup room, I succumbed to wearing my skimpy magician's assistant outfit home. At least my practical faux-fur-lined boots were not in my now absent bag.

I pull my marshmallow coat close and take in my dreary surroundings. Several dumpsters line the grimy brick walls. Though the smell isn't as pungent as it is during the summer, the rats skittering beneath each metal box of trash are clue enough to the rotting food within. *At least, I hope it's food.* Bodies are occasionally found in dumpsters on the news. I cringe at the thought and stick to the middle of the alleyway to avoid contact with the makeshift coffins.

Drifts of dirty, stained snow huddle against the corners where the pavement meets the buildings. It's as though the snow is unaware that it exists only in the cold, and it's trying to find the coziest, warmest section of the alley to rest. Overhead, the dim yellow glow from muted bulbs creates more shadows than light. Halfway down the street, one bulb hangs precariously from a tilted lampshade off one of the buildings. It flickers in three quick spurts of light followed by three extended radiances, like a never-ending Morse code signal on repeat. Unease slithers down my spine.

I pause, glancing back the way I came.

The opening to the street seems so far away, even though I've only made it down less than half of the alley. Above me,

the sky swirls with black and dark gray – made more threatening with the flicker of the broken light. I really don't want to get stuck in the storm.

At the other end of the alley, the street ahead is bare.

1, 2, 3... 19, 20

Not a single car passes. I turn around and count again. Two cars drive in either direction on the street, and a couple huddled in oversized coats hustle past the opening to the alley.

You're such a scaredy cat, Alice.

I turn on my feet, giving into fear, and head back to the busier street.

“Just get home,” I whisper, shaking my head. “Bite the bullet and get a cab, for goodness sake. Money isn't that tight.”

Even as I say it, I know it's a lie. Money is a constant vice grip on my thoughts. Rent is due in a week, and I don't feel comfortable asking Sam to cover more than her fair share again, even if she would do it in a heartbeat.

“Ramen dinner for a month it is.”

Snowflakes start falling in thick clusters. The ground, already coated in frozen slush and ice, crunches under my boots with each step. The snow reflects off the buttery glow of the lights.

Beautiful, in a macabre kind of way.

I stare up at the menacing sky, walking toward the still-bustling street, contemplating trying to catch a drifting snowflake on my tongue like I did as a little girl in Montana when Granddad would take me sledding. His backyard had the best sledding hill. John Harper, more of a parent to me than my own mother, gave me a lifetime of love, fun, and memories before he passed away.

It takes a moment for me to register the echoing crunch behind me, nearly in unison with my footfalls. Instinctively, I reach into my coat and palm my small container of pepper spray. My thumb rolls over the latch, setting it ready just in case. I've never had to use it.

I take a few more steps, not wanting to stop or turn around but listening for the creak of feet in the fresh, wet snow. I hear nothing other than my own boots grating softly into the ground.

Get a grip. Only around thirty more feet until I reach the street.

I relax my posture and stride, trying to ease away the ridiculous anxiety. Thirty feet isn't that far. I'll be back in civilization in no time. My hand slides from my pocket sans pepper spray, and I tug my coat closer to my body, still fighting off the winter chill.

Three steps later, I involuntarily stop dead in my tracks. A heavy clomping of boots rushes up behind me. I turn. A glimpse of the shadow rushes at me before a wrecking ball of a human crashes into me. I'm thrust to the ground.

Fear ripples through my body. A high-pitched scream reverberates in my throat and fleetingly reaches my ears before it's muffled by a large leather-gloved hand.

Ice bites my legs. I kick and struggle beneath the weight of my attacker. The leather chafes against my skin as the figure digs its fingers into my jaw. The vice grip is crushing.

“Quiet!” the harsh, scraping voice demands. “Shut up, or I’ll kill you here.”

The man’s words repeat over and over.

Shut up, or I’ll kill you here. Shut up! Shut up!

After the third threat of death, I realize I’m still screaming behind the gloved hand. I gasp a breath, only able to get the smallest amount of air through two of his slightly spread fingers.

It’s enough to survive for now.

Trying not to hyperventilate behind the muzzle, I silence to a whimper. My hand scurries to my pocket.

Pepper spray. Get the pepper spray.

Tears stream down my temples.

I wonder if they’ll freeze against my skin before they have a chance to collide with the dirty snow.

My fingers float over the pepper spray. I grab it and pull it from my pocket, pointing it at the asshole on top of me. The man shifts his weight, rips the container from my hand, and throws it down the alley.

“I don’t fuckin’ think so, Alice.”

He knows my name. How does he know my name?

I force myself to look at him. My eyes travel toward where the man’s face should be, but all I see is a black abyss. A sob gurgles in my throat. I blink my eyes over and over as my brain tries to make sense of what I’m seeing. Too slowly, my mind registers lines and formations beyond the dark chasm.

A jet-black ski mask. Shaded goggles. An ebony scarf. They turn my attacker into a no-faced monster.

I’m spinning. My face slams into the snow, ice crystals and stones scraping my cheek. He’s flipped me over, grabbing both arms roughly behind my back. He piles one of my wrists on top of the other, grasping them together and shoving up my coat sleeves. My shoulders stretch to their limit before coarseness wraps around my wrists. A rope twists around both, then slips between my hands and arms. I buck my body. Twisting and turning until I’m on my side. This fucker is going to get the fucking fight of his life.

He grunts as he slams into the ground. I kick my legs, hitting his chest, his arms.

Only then do I realize his hand is no longer over my mouth. A blood-curdling cry, a call for help to anyone who might hear.

I get on my knees, arms still tied behind my back.

If I can just get to the street...

I'm slammed into again, flipped onto my back. The weight of two bodies crushes my arms against the ground. My face explodes with pain. The monster's knuckles slam down on my cheek. Once. Twice. Hard. He shoves one knee into my diaphragm, under my ribs.

I gasp for an impossible breath.

December 1, 11:28 pm

-Jack-

This job's a fuckin' joke.

Not to mention boring. The only interesting thing about it is the gorgeous brunette that can't stay out of my head. As I finish my rounds, Alice and her last outfit from tonight's show replay in my mind. The red and black corset with matching shorts that showed off the curve of her ass are enough to make any man want to throw the woman over his shoulder and run off to the nearest bed. The swell of her breasts threatening to pour out of the lace edges of her corset and those sexy stockings climbing her toned legs mean I'm a goner.

Alice is a client's employee. That means she's off-limits.

Even as I say it, I know it's a lie.

The final lock clicks in place, and I turn toward the street. A stifled whimper whisks away on the breeze.

Stray cat, maybe?

I listen closer. The whimper whispers again. My gut tells me to check it out. I walk toward the space between the two five-

story buildings. As I near the corner, a woman's scream chills the already icy air, urging me into a sprint. I unholster my weapon and run into the alley toward the cries.

“Fuck.” The sight nearly pummels me.

Alice is crushed against the ground, arms restrained behind her back, and some asshole in black lumbering on top of her. Streaks of blood rough up the smoothness of her porcelain cheek, and pure rage boils me as my Special Forces training kicks into gear.

“Get the hell away from her,” I growl. The man lifts himself off Alice, looking up toward me. I take another two steps, aiming my Sig toward the perpetrator. His outstretched hand grasps Alice's arms. He tugs her closer, using her as a shield and blocking my aim.

I could make this shot. Easily.

But I don't want to risk hitting Alice. The masked man stands, pulling Alice up with him.

“Let her go,” I command. The masked man says nothing. I take another couple of steps, positioning myself less than six feet from Alice and the man. “I'm going to count to-”

The man shoves Alice from his grasp. She stumbles toward me, arms still tied behind her back. Instinct plays me like a marionette as I switch the safety and holster my weapon, dropping to my knees and catching Alice in my arms before she smashes into the ground. The crunching footsteps echo as the man runs away.

“Alice? Are you ok?” The words are choked. She stares wide-eyed at me, and I brush the hair from her face. “Alice, speak to me, dove.”

Her body is shaking, and I rub my hands gently up and down her arms.

“I’m ok. I’m... oh, god, Jack.” My name on her lips twists my insides. “Oh, god. I, uh, I... he...”

Her breathing is erratic.

“Fuck, it’s ok. I’m here.” She’s in pain, and she’s scared. I resist pulling her into my arms, knowing from my training with victims that any slight movement or detail can trigger a response. I need to make sure she feels safe and knows every move I’m about to make. “Look at me, Alice.” She does. “I’m going to circle behind you to untie you. Ok?”

She nods.

Slipping the raptor knife out of its sheath, I cut through the rope’s fibers, unwrapping the line from her wrists. Rough abrasions have been scraped into her skin. My teeth clamp together. Regret from letting the asshole get away shakes through me.

I’ll hunt the bastard down.

Knowing the rope is evidence, I gather it into a pocket before helping Alice stand. She cradles herself against my chest, her hair brushing the skin of my neck. Roses briefly permeate the air.

Alice's hand glides up my chest between the opening of my unzipped coat. I pull her closer. Crucial heat radiates between us.

“We need to get inside and call the police, Alice.”

She nods again. A scrape on her forehead beads with blood. Bruising is already beginning to color around the wound. She lifts her hand, her fingers nearing the abrasion. I stop her.

“We'll take a look at your injuries inside.”

She leans back into me. We make it to the door of The Amazing Anslar, and I unlock the door without letting Alice slip from my arms.

She fits perfectly in them.

When she moves away, I let her go. She watches as I flip on the lights. When I turn back around, she's sitting on the couch in the entrance area. The glass windows at the front of the building are too conspicuous. Even though the asshole who attacked Alice would be wise to run as far as he could, men like him sometimes stick around.

I step over to her slowly, aware of my movements and not wanting to startle her. When I reach her, I stretch my hand out to her, palm up. “You can rest on the couch in the back. It's closest to the office. And I need to contact my company, the police, and Mark Anslar about the situation, but I don't want you out of my sight.”

Alice slides her small hand into mine. “Ok.”

The room is dark when we enter. I let my eyes adjust before moving forward and clicking on the shaded lamp resting on one of the workstations. I help Alice to the couch and wrap a blanket over her body. She sits, her green eyes wide and staring.

Alice grasps onto my hand as I move away. Her fingers tremble. The touch sends sparks through my body.

“Don’t leave.”

Never.

“I’m not going anywhere. I need to make some phone calls, and I want to get a first aid kit to take care of the abrasions on your head and wrists, but I won’t leave.” Seemingly satisfied with my response, Alice’s hand drops to her side. She pulls her knees up near her chest and tugs the blanket closer to her body, leaning against the arm of the couch and closing her eyes.

I step into the office, a mere ten feet away, looking back to check on Alice. Using the phone sitting on the desk, I call the police, specifically Detective Hammill, to inform her of the incident. I work closely with the department and trust Lillian to do her job.

“This is Detective Hammill.”

“I need you to come by The Amazing Anslar headquarters.” I don’t bother saying hello. Formalities are a waste of time in moments like these.

“I’m on duty, Walker. If you can wait a few hours, you know I’ll help you get off when I do.” Her voice is sultry. It’s

the voice she uses when she thinks I'm looking for sex.

I'm not. As far as I'm concerned, the few times we had sex were a mistake. That's clearer now more than ever.

"One of the assistants was attacked in the alley."

Lillian sighs into the phone.

"I'm on my way." Pulling out my cell, I call Elite. It's a twenty-four-hour business. Someone will answer the call. I've trained my men to stay alert, even in the late hours of the night.

"What's up, boss?" Lincoln Smith, a newbie at Elite, answers the call on the overnight line.

"Transfer me to Emmett." That is all I have to say before the phone starts ringing again and my brother picks up.

"Callin' a bit late," Emmett says. "What's the emergency, Jacks?"

"There's been an incident at Anslar's. I need you and Leo down here. Survey the area. Look for anyone suspicious. And we need to increase the tech here, so let's get a plan going for that."

"Shit. Is Anslar alright?"

"The jerkoff's fine. One of his assistants was attacked in the alley."

"And Anslar ok'd the extra tech? He doesn't seem like the kind of guy to spend extra money for anything, much less the benefit of his girls."

My teeth clack together at Emmett's assessment of Alice. *She's not Anslar's girl.*

But Emmett is right – Anslar will never dish out the costs of a new system just because one girl was attacked near his workplace. Pressure pushes against my palm. Looking down, I'm choking my cell phone.

“He didn't, yet. He doesn't even know about the attack. But I'll make sure he understands the severity of the issue.”

“I see,” Emmett says. I don't appreciate how he uses those two simple words, as though he has been let in on a secret he doesn't like. “I'll be there soon. With Leo, even if I have to drag his ass from bed.”

Increasingly agitated, I shoot a text off to Anslar, letting him know he needs to come by immediately, that there's been an incident. The asshole won't be sleeping. He always goes out to bars after Saturday's performance, trying to find some girl to bring back to his place. I've worded the text carefully to make Anslar think there could be a threat to him. The guy can't pass up a chance to feel like a target.

I go back into the other room. Thankfully, Alice is asleep. I gently shift the blanket to cover more of her body. Then I sit next to her, waiting for the entourage to arrive.

December 2, 12:34 am

“Shit!” My shout doesn’t echo through the soundproof basement of my small, two-bedroom ranch on the outskirts of the city. It’s nice when the noise can’t escape the room. That will come in handy.

It should be coming in handy right now.

It had taken me longer to get here. I weaved up and down streets and alleys, constantly checking behind me to make sure that lug of a guard wasn’t following. Luckily, the storm stayed at bay during that time. I’ve been pacing back and forth for the past ten minutes.

Where did things go wrong?

Earlier, I watched as Alice opened the seventh letter. She read it once, twice. Her breasts rose and fell with shallow breaths, and her lips mouthed the words *Yours Truly*. How I wanted to have her right then. With shaky hands, she set the letter on her makeup station.

At least she didn’t toss it in the trash like the sixth one.

That pissed me off. I give her a gift, and she fuckin' throws it out like garbage. My hands clench at the memory of finding it crumpled in the can.

Ungrateful bitch.

Alice left work late. Later than usual and later than most of the others who rushed out to beat the still non-existent storm. She'd been worried about the weather. I heard her whisper it to herself several times. And so I waited, hidden by shadows in the alley. I knew she'd take the shortcut. She always does when she gets out late. It cuts out a good twenty minutes from her usual route home.

“Everything was going to fucking plan!” I lift the chair that isn't bolted to the ground and throw it into the wall over and over until it smashes to pieces. She was supposed to be there with me right now. She was supposed to be tied up, locked in her seat – the seat I fucking made for her – and we'd be talking. A conversation between friends.

The scrape of the chain against the concrete floor sounds with my shifting foot. My dungeon is a masterpiece. Against the far wall stands a small bed. Ropes drape from each of the four posts, and a belt strap crosses the center. A chair, centered in the room, is firmly secured to the ground. A drain sits below it. And across the room from the bed, past the chair, a glass case stands, lighted by a small bulb shining over my tools.

I chose Alice for her beauty and her innocence. She reminds me of Amelia in so many ways. *My first.*

Flashbacks to seven years ago flick through my mind. Amelia smiling at my jokes. She paid attention to me, unlike her asshole friends. She was sweet. Understanding.

Perfect.

Alice is the same way. We could be getting to know each other more intimately at this very moment.

But instead, that fucking hulk of a human interrupted, and I'd been chased away. Annoyance and rage drown my thoughts.

I had no other choice. Not if I want another chance at Alice. And I will have a chance with her. Taking a deep, calming breath, I begin restructuring my initial plans. Another letter will have to be sent. *315 B Rockwell Ave.*

Her address whispers through my head, and a smile slithers across my mouth.

My pocket vibrates as I reach the final step of the stairs before pushing open the door. Taking out my cell and glancing at the screen, I sigh.

My thumbs speed over the buttons: Be there in thirty.

December 2, 12:36 am

-Alice-

Voices in the dimmed room pry my eyes open. My heart races as I try to remember where I am and why. Anxiety escalates. I sit up too quickly, causing my head to throb near my right brow.

I look around. Most of the room is shadowy. The couch, firmer and rougher than any couch needs to feel, is the most disgusting shade of brown I've ever seen. Like vomit, which is precisely what I want to do. But my eyes focus, and I know this couch.

I'm still at work.

I sit up a little more, leaning against the back of the sofa and taking in a deep breath. I ache all over. Head. Shoulders. Wrists. My whole damn body aches.

"Shut up, or I'll kill you here."

The words bounce around my head like a sledgehammer. Snapshots of the alley, a shadowed man, and a voice ricochet through my thoughts.

“She’s still resting. Wait until the doctor arrives before you start bombarding her with questions.” My pulse flutters at the deep tone and protective words. No one has a voice like that except Jack Walker. Movie-star handsome. More godlike than anything. I always cut my conversations with him short, afraid of stammering or becoming speechless and creating an awkward moment where I’m fantasizing about his lips on mine before I regain poise. And then how would I explain that? *Oh, sorry. I was just imagining what it would be like to have your tongue in my mouth.*

He could easily destroy me in the most salacious ways.

“What doctor makes house calls at this hour?” Incredulity sweeps over the female’s words.

“My doctor.”

“We need a statement from her, Walker.” The woman’s voice is stern yet exasperated.

“You’ll get your statement, Lil. And I’ve got my men out there right now looking for anything else you might need.”

I reach up, my fingers tracing over a small bandage covering a very tender temple. I gasp when I see my wrists, both wrapped in white dressings and medical tape.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” the female retorts, giving an eye roll to Jack. “I’m Detective Lillian Hammill. Let’s talk.”

Detective Hammill flashes a badge of sorts too quickly for me to comprehend what it is. She then offers an outstretched hand. I take it tentatively. Do I know this woman? The damn

throbbing in my head persists. I can feel every subtle movement with the pinch of my eyebrows.

“Jesus, Lil. Give her a moment.” Jack crosses the few feet separating me from the detective. The raven-haired man with electric blue eyes, tall and all male, crouches on the floor in front of me. I drop the detective’s hand. Jack does something to my insides that no man has ever done. My heartbeat races at the closeness. “Are you ok? How’s the head?”

His hand raises, fingers carefully rubbing the padding covering whatever bump I have. My eyes flick up to the gorgeous ones sculpted from ice staring back at me with concern. I stop breathing a moment and lean away.

It’s safer to keep my distance from a man like this.

“Um. It’s ok. It’s just a little sore. Tender.” I can’t look away. Silence infiltrates the space around us.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Walker. Let me do my job.” I glance toward the detective, who is soundlessly tapping the toe of one of her pumps into the shag rug. Jack huffs, dropping his head before turning a glare on the detective.

“Lil, just –”

“It’s ok, Jack. I can talk to, um –” I give a questioning look to the detective, taking in her appearance. A crisp white button-up blouse tucks neatly into loose-fitted gray slacks. The top accentuates her curves, and her manicured hands hold a pen and a small notepad. Long hair is in a mid-ponytail, descending straight down her spine. Not a single natural blond

hair is out of place. Her makeup is subtle, emphasizing her high cheekbones, smooth skin, and dark eyes. An image of professional perfection. She's intimidating. A surge of inadequacy bubbles in my stomach, and I pull the blanket closer to me.

“Detective Hammill,” she pipes.

“Yes. Sorry. I can talk to Detective Hammill. Just let me get my bearings.” *And maybe some ibuprofen.*

Without hesitation, Jack strides into the office.

Did I piss him off?

Noises resonate from his direction. The creak of a wearing hinge precedes a jostled rattling. Then the fridge door lets out a breath, releasing the tight suction of its barrier before that, too, is closed. In under a minute, Jack returns, handing me one of the ice-cold mini bottles of water. He then leans over, lifts my right hand with his and turns it palm-side up, transferring three pills into it.

I stare at him, dumbfounded. My mouth has fallen open ever so slightly, and my throat suddenly scratches with parched breath.

Did I ask for ibuprofen out loud? I could've sworn that was in my head.

“Miss Harper,” the detective bites out, clearly done with waiting. “I need your statement on what happened.”

I pop the pills in my mouth and take a swig of water. My throat moistens. Taking a breath, I turn toward Detective

Hammill, hoping this will be quick so I can get home and sleep. Then I can hole myself up in my apartment until Tuesday's practice.

The energy between Jack and me is a silent distraction, making it difficult to think.

Just focus on the detective's face, Alice.

With another breath, I start from the beginning, explaining to Detective Hammill how my trek home began, how I second-guessed my choice and turned around. The attack. The threat. And because I can't help but glance at the magnificent creature less than an arms-length away, I note to myself that Jack's hands clamp in tight fists even when his face remains impassive. Every so often he cracks a knuckle or two.

Somewhere in the middle of my recount, Jack's doctor friend shows up. My head feels better now, thanks to the medicine Jack gave me, though a slight twinge in the temple still shocks me periodically.

The medical professional, who introduces himself as Doctor Alexei Petrov, is handsome and young, maybe thirty-two. No older than thirty-five. He dons a gray Henley and dark jeans and smells like spice. I'm used to doctors in slacks and white jackets with nametags and the odor of disinfectant and sickness emanating from them. That's what I remember from the last time I went to see a doctor a few years ago when Granddad had me on his insurance.

How will I afford the care the doctor is giving me now?

Mark Anslar doesn't offer health insurance options for his part-time employees, which basically means he doesn't offer health insurance at all. Slight panic grips my lungs as I try to calculate the math. My budget won't allow for even a bottle of aspirin.

"Before you... how much will this cost?" I bite my lip, and a groove pulls between my brows. My hands fall to my lap, one thumb picking the skin of the forefinger on the opposite hand.

Having taken Jack's spot on the couch next to me, the doctor rests a reassuring hand over mine. His head turns up. I follow his line of sight. Jack offers a quick nod before the doctor's focus returns to me.

"Don't worry about it today, Alice." The doctor's *don't* comes out sounding more like *don'd*. I'm fairly certain I detect the slight vibration of a vee at the beginning of worry. He pats my hand and releases it.

Doctor Petrov encourages me to keep speaking. Throughout my retelling of the events from earlier, the doctor checks my pulse and undresses the bandages on my wrists. I hadn't seen the damage. When the final layer of gauze is removed, I take a sharp intake of breath. Rounding each wrist are three or four red lines, each with thin layers of skin scraped away. One of the lines burned into my skin still beads blood.

I might have been able to get by with the scrape on my head, but there's no way I can hide the injuries to my wrist when in costume.

“How long will it take to heal?” I ask. *Please say only a couple of days.* Wishful thinking never got me anywhere, though, so I don’t know why I ask. I know it will take longer than that.

“You did a good job cleaning this, Jack,” the doctor addresses before answering my question. “The redness will be down by Monday, and the most superficial areas of the wound should clear up in four or five days with proper care. This part –” Doctor Petrov points to the rawest area of skin “– might take a week or two to heal. It’s quite a bit deeper than the other sections.”

My shoulders slump, and my gaze meets the ground. That’s far too long to wait. Once Mark sees these injuries, he won’t want me in front of an audience. *Perfection is of utmost importance.* His words, repeated at each weekly costume meeting, make my stomach sink. I can only hope he won’t fire me since it’s a medical issue. Maybe I should ask the doctor for a note.

“Let’s check that head of yours.” Doctor Petrov shines a tiny, bright light in my eyes. After a thorough exam, he doesn’t suspect a concussion. “Rest. Take more ibuprofen every four to six hours as needed. No more than six in a twenty-four-hour period. Call me if the headache doesn’t go away or something worsens.”

Doctor Petrov gives me a small white card.

“Thank you,” I say. The doctor turns to Jack. Their whispers don’t reach my ears as they walk away from the detective and

me.

“Can you think of anyone that would want to hurt you?” Detective Hammill questions.

“No.” I can’t. I try to be on everyone’s good side, or at least in the background where I can’t be noticed.

“Can you think of anything else that might be important for me to know?” I consider the detective’s inquiry. This is the first time I’ve been attacked. I shake my head.

“No one at all? An angry friend? Someone you upset in the past month? An ex-boyfriend?” That was laughable. Aside from a series of short flings that lasted no more than a month, a week, or even a single date, I haven’t had a boyfriend since high school. It’s been too difficult to trust others since my mother’s betrayal. The only one I let in was Sam, but Sam wouldn’t attack me. Besides, the attacker was a man.

I shake my head a second time. “I’m not exactly close to many people. I have a roommate, but she wouldn’t do this. Besides, she’s in Mexico.”

Detective Hammill sighs, an edge of agitation coming through. What else can I say? I can’t think of anyone who wants to hurt me. Hell, the only thing that’s haunting me has been those letters.

But those are from some weird, socially awkward fan from the audience. Right?

The letters have been creepy but not threatening. A little macabre at times, but nothing hostile. My expression shifts as

I consider the possibility.

Maybe I should show them.

I look toward my vanity where they're kept in the bottom drawer. In the next moment, Jack's authoritative voice punctures my thoughts. "What is it, Alice?"

Hearing my name in that voice sends pleasant shivers over every inch of my skin.

Instead of saying anything at first, still hoping there isn't a connection with the note sender, I lift from my spot. My legs, weak with exhaustion, tremor when I stand. In an instant, a firm grip on my elbow anchors me.

"Careful." Jack's hand radiates heat against my skin, tantalizing the rest of my body. No doubt my cheeks are flushed. "Can you stand?"

Those brilliant eyes bore into me, and I can only nod in affirmation. Jack's hold releases from my elbow. I take a second or two to recompose myself and make sure I'm steady. Crossing the room, I sit at my makeup station, hesitating to open the bottom drawer to reveal the letters. I turn toward the detective and Jack as my hand reaches for the knob.

Before anyone can say anything else, banging erupts from the front of the building.

Rapid, loud.

And unforgiving.

December 2, 1:13 am

-Jack-

Lillian leads the way to the door, though I already know what we'll find. The three faces staring back at us through the icy glass further confirm our safety. Outside, Anslar, his personal assistant Leroy, and some bleached-blond woman in red heels and even redder lipstick stand shivering in the frigid air.

“Let us in, Walker. Now.” Anslar grasps for any kind of authority he can get in an attempt to control his employees, including those hired to protect him. His teeth are chattering, but he does his best to imitate a tough, furrowed expression. He looks like an angry toddler. Only when Anslar notices that my gun is drawn does he change his tune. Sort of. “Please.”

I holster my weapon. Lillian does not. Her gun is trained on the floor, but her eyes are focused on the three intruders outside. I unlock the door, and the three hustle into the warmth of the building.

“Am I in danger? I knew this would happen. You get famous and suddenly someone's after you.” Anslar rambles

while shedding the layers that kept him warm moments ago, throwing his coat and scarf on the lobby couch. When he finally runs out of questions, he turns toward the blonde woman who's staring hungrily in my direction. Anslar wraps an arm around her shoulder, drawing her attention. "I knew when I got into this line of work that it's not uncommon to get threats against you. All part of being in the public eye. Yes, it can be dangerous, but I won't hide. I won't stop doing what I do."

The blonde-haired woman looks impressed, or at least she can feign interest.

"You're so brave, Mark." Her polished hand crawls up Mark's undefined chest, and she nuzzles her nose into his neck.

Lil glances at me, brow quirked up in disbelief, and holsters her gun.

"Who's this broad?" Anslar nods his head toward Lillian. "She's almost as good-looking as that brunette assistant of mine."

"This broad," Lillian emphasizes to indicate her annoyance, "is Detective Lillian Hammill to you."

Anslar's eyes grow wide before he clears his throat and composes himself.

"Shit. Sorry about that. I'm Mark Anslar. You might've heard of me. The Amazing Anslar? I have quite a reputable magic show in the area. I own this business." He offers a hand

that she doesn't take. Instead, Lillian stares at the magician. Anslar drops his hand, wiping it on his pants on the way down. "Uh... what is the PD doing here?"

"Elite often works in conjunction with the department to protect those that need help and investigate ongoing cases," Lillian states.

"Oh, I thought you were just a security company." Anslar turns toward me.

"No." I resist the urge to punch the asshole.

The magician moves closer to the blonde who came in with him. When Lillian's eyes graze to the right, the woman speaks up. "I'm Misty. Misty Mitchell. My friends call me Ems."

Lillian takes out her notepad and writes Misty's name on a blank page.

"How do you know Mr. Anslar?"

"Oh, we met at the club a few weekends ago. Deviance. That's the club. I work tables there on weekends. Marky's a great tipper and frequent customer. He finally got up the nerve to ask me –" Misty abruptly closes her mouth. "I'm sorry. I tend to talk too much."

"It's ok, Miss Mitchell." Lillian jots a few more notes on the paper.

"Do you know who's after Mr. Anslar?" Leroy asks, stepping closer to his boss and placing a hand on his shoulder. Anslar shifts away from Leroy's touch, throwing an arm

around Misty. Leroy's gaze shifts from Anslar to behind Lillian and me before meeting our humorless stares.

I watch him. Closely.

Despite looking like he should be lifting weights at a gym and preparing for a bodybuilder contest, his movements and mannerisms are on point for being someone's gopher. The man fidgets in his spot, pulling on his jacket sleeves like a giant child. Every time he's near Anslar, he becomes a very large squeaky little mouse. Nervous. On edge.

His gaze shifts again.

You know she's back there, don't you?

Before Lillian can explain the situation, I speak up. "Not exactly, but his business may be in jeopardy. Shortly after leaving work, one of his stage assistants was attacked in the alley. Detective Hammill and I are investigating."

Lillian eyes me but doesn't react to my explanation.

"My business is in trouble? Does that mean I might get attacked, too?" Panic rises in Anslar's voice, and Misty hugs him.

"Don't you even want to know which assistant was attacked, Mr. Anslar? Or even if she's ok?" Lillian questions.

"Oh, right." Anslar clears his throat. "Which of my girls was involved?"

My jaw tightens at that assumption. None of Anslar's assistants could be considered 'his girls.' Especially not Alice.

On top of that, Anslar's indifference toward 'his girl' further pisses me off.

Lillian flips through her notebook, making a show of finding the name as though she hasn't already memorized it. I never understand why she does that, but she does it often.

"Alice Harper," she finally states.

"Oh my, God. Is she alright? She wasn't hurt, was she?" Leroy's sincere concern contrasts with Anslar's absence of worry.

"The brunette? She came in late the other day, right? Didn't she leave tonight in her costume?" Anslar was getting at something. My jaw jerks. The crack of my neck does little to relieve the tension building inside.

"What's your point, Anslar?" A low, angry rumble vibrates in my chest.

"Nothing, really. She was just a bit scantily dressed. It could've been anyone attacking her, not someone that wants to hurt my business. You know?" To the credit of all others in the room, they seem stunned by Anslar's assessment of the situation. Even Misty takes in a shocked breath and steps away from him. Leroy stares open-mouthed and wide-eyed at his boss's lack of sympathy toward an employee.

I flex my hands twice and crack my neck again. It's a technique I learned in high school to control my anger and prevent fights while Emmett and I were moved from foster home to foster home. As much as I want to, I won't punch the

asshole in the face and end up with a lawsuit against him or Elite.

At least not yet.

“Mr. Anslar,” Lillian states curtly, “what a woman wears is *never* the *cause* of an attack, no matter what the patriarchy tries to imply. Besides, she was wearing a knee-length winter coat over her costume. Other than part of her legs, her body was covered. I highly doubt what you’re suggesting is the cause of the attack.”

“Oh. Of- of course not. That’s not what I meant,” Anslar stammers, choking on his initial sentiment. “All I meant was this might not be related to The Amazing Anslar business or show.”

“That might be the case, but there’s evidence to point otherwise. We are keeping all possibilities open at this point.”

“What evidence?” Leroy’s voice resembles a mouse’s squeak. The jumpy assistant uses his right forefinger to pick around the nails on his left hand. Closer inspection shows peeling layers of raw skin at the nail bed. It’s a surprise they haven’t started bleeding.

“Evidence I won’t be revealing at this point in the investigation, Mr. —” Lillian pauses.

“Dalton. Leroy Dalton.”

“Mr. Dalton. There are some things I need to keep quiet for now. I’m sure you understand,” she finishes. I appreciate Lillian’s discretion.

Leroy nods and peers again toward the back room. “Is Alice here currently? Is she ok?”

“She’s here,” I confirm. When Leroy makes a move toward the backroom, the protector in me places a firm hand on his chest. Despite being a muscular man, Leroy teeters back. “She’s not up for visitors at the moment.”

“But we’re friends. We’ve known each other since she started working here. She must want someone there to comfort her, support her.”

“Alice doesn’t need any more visitors. The doctor is with her currently. Any other commotion isn’t needed.”

“Doctor? Is she trying to get workman’s comp or something?” Anslar asks. *Is this guy so self-absorbed that he’s oblivious to social decorum?* “She’s not suing, is she?”

This time I count down from ten in my head again.

“The cost of the doctor is taken care of, Anslar,” I say. The magician breathes a sigh of relief before I continue. “That said. You may want to consider increasing the security within your building. We don’t want the attacks to escalate and be detrimental to your company. I’m having Emmett put together some options to show you. If you could meet him here around noon, he can go over the information and costs.”

I can’t decide if it’s the thought of an actual attack on Anslar’s company or the idea that security costs could increase that drains the magician of the rosiness naturally painted on his cheeks.

“Oh, sure. Yeah. I can meet him at noon. Anything to keep me... and my employees... safe, right?” Anslar releases a small, anxious laugh.

I don't buy it for a second, asshole.

“Right. We want *everyone* here to be safe,” I state.

Lillian sighs. She uses this moment to divert the attention of the three newcomers, positioning herself between them and the door. It's a nonverbal implication that they won't be leaving until she's questioned each of them. Anslar, Leroy, and Misty listen to Lillian's questions, answering each one to the best of their abilities.

With the others distracted, only I notice when Alice and Alexei emerge from the back room. Alice's arm entwines in the doctor's at his elbow. I know he's just being helpful, but a jolt of jealousy shoots through my chest like lightning. I walk over, relieving the doctor of his duties for the evening. The moment Alice's arm links with mine, I can feel the tension in her muscles dissipate. A current of unadulterated desire surges between us. Summoning all my willpower to not throw Alice over my shoulder and take her home, I clear my throat to release the building tension.

“Just bill me, Alexei,” I say. “And I'm sure Lil wants an official statement on Alice's injuries.”

Alexei nods. “I'll write up a report and get them to her.”

He maneuvers around the group that Lil is interrogating and exits. Alice's gaze jerks up to me, her eyes wide and stunned.

She presses a hand to her head.

“Are you ok?” I lean down to whisper in Alice’s ear. The scent of roses fills the air.

“I guess I shouldn’t be so quick with my head movements. Doctor Petrov warned me I might feel the effects of the bump for a day or two.” She pauses. “Did you just tell him you’re paying for my medical treatment from tonight?”

Before I can confirm, Anslar, Leroy, and Misty all turn with a collective gasp.

December 2, 1:26 am

-Alice-

“Alice!” Leroy nearly breaks out into a run.

A vision of the masked man in black flashes behind my eyes. I startle, instinctively hiding behind Jack to avoid being hurt again. My hands shake, and my breaths come shallow as I grip the back of Jack’s shirt. A protective hand presses firmly against my back. My arms rest against Jack’s constricting muscles, and my breathing slows. I can’t help but notice the heat emanating from the man. His back flexes as he tightens his hold on me.

“Oh my, Alice. Are you ok?” Leroy’s voice brings me back to the moment, and I peer around my protector. Leroy has stopped dead in his tracks. Embarrassment floods my soul.

I’ve known him for years. I need to relax.

Releasing a breath before unveiling myself again, I smooth the corset of my costume and stand as straight as possible. Appearing calm and collected even if I’m not is essential, especially in front of Mark. Anything to make this situation

better. There's no way to know how Mark will respond to my injuries.

“You startled me, that's all. I'll be ok, Leroy. Thank you for asking.” My voice is sweet and gentle. Leroy cowers in Jack's presence. Silence engulfs the room as Leroy and Mark take in my appearance. Feeling like a goldfish being watched by hungry cats, I shove my shoulders back.

Stand tall. Be confident.

“Alice. I'm sorry this happened tonight.” Mark says the right words, but their lack of sincerity is apparent. His eyes lower to the gauze on my wrists before scanning back up to scrapes and bruising on my temple and cheek. Doctor Petrov suggested keeping the facial injuries to the air since they were more superficial than those on my wrists. Now I wish they were covered so I could downplay their severity.

How do I stop what's about to come?

Mark steps closer. With only a foot between us, Mark grasps my hands in his and tugs me toward him. Aching sprouts up my wrists, and all the muscles in my body tighten as I try hard not to pull my arms away or show pain.

“Let go of her, Anslar.” Jack's command is laced with threat. Mark immediately drops my hands, stepping back six inches to put more space between him and me and Jack.

“Those injuries are more severe than I expected. It might be difficult to cover them. Will you be in shape to work this

week?” The critical tone in Mark’s question doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Doctor Petrov said I can work as long as I’m up to it. I can hide the bruising and scratches on my face with makeup and get creative with costuming to hide my wrists.” *I’m rambling, but if I can just get all the words out before anyone interrupts...* “I’ll be ready for Tuesday’s practice, I promise. I won’t miss a single day.”

It’s the truth. Despite having little luck in the job department and hating this one, I’m a dedicated worker. Well, I’m a dedicated paycheck earner. I refuse to be a burden on anyone in my life.

Jack turns toward me, brows furrowed and mouth dipped in a slight frown. “Alice, I don’t think –”

“Wonderful!” Mark bursts in, practically shouting, “That’s great news for the show. I knew you wouldn’t disappoint The Amazing Anslar! You know how important it is for me that the show goes on unaffected by minor complications. I’d hate to see you need an extended absence. We’d have to find a replacement if that were the case. After all, we wouldn’t want to disappoint the audience or your colleagues. That wouldn’t be good for anyone.”

Anslar emphasizes the final statement with a pointed look. I suppress the sigh and eye roll, both dying to escape. “Of course, Mr. Anslar. I’ll be at work on Tuesday.”

Jack’s jaw ticks twice as he takes a step forward. I place my hand on his arm and give a slight shake of my head. This isn’t

his fight.

He takes a deep breath and steps back, positioning himself next to me. My hand stays resting on his arm. Neither of us moves away.

Mark's attention flicks down toward my hand resting on Jack's arm. His lips purse, and his eyes become thin lines for a split moment. When he recovers, a more neutral expression hides his annoyance.

“Well, Detective Hammill. If there is nothing else you need from me at this time, I'd like to continue my date with Misty here.” Before the detective can answer, Mark is gathering his coat and outerwear off the couch and insisting Misty put her jacket back on.

“I'll be keeping in touch, Mr. Anslar,” Detective Hammill responds.

Within seconds, a rush of icy air filters into the entryway of The Amazing Anslar as Mark hurries Misty outside into the wintery night. Snow has started to fall, and it seems as though the storm is no longer delayed. Snowflakes whip in all directions under the yellow glow stretching down from the street lamps. No doubt I'll have to call a cab now.

“I'm glad to hear that you're ok, Alice,” Leroy interjects through the silence. He steps closer, eyes hopeful. “Um, is there anything I can do for you? Call your roommate to come get you?”

“Oh, Sam is out of town until Thursday. I’ll call for a cab or something.” I should text her, at least. Let Sam know what happened tonight and that I’m ok. Sam will freak out and insist on coming home ASAP, but there’s no sense in her cutting her trip short. No, I’ll wait to let her know about the attack. That way, I won’t ruin Sam’s family vacation.

I wouldn’t be in this situation if I had gone with her.

The memory of the cloaked monster flashes through my mind. I push it aside, along with all images of being attacked. In place of them, the thought of calling for a ride stewes uneasily in my head and stomach. I’ll have to check my bank account before calling for a cab.

What if your bank account is too low to afford a ride?

I’d have to walk home. I’m not sure I can brave that again tonight.

“Nonsense! I can drive you to your apartment. It won’t be any trouble. Then you won’t have to pay for a cab. Rely on your friends, Alice. We’re here to help!” Leroy becomes a happy, excited puppy wanting to do right by its owner. The offer is kind, and I’m tempted to take him up on it.

“That won’t be necessary. Alice has already secured a ride home.” The deep tones of Jack’s voice soothe any anxiety welling up inside my chest. Though we haven’t talked about a ride, I know he’s offering one now. Without question and with no option to decline. Not that I would decline. The thought of riding in this man’s car – the two of us, alone – sets my insides on fire.

I turn toward Leroy. Disappointment scatters across his face. A puppy kicked away by the one it adores. Guilt bubbles in my belly for causing any kind of hurt. I might have taken him up on his offer in a different situation, but I need to feel safe right now. And Jack makes that possible.

“Thank you for the offer, Leroy. I appreciate it.” I place a comforting right hand on his shoulder, which seems to perk him up. “I forgot, but Jack did offer me a ride earlier, and I already accepted. I don’t want to be rude. I hope you understand.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Another time.” Leroy’s right arm crosses over his chest, and his hand rests on mine. All the while, he stares intently into my eyes. The rust color of his irises shimmers in the overhead fluorescents. He gives my hand a quick squeeze before letting go. Pivoting in his spot, Leroy then moves toward the door, glancing back once and offering a smile before opening it. “See you on Tuesday, Alice.”

The storm, now raging outside, swallows Leroy whole, and he disappears into a blanket of white.

“Well, Miss Harper. It’s been quite a night, hasn’t it?” Detective Hammill stands in front of me, suited up for the weather. At which point during the past fifteen minutes did the detective manage to sneak in back, grab her coat, scarf and gloves, and then put it all on?

Despite not realizing when others come and go, I remain acutely aware of the man next to me. Some might say his size

alone would make him difficult to miss, but I suspect it's more than that. When he goes into the back room, a chill fills the void he leaves behind. When did I become so reliant on this man's presence? Hours ago, I crushed hard from a distance. Now, my innermost parts ache for Jack, and that scares me. This man could eat me alive if he wanted to, and I'm pretty sure he wants to. My pulse races in anticipation.

"Are you sure there's nothing else you can think of?" Detective Hammill asks.

The letters.

I almost say it. I probably should. Even if I don't think they're connected, shouldn't the detective know? But because I want this night to be over and because I want to pretend those letters don't exist, I shake my head.

"Nothing at the moment."

"If you think of anything else that could help, remember something from the attack, contact me immediately."

I'm handed a second white card. This one has more information than the doctor's, but the purpose is the same: contact them if something happens. With that, the detective calls goodbye to Jack and leaves.

Within seconds, Jack returns with my coat and scarf. He helps me put it on without a word, places a careful hand on the small of my back, and ushers me outside into the storm. The snow is dazzling, furling in waves through the sky. The storm

seems less intense now that I'm in it. Its beauty reminds me of winters in Montana.

I miss him so much.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" I ask, tilting my head back carefully so as not to trigger vertigo, and watch the swirls of white above me.

"Absolutely."

When I right my head, Jack's watching me, a smile dancing across his lips. My cheeks warm. Before I can let embarrassment engulf me, Jack takes my hand in his. We walk toward his black SUV, parked a short way down the street. Only then do I realize we'll need to pass by the alley. My grip on Jack's hand tightens. He pulls me closer.

"I won't let anyone hurt you." His voice is carried away with the breeze, but I don't doubt him.

"I know."

December 2, 2:14 am

-Alice-

Jack closes the door once I'm in the car. Comfort blankets me as I breathe in. Jack's car smells of him, like midnight in the Montana mountains. In the most simplistic ways, it brings back all the pleasant childhood memories and makes me feel completely safe.

Jack starts the engine, and we're on our way.

Tinted windows shade the outdoor wonderland just enough, making it feel like we're in our own world for a time. I smile to myself.

"What's on your mind?" Jack questions. His piercing eyes are directed at the road as he maneuvers through the slippery streets.

"Nothing." Except there's so much more than that on my mind. I just don't know how to put it in words. Jack gives me a curious glance, his eyes dancing in secret amusement. A smirk crosses his lips. I could admire this man all day.

But gawking is rude. And embarrassing.

I avert my gaze to the front window with frost grasping around its edges. I've forgotten how much I love the beauty of winter. Having been so lost in my everyday life dealing with work and basic survival, I haven't appreciated those simple things. The things I was taught never to take for granted.

"When I was younger, I would spend whole days in the snow. Traipsing up hills with my red plastic sled dragging behind me only to slide back down in a hurry to do it all again. Ice skating on the frozen pond at the edge of my grandfather's property. Building snow forts. And when dusk finally started to fall, and it became too dark to play, my grandfather would be waiting in the kitchen with a hot cup of cocoa piled high with whipped cream and sprinkled with cinnamon." Tears bristle in my eyes at the memories. I blink them away. "It was enchanting. Like the world only existed in each individual moment."

"Do you miss Montana?" He glances over for a quick second.

Did I mention Montana?

I've never told anyone at work where I'm from. Hell, it had been months after moving when I finally opened up about home to Sam.

"How did you know I lived in Montana?"

"You mentioned it last week. It had been snowing when you came into work, and you stood in the entry, brushing snow off your coat."

I remember that moment now. God, I must have had the goofiest grin on my face when I strolled into work, stomping my boots on the carpet. Jack was the only one in the entryway, and I rambled on and on about how this was the first snowfall in all the years living in Belleview that reminded me of growing up in Montana.

“I miss childhood, but it would be silly to miss the place.” Everything’s different there now. The one thing that would have pulled me back is gone. And my mother hasn’t extended a single invitation in any of our sporadic phone conversations. Not even for Christmas, which is only a few weeks away. Jack doesn’t question my vague response, and we soon fall into a comfortable silence.

He parks outside of my home, a two-story brick walk-up. Sam and I live in a relatively safe neighborhood. Lining either side of my street and pressed up close against each other, the two- and three-story buildings lay eerily quiet in the night. Some of the apartments on Rockwell Ave liven up during the day, though there are a few neighbors I suspect are involved in illegal activities that I avoid. Then again, I rarely interact with any of them.

Living on the second story has its pros and cons. Walking up two flights of stairs frequently seems impossible after a long day, but at least there are never echoing footsteps coming from above. Not that there would be, anyway. The first floor, apartment A, has been empty for a couple of weeks so the landlord can complete renovations and updates.

By the time we reach the steps, I can't stop shaking.

You're just cold. That's all.

The lie helps. I unlock and push open the door into the building. With my arm stretched back, I lead Jack up the narrow staircase to my apartment door on the second landing. Before I can put the key in to unlock it, Jack's hand cradles mine. He takes the keys from my hands and positions me behind him. His gun is drawn and pointed toward the ground.

"Isn't that overkill?" I whisper. Everything's been happening at work. Even if I'm afraid, I can't imagine anyone would be waiting for me inside my apartment.

"Humor me, dove."

Dove?

We step into the kitchen, and I flick on the light.

"Stay here. Lock the door." Jack maneuvers his way through the shrouded darkness of the rest of my apartment. I take off my coat and sling it over the kitchen chair. The urge to call out and tell him where the light switches and lamps are tickles the tip of my tongue, but I stay quiet. After a few tense minutes, Jack returns to the kitchen, holstering his gun.

"You said your roommate is out of town?"

"Yeah. Sam's gone for a few more days. Unless her family decides to extend the holiday. They do that sometimes."

"And you'll be alone here the whole time?"

I hadn't thought of that. With Sam gone and the downstairs vacant, I won't have anyone around when I come home at night. The air chills around me, and I fold my arms over my chest, my hands rubbing my biceps.

Without a word, Jack moves closer. Large hands replace mine. The friction of his fingers against me builds through the rest of my body. My knees wobble fractionally. Quick breaths barely fill my lungs.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea? I haven't gone shopping, but I could probably scrounge up something to eat. Pancakes? I know it's not time for breakfast." I look at the clock on the wall. *Is it really only 2:19? I could've sworn we'd been at work longer.* "Or, I mean, we can eat whatever. I'm sure you're hungry. I'm hungry and..." *Stop rambling, Alice.*

Jack's lips turn up a tiny fraction. "The apartment is clear. All of the windows are locked. Everything is secure, Alice."

I nod. *Secure. That's good, right?* I move across the small kitchen to the cupboard. If I'm being honest with myself, I could still go for some whiskey. Whiskey and a bath sounded good before everything went down, and they sound even better now. Whether that's because I'm still nervous or because I'm alone with Jack, I don't know. My pulse is twitchy. My legs ache to pace, tap, move in any way they can. Even my fingers want to dance erratically on something. And now, with this gorgeous man in my apartment, the thought of getting naked ignites a longing ache in my core.

I drag two glasses from the cupboard and set them down. I feel the presence behind me as I reach across the counter for the auburn liquid. I turn. There's barely an inch between us as Jack takes the bottle and sets it down. The back of his hand tickles my cheek, and he leans toward me. My eyes dart to his. Now empty, my hands don't know what to do, and I shove them behind me, imprisoning them between me and the counter. My chest rises and falls too quickly for comfort.

"No whiskey tonight." His face is so close to mine, and I feel safe with his protective warmth rolling off him in waves. "I need you to breathe, Alice." His breath slides over my skin. One hand cups my cheek. His other slides down my arm, leaving tingles in its wake.

Breathe? How can I breathe now when I'm about to melt away?

Air shudders into my lungs as I try to obey. His arms wrap around me, and I lean into him.

"I'm scared, Jack," I admit, surprising myself.

I stare up at him, his glacial gaze watching me back. My eyes wander from his down to his lips, then back up. Jack's expression is intense and wanting, asking for confirmation that we are on the same page.

"I'm going to keep you safe, Alice. No matter what, I'm going to protect you." Jack's lips brush against mine. All the willpower in the world couldn't prevent my reaction. I grasp Jack's coat with one hand. The other wraps behind his neck, pulling him in closer. My mouth crashes into his. Jack's hands

move from my face and roam down my body. His touch eases the aches from the attack, sending tingles across every inch of skin. His tongue pushes my lips apart, and I willingly obey. Heat radiates through the deepest parts of me. It's no longer a matter of want. I need this man.

“I've been dying for you to do that for weeks,” I confess.

“Me too, dove. Me, too.”

December 2, 9:34 am

-Jack-

I wake up sitting in the corner of the couch. Alice is curled into me, tucked under my arm. A delicate hand rests on my thigh. Her finger twitches, and all of my nerve endings burst to life.

The kiss was unprofessional. And I want to do it again.

Considering the circumstances, I hadn't expected Alice to be so enthusiastic in her response. She had pulled me closer. It's like she couldn't get enough. And neither could I.

I look down at Alice. The bruising near her temple has bloomed darker and raised with swelling. Her hair is wild, a contrast to the calm she appears right now.

"Alice," I whisper, kissing the top of her head. "It's time to get up."

In reality, I have no idea if there is a time to get up today. It's Sunday. A gorgeous brunette is in my arms. Emmett's in charge at Elite. I'm certifiably insane for even suggesting we have to get up. Unfortunately, Alice stirs, lifting herself off

me. Her hand trails off my thigh, leaving a draft in its wake. With tousled hair and cheeks tinged pink, Alice is a sight to behold.

“What time is it?” Her voice is the slightest bit raspy from sleep. I pull out my cell phone.

“9:37.”

Alice stands, smoothing her sweatshirt with her palms. After our kiss last night, she changed her clothes, and we sat on the couch, talking about anything that wasn't the attack. We must've fallen asleep rather quickly in each other's arms. It's been a while since I've slept straight through the night. I can't even recall my dreams.

Fidgeting in place, Alice opens her mouth slightly before closing it again. Her head swivels to face various parts of the room. Her hands fiddle together.

“I'll uh... I'll get us some coffee,” she says. Before she can walk away, I reach for her hand and pull her into my lap. She falls with an oomph. I leave her little time to comment before my lips find hers. It's counterintuitive to the whole reason for waking her up, but she's in my arms again, and I don't care. I weave my hand through her untamed mane. Hair tangles with my fingers, and Alice mewls before I pull away.

“Good morning.” Her eyes are somehow greener in the morning. I move one hand to her cheek and give her a tender peck.

Alice clears her throat, a smile pasted on her lips. “Good morning to you, too. Now can I get us coffee?”

I follow Alice into the kitchen, sitting at the small round table. She moves fluidly through the space, filling the kettle, grabbing the French press, and scooping the coffee. The bareness of the shelves each time Alice opens a cupboard puts an ache in my chest.

“Do you have any plans for the day?” I ask.

“Not really. I was going to go grocery shopping, but I’ll just wait until Sam gets back to do that.”

I make a mental note to take her out to the store later. “Tell me about your roommate.”

“Sam? She’s wonderful. She was one of the first people I met when I moved to Belleview. We hit it off, she had an open room in her apartment and was looking for a female roommate, and the rest is history, I guess.”

“So, this is her place?”

“Yes, technically, but she’d never say that.” Alice removes the screaming kettle from the flame and pours the boiling liquid over the coffee grounds. “She’d say it’s ours, but it was hers first. An act of rebellion against the affluent lifestyle she grew up with... at least that’s how she would describe it.”

“Where does she work?”

“She doesn’t. As I said, Sam comes from money. Her dad is pretty high up in the political game.” *I wonder if I know him.* “He’s happy to pay her rent and bills each month as long as

she stays out of trouble. She's had a pretty cushy life, but you wouldn't know it with how down-to-earth she is." Alice pushes the French press down, trapping coffee granules to the bottom. She pours the steaming beverage into two mugs.

"Anything in it?" Alice holds up a gray mug. I shake my head. She sets the mug in front of me before moving to the fridge. The suction releases a sigh when Alice opens the door. The fridge is as empty as the cupboards. Alice pulls out the creamer slowly enough for me to see the label.

"Chocolate, huh?" I smirk at her choice.

"It's one of the few food things I'm willing to splurge on. Chocolate in coffee is the perfect marriage. Especially in the mornings." She winks. Alice pours a generous amount of creamer into her coffee, turning the dark substance into a tawny caramel. Grabbing her mug, Alice takes a seat across from me at the small table.

"What about you?" My forearms rest on the table, the hot mug cupped in my hands as I lean in toward Alice.

"What about me?" Her fingers entwine around the mug.

"You said Sam's life has been cushy. What has your life been like?" Mug halfway to her mouth, Alice pauses and her features flinch before smoothing over.

"I won't complain." She blows over the liquid before taking a sip.

"But you can?"

“Can’t everyone?” She stares right at me. One eyebrow lifts, daring me to argue.

“I don’t care about everyone right now. I want to know about you.” *I really do. Everything.* “Birthday. Favorite color. Your likes and your dislikes.”

“May 3. Arctic blue. Bookstores on a rainy afternoon. Job hunting.”

I commit the date to memory. “Bookstores on a rainy afternoon? That’s quite specific.”

The corners of Alice’s mouth tug up, and her eyes sparkle.

“Nostalgia is a powerful thing,” she begins. “When I was growing up, my grandfather loved stories. He had a library stocked full of books but could never stop buying more. For years, he’d cart me around to used bookstores in the area. There’s something addicting about the smell of old books. Mix that with the fresh scent of rain, and you’ve got magic.”

I hope early May brings downpours just so I can give her that again.

“Tell me more about your family. You’ve only spoken of your grandfather, but you must have parents. Maybe a sibling? Tell me about them,” I encourage. Alice takes another sip of her coffee. One of her shoulders lifts, and her head dips in a half-shrug. Indifference draws her expression.

“I’m an only child. One of those oops-didn’t-mean-to pregnancies. I never knew my father. He bolted a month before I was born.”

“Are you going to call and tell her about what happened?”

Alice shrugs. “Maybe. My mother resents me for my father leaving. I am a constant reminder that he didn’t love her.” Alice takes a breath. “But I had a caring grandfather who gave me the best childhood a girl could ask for.”

“How’d you end up in Belleview?”

“When my grandfather died, there was no reason to stay in Montana.”

“How long ago did he die?”

“Three years, during my first trimester at Montana State University.” Alice swallows hard, her eyes glistening. “My mother didn’t tell me until a week after his funeral. She claimed she didn’t want to distract me from school, but I think she wanted to clear the house of anything she could sell. When I did go back, there was nothing left of his. She’d moved into his house with her boyfriend, Jeffrey. Everything was gone.” I shake my head in silence. “I took it as a sign, dropped out of college, and moved away.” Alice clears her throat, and her eyelids flutter rapidly. She takes another sip from her mug and then plasters a smile on her face. “And that’s how I ended up in Belleview.”

My heart drops in my chest for Alice. How could a parent be so cruel? So uncaring by not allowing their daughter to find closure in the death of a loved one?

“Grandad always said she loves me in her own way,” I say. “Maybe he was right.”

I offer a sad smile.

“Anyway, how about you?” I ask.

“Me?” The fact that she wants to know about me fills me both with excitement and fear. When was the last time I opened up to anyone other than Emmett? And even that, over the years, has occurred less.

“Yes, you. When’s your birthday? Favorite color? Your likes and dislikes?” She mimics my questioning with a teasing smile. “Tell me about your family.”

“It’s just Emmett and me. It’s been that way for a while. Unless you count those who work for Elite.” It’s my turn to take a pausing sip. How much do I want to tell Alice? Her green eyes watch patiently. I breathe in and exhale sharply before continuing. “My mom died when we were young.”

A smokey hallway billows through my memory. Emmett crying as he was dragged through the kitchen. I shake my head.

“What about your father?”

My father? There’s not much to say about him.

“He’s not around.” I clear my throat. Alice’s brows pinch together, and she nods at something.

“I... I think maybe I will call my mom.”

December 2, 1:01 pm

-Alice-

My fingers dial the number before I can second guess the decision. *Ring*. My stomach churns. *Ring*. Why am I doing this? *Ring*. I should hang up.

“What do you want?” The gravelly smoker’s voice scratches my ear.

“Hi, mom.” I swallow down the effect of the word. I hate calling Linda Harper “mom,” even if that’s technically who the woman is to me. But calling Linda by her given name is sure to cause an argument.

“Why are you calling? You know Saturday is mine and Jeffrey’s day to relax without being bothered by anyone.”

“It’s Sunday, mom.” *Why am I doing this? I should have stayed in the living room with Jack.* Waking up in his arms this morning felt reassuring. Like nothing could hurt me. But then I had asked him about his father, and something about the way Jack said he’s not around made me want to reach out to her.

“Fine. Then *Sunday* is our day to relax without being bothered. Does that make you happy?” Linda’s question is rhetorical. *I think*. I don’t answer. I should’ve called Sam instead.

That would ruin her vacation.

“I’m sorry, mom. I just needed to call. To talk.” When my voice catches, I begin speaking with a slightly higher tone to combat the threat brewing within my chest. “I... something happened last night, and I thought you might want to know.”

“You got fired, didn’t you? I always knew you couldn’t hold a decent job for long.”

“Mom, no. I wasn’t fired. I—”

“What then? Did you get knocked up? You’d make a terrible mother. I bet you don’t even know who the father is, do you?”

“What? No, mom, listen. I’m not pregnant. I was —” Tears prickle my eyes as the memory seeps into my thoughts. Shaky hands and ragged breaths consume me. *I need Jack*. My gaze darts to the bedroom door, knowing he’s on the other side, sitting on the couch. But right now, I feel far away from him, alone in my room. A chill creeps into my bones. *Like the chill from last night*. I swallow. “I was attacked. On my way home from work while walking down the alley.”

There is silence on the other end of the line as soon as I say those words. The tiniest flicker of hope ignites in my belly that

Linda will have soothing and comforting words. That my mom might actually ask if I'm ok. Tell me it will be ok.

Instead, she lets out a harsh laugh.

“It was probably some guy thinking you were interested. You were in the alley? Probably thought you were for sale or something.” Everything inside me crumbles to pieces. I don't know what to say, but that doesn't matter. “Look. I can't be wasting my time on the phone. Jeffrey and I are busy.”

The line goes dead, and moisture slips down my cheek. I curl into myself on my bed. I feel empty. Minutes later, a knock at the door drags my eyes to it.

“Alice?” The door cracks open. “I didn't hear you talking, so I figured the call was over.”

I nod. Jack moves to the bed and sits down, reaching over to me and pulling me up into him. He rubs his hand up and down my arm and places a kiss on my temple.

“I know what it's like when parents let you down. Especially in moments when you hope they wouldn't.” I look up at him. He glances to the side before returning his attention to me. “My father's taken up lifetime residence at Belleview Penitentiary.” My brows dip to the center, questioning behind my eyes. Jack shakes his head. “Let's forget about the disappointment family can be for today. We'll order in, pop in a movie, have some drinks.”

That sounds so good. A day with Jack? Sounds like the perfect cure for this weekend.

I smile. “Let’s do that.”

December 4, 2:26 pm

I watch Alice from across the back room as she prepares for tonight's show. Her hulk of a security man lumbers close by, never releasing Alice from his burdensome watch.

Fucker.

"Did you hear what happened to Alice this weekend?" some asshole I work with asks. *What's his name?* I think it starts with a P, but I can't be sure.

"Yeah. That's crazy, isn't it? I hope she's ok."

I sure can act. Everyone believes the charade I put on. It's almost pathetic. That's why Amelia had trusted me, how I'd convinced her to help me with an English essay, got her to come by my house. She had always been so believing, naïve.

Maybe that's where it went wrong the first time. There hadn't been any fight, even at the end.

The asshole, whose name probably starts with P, says something else before walking toward Alice. I'll go over to

her soon. Play nice. Act concerned for her safety. The whole place is buzzing with news of what happened to her. Not showing interest or trying to get more information would seem suspicious. I'll play along for now.

As I watch Alice, I hone in on all her small nuances. Idiosyncrasies that most people wouldn't notice. For example, when she's nervous, Alice tucks her hair behind her right ear. Only her right ear. The other side remains loose and flowing against her face. Her eyelids flutter. With glistening eyes, her long lashes brush against the air. She's fighting back tears. And when someone's spewing questions at her, Alice's lips pucker. She's biting the inside of her cheek, and I desperately want to know how her mouth tastes.

Amelia had tasted like cinnamon. It didn't fit her. Too spicy and jolting. She hadn't had the bold personality cinnamon gum requires in a girl. She was sweet, like sugar, and I had expected her to taste that way. But she always chewed that damn cinnamon gum. That should've been a hint that she wasn't exactly like I imagined. I had looked past it, not realizing the importance until it was too late. Anger still simmers deep at that.

Alice won't do that to me, though. She'll be sweet. And I'll taste her soon.

Frustration washes over me. My plan has been screwed up over and fucking over. She can run off to her little security man. I'll let him have her for now.

At least until I'm ready for her again.

December 4, 2:32 pm

-Alice-

Overwhelming. That's the only way I can describe being at work. The second I walked into the building with Jack forty minutes ago, my coworkers began bombarding me with questions and intrigued concern. Even now, I try to finish getting ready for rehearsal without reprieve. I breathe in deeply as anxiety begins to set in. If I'm not ready by the time rehearsal starts, Mark will find a way to berate me. Sure, it will be masked in fake worry: "If you are having trouble today, perhaps you shouldn't be here" or "Maybe you should sit this one out." I can't pinpoint the moment his backhanded comments began, but at some point, I noticed them and tried to stay one step ahead to avoid the conflict.

As I stand in front of my mirror, still answering everyone's curious inquiries, I glance to my right. Somehow Mandy and Tessa are prepped and waiting for practice, sitting on the couch. To be fair, they don't have to play around with makeup today. They don't have scrapes and bruises to cover up. I sigh.

I just need a few extra minutes to make sure my makeup is on so I can test my appearance under the lights.

Glenn stands to my left. “So, you didn’t even hear the guy rush up behind you? Man, Alice, that’s crazy. It could have been a lot worse. You need to be more careful. Get a cab or something.”

I repress the urge to roll my eyes as I swipe liquid eyeliner across my lid. I nod to show I recognize his words. *Not everyone has money to spare for rides home every night.*

Next to him, Ramsey smacks Glenn on the back of the head. Vince, one of the stage crew, laughs.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Insensitive much?” Ramsey turns toward me. “I’m glad you’re ok. And let one of us know if you ever need a ride home.” Glenn and Vince nod in agreement. “Or even Mandy and Tessa.”

“That’s right, babe! We’re here to help!” Mandy calls from the couch before returning to her conversation with Tessa.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure to ask someone for help from now on. And Glenn’s right: I should have been more alert.” My reflection is disheveled. At least to me. Staring at my work, I hope the lighting won’t highlight any of the rough spots. I look in the mirror to watch the world behind me.

Jack stands alert by the wall to the right, near the office. His eyes jump from one member or another of The Amazing Anslar show. Flanking from the left, Leroy watches me.

As if realizing I've noticed him, Leroy smiles and begins moving toward me. He was one of the first people I got to know on the job. When I started, Leroy had been so helpful in introducing me to others and making sure I felt welcome, but talking to even one more person feels like too much.

"I'm sorry about the other night," Leroy interrupts Glenn and Ramsey, who have since started to bicker back and forth about proper etiquette when talking to an attack victim. "You don't deserve that kind of scare."

"Thank you, Leroy," I say and smile kindly at the condolence. "And thank you for being so concerned on Saturday, too. It's nice to know I have people who care."

I look into the mirror once more, double-checking every spot of makeup. I'm about to apply more foundation when Glenn pipes in. "What's with all the makeup, Al?"

I hate it when you call me that.

"I want to test the lighting. I'm worried my cuts and bruises might show up under the lights," I admit. "Hey, Ramsey. You think you can play with the lighting to make sure nothing shows today? That way, come time for the shows, I'll know the audience won't notice."

"Sure thing, Alice. Don't put anything else on, though. Let's test it as is."

"You always look lovely, Alice," Leroy says. Clearly, he hasn't been paying attention to the conversation, but he's

trying to be nice. Ramsey and Glenn roll their eyes at the personal assistant.

“How soon before we start?” I ask.

“Ten minutes,” Leroy answers. “Are you ok? Can I get you anything? Water?” Without waiting for a response, Leroy scurries off toward the office.

“Man, that poor bastard has it bad for you,” Vince laughs. Ramsey smiles at the observation.

“Yeah. You barely have to bat an eye, and he’s falling at your feet.” Glenn says.

Leroy comes rushing back and hands me the bottle of water.

“Thank you,” I say, setting it on my vanity. My stomach is in so many knots that even if I wanted to drink something, I’m sure I couldn’t.

“Not causing enough commotion today that you’ve got to distract my PA, Alice?” Mark’s voice echoes from the darkened hall. Only seconds later, he enters the room. “Haven’t you created enough distraction for the day?”

Seriously?

Glenn turns away from our boss, and Vince rolls his eyes. Ramsey gives a slight shake of his head as Leroy shrinks in his spot.

“I... I was just getting her water, Mr. Anslar,” Leroy stammers.

“And you should’ve been making sure I had everything I needed instead of fawning over a pretty girl.”

“I’m sor-”

“It wasn’t his fault. It was mine,” I say. Heads turn toward me. Raised brows and curious eyes wait for me to continue. Mark stands with his arms crossed, smugness written on his face. “I mentioned I was thirsty and asked him to get me a drink before the show. I was finishing up with makeup and didn’t want to waste any more time. I’m sorry, Mark. It won’t happen again.”

Jack shakes his head. His fingers graze over my arms.

“I sure as hell hope not. We have a show to practice.” With that, Mark spins and walks back down the dark hall. Poor Leroy trembles, his head dipped, as he follows Mark into the darkness.

“What an ass,” Glenn and Ramsey say in unison once Mark’s gone. Few of us like him, if any, but we’re not stupid enough to tell him that. Still, the solidarity in opinion among my coworkers brings a little joy.

“Shall we?” I hold my breath. The tech crew and other two assistants tacitly agree to the prompting, exiting the backroom down the hall toward the stage, leaving me alone with my thoughts. By eight tonight, I’ll be free to leave. Plans of crawling into bed next to Jack bounce through my head. Focusing on deep breaths, I contemplate walking out for the day. I’d have considered it more if I weren’t so worried about

losing my paycheck, but Mark would definitely fire me. I can't afford that.

A gentle touch on my arm sends an electric current through my body. I turn my head to see Jack.

"You say the word, and we can leave," he promises. I smile.

"I'm fine."

"Isn't that what people say when they're not fine?" Jack smiles.

"Yes, but I am, really. I've dealt with assholes before. And I've been through enough in the past two days that his childish nitpicking can't do much to me anyway. I swear I'm ok."

Jack nods. With one final brush of his fingers down my arm, Jack turns toward the office. Taking one last glance in the mirror before setting my shoulders back and posture straight, I make my way to the stage.

I reach the end of the long hallway and step out to where everyone is standing around Mark.

"Still keeping us waiting," he states.

I stay silent this time, wanting to get this shitty rehearsal over with as fast as we can. Mark finishes his instructions and is about to start the practice.

"Before we start, should we check Alice's makeup?" Ramsey asks. Mark sighs, annoyance filtering over his expression. "It will only take a minute and will let us know if

she needs to change anything for Friday's show, so the audience doesn't see her injuries."

Mark looks over his shoulder at me before returning his attention to Ramsey. "Fine. Quickly."

"Just stand center front," Ramsey says. "Mandy, can you go to the front row of the audience?"

I make my way to the post while he and Glenn head to the back of the theater. Mandy sits in the front row. The normal lights on the stage are on, making me incredibly aware that everyone is watching. Vince whispers to Tessa in the wings. Mark stands with his arms crossed, staring daggers in my direction. Everyone else is scattered backstage, their eyes unwavering from where I stand.

"I said quickly!" Mark shouts across the room. Immediately following his outburst, bright white floods my immediate area. I close my eyes tight for a couple of seconds and then open them slowly. A black spot dances in front of me, and I try to blink it away.

"Alright, Alice, just face forward, head up... now turn to the right... left..." I follow each instruction as the dot fades and my vision rights itself.

"How does it look?"

"I can see it from here. It's a disaster." Mark says as he walks closer. Only a yard separates us, so I know he can see the injuries. I ignore him, waiting for a response from any of my coworkers.

“We can’t tell from back here,” Glenn calls out. “How about you, Mandy?”

“Looks good from my point of view!” she responds. I exhale in relief. *Thank god the makeup works.*

The spotlight turns off, and everyone begins shuffling to their spots. Mark steps even closer, inches away. I pin my shoulder back, refusing to be intimidated by this man.

He huffs. A smirk rises on his mouth. “Looks like you got lucky again, Alice.”

December 6, 9:32 pm

-Jack-

After I dropped Alice off at home, I was sure I'd head back to my penthouse for sleep or the office to work on her case.

But I can't stay away. Remembering Alice's bare cupboards, I stop by Vito's Pizzeria before heading back toward her apartment. Parking on the street, I grab my phone and press her name. When she picks up after the first ring, the corners of my lips tip up.

"Jack?" Alice answers, a hint of confusion and excitement coating her voice.

"Yeah, dove. I realized something after I left." I exit the car and make my way up the shoveled sidewalk.

"Oh? What's that?"

"That I didn't want to leave." A small inhale of breath whispers through the phone. "You want to come let me in?"

Seconds later, Alice cracks open the front door wearing cotton pajama pants and a black tee. Even in loungewear, the woman's gorgeous. She hides halfway behind the door as

though protecting herself from the outside world like she's making sure it's me at her door and not an imposter.

“You brought pizza.”

“What kind of man would I be if I let you starve?” I ask. Alice's cheeks tinge pink. I reach up, caressing the smooth skin of her face. “Are you going to invite me in?”

She moves back, opening the door wider and allowing me to step inside. I follow her up the stairs, appreciating how her ass sways with each step. The second we step into her apartment and shut the door, I toss the pizza on the table and pull Alice into me. A small squeak escapes from her as our bodies press together. One hand supports the small of her back while my other cradles the back of her neck.

Before she can ask a question, my mouth is on hers, my tongue urging her lips apart. *Cherries*. Alice tastes like cherries. She's delicious. I could devour her where we stand.

“Remind me never to wait this long to kiss you again, dove.” Because if it were possible, I'd kiss her every second of the damn day. My mouth would never leave hers. My hands would never stop caressing these curves.

“Promise.” Her breathlessness breezes the word away.

I pull her closer. Alice's body willingly responds, and she flattens it against me. A moan escapes her lips. I take the cue, skimming my hands to her thighs and lifting her up, grinding into her. Her fingers tangle in my hair as I set her on the counter, not once relinquishing the kiss.

My hands trace the contours of her neck, her shoulders, her soft arms, descending over the swell of her breasts until I've reached the edge of her shirt. My fingers dip under the hem, caressing her satiny skin. Alice's body trembles against my touch. Her mewl whispers against my lips.

Alice's hands drop to my sides, pulling me closer. My fingers tangle with hers, my thumb accidentally rubbing against the bandage on her wrist. She flinches at the touch, and I freeze.

"I'm sorry," she says with a sigh. Her head angles away. I lift her chin, so she sees me.

"No, I'm sorry, Alice." Stepping back to give her space, I feather my touch over the bruise on her temple before placing my lips gently against her cheek. "We'll take things slower. Give your injuries time to heal."

She kisses me once more before sliding off the counter. "Let's eat. Pizza's getting cold."

"I hope you like things simple." I open the box to reveal a large pepperoni pizza.

"Works for me. Want something to drink?" Alice's forehead knots in the center immediately after asking. "We have water. And some incredibly cheap whiskey."

"You know, until you pulled that out the other night, I never would've taken you for a whiskey drinker."

"I'm a sucker for the burn as it slides down my throat," she admits with a smile.

Her words go straight to my cock. I readjust my pants and clear my throat. A smirk rests on Alice's lips, and I'm rethinking my declaration to take things slower when Alice sets two glasses on the table and pours from a nondescript bottle labeled with one word: Whiskey. When she glances up, an embarrassed half-smile sits on her lips. "I did say it was incredibly cheap."

"I'm up for anything, dove. Pour us some fingers worth. I'll grab the pizza. Let's watch something while we eat."

"Netflix and chill? I thought we were taking things slower." She winks. Alice's flirtatious attitude ripples through my body. *She's going to be the death of me.*

"We'll go at any pace you want." I kiss her cheek before moving toward the living room. "I'm a patient man. I can wait."

December 8, 10:36 pm

-Alice-

The audience bursts into one final round of applause as the week's ending show closes. Mark schmoozes with his fans that paid a little extra to get a behind-the-scenes look. As Mark leads his customers through the backstage areas, they walk past Tessa, Mandy, and me. We've been instructed to stand to the side and smile. AKA, seen but not heard at this point.

Eyes ogle us. We're still dressed in our magician's assistant costumes, and my breasts are practically falling over the trim of my bodice. I pull my coffee-colored waves in front of me, giving some semblance of cover. It does nothing to avert the lustful stares of some of the men. Men with their wives and children. Men with their college buddies. Even one husband-to-be with his groomsmen in some strange excuse for a bachelor party.

"You ladies are amazing." A man and two of his friends stop in front of us. The one talking focuses on Mandy, flashing her a smile that would melt the panties off most women. "Seriously, you make the show."

“Don’t let The Amazing Anslar hear you say that. His ego might get bruised,” Mandy says, then giggles. A finger wraps around a tendril of her blonde hair as she offers the man a flirty smile. The girl has confidence, and the guy takes the bait.

“I’m Ben,” he says before pointing to his two buddies. “This is –”

“Georgie?” I exclaim. I hadn’t noticed him at first, but sure enough, Sam’s older brother just saw the show.

“I was wondering when you’d notice me, Alice.” The man’s brown eyes glisten with amusement. He flashes a smile.

“Why aren’t you on vacation with Sam and your parents?”

“I’m heading there tomorrow for a few days. Stayed in town to celebrate my friend’s bachelor party.” Georgie points across the backstage area to a staggering man.

“Aren’t bachelor parties typically spent at strip clubs and bars? Don’t tell me you’re all *that* into magic?” I tease.

“It’s not the magic we came to see.” Georgie licks his lips. His gaze roams from my eyes down to my legs and back up. My body burns at the attention. I shift my weight from one leg to the other. “The show was suggested to us by another friend. Something about sexy magician’s assistants.”

“Well, it’s great to see you.” I fold my arms across my body, more aware now that I’ve been standing on display in my corset and booty shorts. I peek at my wrists. A gentle

wrapping that matches my outfit covers them. *At least I won't get any questions about that.*

Lifting my eyes, I catch Jack leaning in the corner, watching. Even in the shadows, his blue eyes blaze. He makes no move toward me, but his smoldering gaze glues my attention to him. A fog hovers in my mind, pulling me toward Jack. In my peripheral, Georgie turns his head to see what's diverted my focus.

"Say, why didn't you go with Sam? I know she invited you," he asks, turning again toward me, stealing my attention back. The haze that filled my mind moments ago dissipates. Georgie reaches over and tucks a loose tendril behind my ear. His skin is cool to the touch, so different than Jack's. I turn to my friends to see them ogling the man in front of me as his two friends desperately try to get their attention. I can't deny that Georgie is attractive. Tall, dirty blond, and handsome as can be. Prince in shining armor material. He's everything a woman could want.

I clear my throat and wave a hand through the air. "This. Work."

"Ah. That's too bad, though I can't say I'm at all disappointed after watching the show tonight. I don't suppose you three have plans after you get off work."

I'm hoping Jack will decide to come over, but technically I have no plans. Still, I don't want to go out, just in case. "Oh, um. I'm planning on going home to sleep. It's been an exhausting week."

That's an understatement.

Georgie takes a half step closer, and my back presses against the wall. He places one hand next to my head; the other skims down my arm. A shiver tickles over my skin.

“I can't convince you to come out for one drink?” His voice is low and smoky. A layer of lust filters over it.

Taking a steadying breath, I shake my head. “I'm sorry. I'm pretty beat. Another time.”

Georgie moves back, releasing me from the pseudo cage. Disappointment clouds his expression, but he offers a small smile.

“That's too bad, but I'll take the raincheck. It's good seeing you, Alice.”

“You, too.” With that, Georgie and his friends walk to their bachelor party group. As he leaves the backstage area, Georgie smiles again in my direction. Once they have left, I turn back to Mandy and Tessa.

“Damn, Alice. That boy is one fine piece of meat.” Mandy fans herself dramatically as she falls against the wall. “How are you not drooling right now?”

I shrug. “He's my best friend's brother. We're practically family.”

“Whatever was going on between the two of you did not look familial,” Tessa says.

“I’m just not interested, I guess.” I shrug again and walk away toward the back room. The sooner I can change and gather my stuff, the sooner I can get home. As I step into the back hallway, the air around me changes. Charges to life. Softly, fingers waterfall down the bare skin of my arms. Feeling protected, I stop, leaning back into muscular arms.

“Who was that?” Despite the growl of possessiveness, the low rumble of Jack’s voice is far from frightening.

“A friend. Sam’s brother,” I say. Jack remains silent, but his fingers continue their path. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

Before Jack can answer, the chattering of voices disrupts our solitude. I pull away from him, giving enough space to hide our mini rendezvous in the dim hallway. Continuing my path down the hall to the dressing room, I can feel Jack close behind, and a smile crosses my lips. I change out of my costume behind the standing screen in the corner of the room. Mark has yet to hire anyone to build the girls a changing room. I can only guess why. It isn’t until my last coworker leaves, and I’m standing in front of the mirror that the reflection of my name pulls a gasp from my lungs. I fall into my seat, my hand reaching out unsteadily but not touching the envelope.

“What is it?” Jack asks. I don’t want to say, but ignoring the letters hasn’t been working.

“I – I’ve been receiving letters from an anonymous sender.”

“What do you mean? Like a secret admirer?”

“I guess you could call it that, but different.”

“Different how?” he growls.

“Creepier.”

I drag open the lowest drawer on the right side of the vanity. It scrapes along the bottom. I hate the nails-on-chalkboard feel that vibrates through my arm each time I open it, so I rarely do. That’s one reason all the letters are in that drawer. Well, almost all the letters. The words from letter six, the only one I threw out, are still ingrained in my mind. A shudder crawls through my soul. I should have thrown all the others in the garbage, too, but something compelled me to keep them.

“This is the ninth one I’ve received.” I point to the still untouched envelope on my desk, then reach into the drawer and pull out the others. I hold them out to Jack, who takes them. “But there are only eight there. I threw one out.”

Jack opens the one on top.

“*My Alice, I’m waiting for our moment. We’ll be together soon.*” Hearing the words aloud is unsettling. I never took the time to figure out what the author of the letters meant, but now I wonder if I should have. “This is dated last Saturday.”

I nod. He flips through the remaining seven. A twitch reverberates in his jaw. Even as my heart pounds in my chest knowing I can no longer pretend the letters don’t exist, a sense of relief washes over me knowing I have Jack.

“When did you start receiving these?”

“I get them about once a week, I guess. So, nine weeks ago, maybe. I didn’t think anything of it at first.”

“Damn it, Alice. Why didn’t you tell me about these last week?” His voice vibrates with frustration. I swallow and shrug, embarrassed to admit that I thought they’d stop eventually. That maybe if I just ignored them long enough, they’d disappear like magic. I can’t look at Jack. I don’t want to face the disappointment that could be on his face. Jack sighs. “I’ve got some calls to make. When I’m done, I want you to tell me everything you can about these letters.”

December 8, 11:26 pm

The snarled oak tree at the back of her place looks right in her window. I rarely climb it, afraid she might wake up and see me. But tonight is special. Last weekend might have gone wrong, but tonight won't.

Alice's window can easily be unlocked from the outside. A large, sturdy limb extends close enough to touch the glass. Then all it takes is a knife and a little jostling. *Voila! Magic!* I learned that trick several weeks ago. It's an oversight I can use to my advantage.

The first time I went in, the house was empty. I wanted to test the waters. See how close I could get while remaining invisible. I only stayed a few minutes before sneaking out the window and down the tree.

She isn't home yet, and the roommate is out of town, which means this is the perfect time to get in.

Shimmying open the window and gliding in, I stand in her room taking in her scent. Roses. She always smells of

roses. Whenever I can get close to her, I breathe her in and savor the fragrance. Fresh. Innocent.

I love her innocence.

The room is relatively bare. To the right, a long dresser spans part of the wall. A picture of a younger Alice and an older man sits in a frame. I lift it, rubbing a gloved finger over the glass. So beautiful. Like Amelia. The same flowing waves in shades of walnut cascade over her shoulders and down her back. The same vibrant green eyes sparkle in the light. Amelia had been a couple of inches taller, but that doesn't matter.

Near the frame, small pieces of jewelry scatter over the dresser. A snowflake-shaped necklace. Some simple bracelets. A green ring sits on a small tray. It matches their eyes. Jade. The rectangular stone is set on a gold band.

I pick it up and slip it on my pinky. It gets halfway down before it won't budge any further.

On the farther end of the dresser sits a small bottle of perfume. I pick that up, too. Spritzing it once on my wrist, I again fall victim to her fragrance. Her scent is superior. A twitch in my pants forces me to abandon the bottle. I can't get distracted. I need to focus so I'll be ready when she arrives.

Across from the dresser, a queen-sized bed sits centered on the wall, flanked by two nightstands. A light gray comforter covers the bed. I've watched her sleep in this bed.

I bet it smells like her.

I could lay in it. Touch the fabric she's touched. My body yearns for the feel of her sheets. But I need to explore the rest of her place before she arrives. I glance at my watch.

“How soon will that be, Alice?” my whisper barely touches my ears.

The door to the bedroom is open, the hallway inviting me out. Each step softly echoes through the empty apartment. Hopefully, the downstairs neighbors don't wake. My brows furrow.

That could be problematic.

The sheath at my side bounces against my leg with each step. Mechanically, I reach for the knife it holds. I should check on them, make sure they won't be any trouble.

Crossing into the dimly lit living area, I move toward the side table next to the couch and twist the small switch on the light. Total darkness shrouds the room. It feels less like Alice in this room. Cold. Undeserving.

Inferior.

I bring my wrist to my nose and sniff.

Roses. There's my Alice.

I let my eyes adjust before walking to the door that leads out of Alice's apartment. Turning the knob, I make my way to the first floor.

December 9, 12:01 am

-Alice-

Jack parks the car on the street outside my apartment. We're both silent and unmoving. A stack of papers sits between us. Copies of the letters. Lillian took the originals after she showed up at The Amazing Anslar. I glance toward Jack. He's been quiet since we left work.

"Are you angry?"

"No," he bites out. His jaw flutters. I turn back toward my window. "You should've told me about the letters, Alice. I would've approached this whole thing differently if I'd known you've been receiving them."

"I didn't want them to be connected. I still don't." I can't look at him. I should've said something before tonight.

Jack sighs. "I understand, but they're very likely related, Alice. We can't ignore that fact."

I nod, still refusing to look over. Slight pressure from Jack's fingers under my chin drags my head toward the gorgeous, protective man next to me.

“It’s ok, dove. But from now on, you need to keep me in the loop. I can’t keep you safe if I don’t have all the information.”

He brushes his lips against mine before we get out of the car. I look up at my building. *Strange*. Both floors are dark. Unease creeps up my spine.

“I thought I left a light on,” I say, shutting the door to the SUV. Jack’s already rounded the vehicle and is by my side.

“Are you sure?” Looking quizzically toward the building, he takes my hand. Fingers entwine through mine as Jack pulls me in close. I shrug.

“I think so. I’m usually good about leaving a light on, especially when Sam’s out of town.”

Snow crunches under them as we move toward the porch. More falls from the sky. Sporadic street lights nebulously light Rockwell Ave. A recent development in the past couple of weeks. The shadows add to my unease. I hug closer to Jack. Each step toward the unlit porch of my building causes the anxiety in the pit of my stomach to swell. Even my eyes start playing tricks on me.

Did a streetlamp behind us just blow out? The world has become darker. The snow falling heavily from the sky is devoid of the luminescence that comes from reflecting off the lights.

Except then, out of the corner of my eye, I spot movement on the porch. A small flutter. I grab onto Jack’s arm and halt in my tracks. It seems impossible that anyone would be standing

there. Right? I peer into the black chasm. Sure enough, there's an outline of a body, standing tall and broad, all too similar to my faceless monster from the alley.

“Jack.” No other words escape my lips. My hand trembles against him as the figure moves toward the steps and down.

Jack pulls me closer. “It's ok, Alice. This is Leo Johnson. He works for me at Elite.”

It takes a few seconds for Jack's words to filter through my head. I'm ready for a fight or flight reaction – definitely leaning more toward flight – and am not focused on anything the two men are saying at first.

Jack reaches his hand toward the enormous figure now standing directly in front of us. He must be at least six foot five, taller than Jack by a couple of inches. Blond hair peeks out from under a black beanie. Dark, playful eyes bounce from Jack to me and back.

“Perimeter's clear, boss. Emmett and I first checked it ten minutes ago, and I've been making rounds since.”

“Emmett still around?”

“Nah. He went back to HQ. Sent Honest Abe to take over.”

“Lincoln here yet?”

Leo nods toward the street ever so slightly. He blows into cupped hands and rubs them together. My erratic pulse begins to regulate as I take in their conversation. At least until I realize Leo and the others are only here to make sure no one came by my house.

“You think my stalker knows where I live?” My voice catches in my throat. Jack positions me so I’m facing him, placing his hands on my chilled cheeks warming them. It’s calming, safe. Looking into his eyes, I ignore the fact that I’m freezing, forget I’m afraid, and completely overlook Leo standing a foot from us.

It’s just Jack and me.

“I’m being cautious, that’s all. I’d rather be safe than sorry. If that means I call in the cavalry to run some checks on the area, so be it.” Jack glimpses to the side and clears his throat. Vaguely, a shuffling of feet and a breeze brushing my face suggests someone moved. When Jack glances back, I’m again caught in his wintry gaze. His mouth crashes into mine. Jack’s hands travel down my body and bring me flush against his.

Curse this marshmallow coat for being so perfect for winter. I’m tempted to rip the thing off here with it stopping his grasp from fully touching me. We finally pull away from each other, breaths misty in the cold air and smiles covering our faces.

“If you two are done, we should get on with the inspection.” Leo’s voice, full of laughter, resonates from the porch. I hide my face against Jack, not embarrassed by my actions but self-conscious knowing we had a voyeur.

“Ignore him,” Jack whispers, kissing my forehead. He leads us up the steps. Leo’s laughter has ceased, but a ridiculous and knowing grin dances across his expression. Looking at his

employee, Jack warns, “You tease her in any way, I’ll kick the shit out of you.”

Leo throws his hands up, professing he will do nothing of the sort.

“Give me your house key.” It’s not a question but a command. One that I follow easily. “I’m going to check out the apartment. Stay here with Leo. It should only be a few minutes.”

Jack kisses my cheek before entering my home. I’m left in the cold with his friend, unsure what to say. Shuffling my boot across the snow that’s collected on the porch, I wonder how long we’ve been standing in silence.

It feels like it’s been at least an hour. Realistically, I know it couldn’t have been more than five minutes.

“That’s a rather nasty scrape on your forehead.”

I bring my glove up to the side of my face. I’d forgotten about the scratches. Most of the superficial ones have healed. Only a few of the deeper ones remain.

“Yes, well. That’s what happens when your face is shoved into the ground, I suppose.” I’m surprised by my sarcasm. I’m not usually so sardonic, certainly not enough to know how others would respond.

Did I offend Leo?

A hearty laugh resonates on the porch.

No, definitely not offended. I offer him a smile.

“I guess it is. Want to tell me about what happened?” Leo’s laughter cools down to sympathetic friendliness.

“Jack didn’t fill you in?”

“A bit, but I find it’s better hearing it straight from the source.” Like with Jack, I feel safe around Leo. Not as safe as I do with Jack, but enough to recognize Leo’s one of the good guys. Enough to relay the story of the attack and the letters to him without hesitance.

“Jack and Detective Hammill think they’re related.”

“What do you think?” Leo asks.

Alice shrugs. “I’m not sure. I hope not, but it would be coincidental if it were two different people. Right?”

“I’ve worked for Elite since its inception. I’ve yet to see anything that coincidental. So, yeah, I think they’re related.” Leo pauses, staring at me. I admonish myself for wishing otherwise and not telling Jack about the letters sooner. A contemplative look crosses Leo’s face. “I don’t suppose you have the letters on you, do you?”

“Oh, um. Jack made copies of them. They’re in the car. Do you want me to get them?” I begin to turn when a hand gently takes my elbow. More laughter escapes Leo, and he shakes his head.

“No, I’d rather keep my job. I get the sense that if Jack even thought I’d consider letting you out of my sight, even if it’s just a walk to the car, he’d have my head.” A warmth fills my soul at Leo’s assessment. Having Elite on my side gives me

some reprieve from the recurring concern that's developed over the past nine weeks since I first started receiving the letters. Still, the implication of Leo's words has me thinking. Jack's a lot of man for one woman. Am I ready to take that chance and possibly get my heart broken?

Silence again washes over me and my current guard. A light in a neighbor's apartment across the street flicks on, grabbing our attention. With one arm stretched out to me, Leo ushers me further into the shadows of the porch. A silhouette of a profile stands behind the sheer curtains in the window. Within a minute, it walks away, and the light extinguishes. I stare toward the now black space.

Is that an outline of the person that had been there?

Leo's initial shielding action puts me on alert. Is it really necessary to be that diligent? A silhouette in a window is harmless.

I stare around the small front yard, into the street, and down the sidewalks. Nothing stands out. No wandering souls roaming Rockwell Ave at this late hour.

"So, you and the boss man, eh?" Leo interrupts my rambling thoughts. A smirk crosses his face. He's aware he's walking on dangerous ground. I'm not sure how to respond to his question honestly. I offer him a smirk in return, my eyes narrowed into playfully suspicious slits.

"Weren't you warned not to tease me?"

December 9, 12:23 am

-Jack-

I exit Alice's apartment to the porch where I left Alice with Leo.

"Weren't you warned not to tease me?" She laughs, her eyes sparkling with amusement and mischief. I love her tongue-in-cheek response, especially to a man I consider family.

"He was." I give Leo a light smack to the back of his head. Friendly, but also in warning to not press his luck.

"Your girl here says you've got copies of the letters," Leo says, changing the subject.

I hadn't specifically thought of Alice as mine, though I wouldn't mind if she were. I have no clue what had gotten into me kissing her earlier. I know better than to get distracted on the job. But then again, this isn't exactly a paid job, and Alice isn't a typical client. I'm the one who decided Alice needs protection. I'm willing to cover any costs of the investigation and protection services. This is more personal for me than any other work Elite has done.

Flashbacks of a man straddling over Alice in the alley flick through my head. Her screams and whimpers echo in the memory. They mirror screams from my childhood. The ones I couldn't save. Ones I wish I could forget.

Alice is ok and standing right here. The attempt to simmer the rage boiling in my chest only moderately works. There are still things to sort out. I need to focus if we want to find the guy sending letters to Alice. I need to meet with Emmett and Lillian to review the letters.

When Alice handed me the stack of letters earlier, I wasn't sure what to expect. As I read through the most recent note, nausea and fury built in my stomach. I'd felt protective of Alice to start, even more so after last weekend's attack.

There is no way I'll let anyone hurt her. Ever.

I toss Leo his keys. "Center console."

Leo plods through the building snow on the sidewalk. I pull Alice in close and kiss her. Fire erupts through my body with her lips on mine. She moans.

Focus on the mission, Jack.

With a sigh, I pull away. A disappointed whimper escapes Alice's mouth, bringing a smile to mine.

"I've got to go to Elite and take care of some business. Leo will stay with you until I get back. Lincoln will keep watch on the street." *Alice hasn't met Lincoln.* "I'll introduce you two tomorrow, but he needs to stay invisible for now."

Alice nods. I brush a strand of hair from her face. The sea green of her irises stares up at me in question.

“Will you be gone long?” Apprehension swallows Alice’s words making me pull her in closer.

“Hopefully, no more than a few hours. You should sleep. Don’t try to hide that you’re exhausted.” Hell, I’m exhausted, but I need to find out who attacked Alice. I need to know if the letters are connected. The only way to do that is to review the facts and evidence. I’ll sleep when I feel I have a handle on the situation. When I do, I’ll come back.

“Every time I close my eyes, the letters flash through my head and a faceless man towers over me.” Alice’s admission clenches at my chest.

“Try.” I brush a kiss against her lips once more before Leo returns, letters in hand. Alice nods, steps away, and saunters into her home. I watch her until she goes up the stairs and enters the door to the apartment, then I turn to my friend. “Keep her safe.”

Leo nods. With that, I hustle to my vehicle and take one last look around the neighborhood. Spotting Lincoln’s car, I hop into the driver’s side of my own and leave.



Arriving at Elite, I drive my vehicle into the underground garage. The garage is a façade. The doors that seemingly lead into the building from it are always locked.

I stop in a parking space labeled ‘reserved’ between two nondescript cars. A small red light on the wall shines down on my Lexus, scanning left then right before turning green. The wall opens, and I move through a large dark tunnel, lowering another level into the ground. Being in a business dealing with protection and security, I created Elite to be impenetrable. Having served the government, I know a business like mine needs additional safety features to keep me and my employees protected.

A floor-to-ceiling closed gate waits for me at the end of the tunnel. To the left, built into the foundation of the basement, is a security station manned by a guard. On the opposite side of the gate stand two other men. Though I can’t see them, I know both men carry a multitude of weapons on them, including company-assigned Glockes. I roll down the window, pleased with my security.

“Morning, boss.” The gray-haired man in the station peers out an open window. He’s unassuming, but the fifty-something-year-old guard could single-handedly take out a handful of men.

“Morning, Silas.”

“You home for the night?” Silas asks. My condo tops the Elite building on the tenth floor. Another security measure.

“Not quite yet. Heading to the office for a bit instead.”

Silas nods and presses one of many buttons inside the station. The gate clicks and slides, disappearing into the wall to the right. I lift my foot off the brake and move forward into

another garage. Emmett's Highlander sits in his spot among a few other employees' vehicles. A black Dodge Charger in a spot next to Emmett's.

"Damn it."

Lillian has access to Elite, though I wasn't expecting her to be here yet. I'd been hoping to speak with Emmett about his search before involving Lil and her by-the-book ways. Not that Lillian needs to be told how to do her job, but my methods can be a bit unorthodox. I don't want red tape getting in the way of this investigation.

Parking and exiting my vehicle, I cool my annoyance. I should've known Lillian wasn't going to wait for a call. She rarely has in the past. I enter the elevators, send a quick text to Leo checking in, and ride up to the seventh floor where Emmett's and my offices reside.

Gwen, Emmett's and my secretary, sits behind a large desk. Emmett must have called her in at this hour. Her black hair is coiffed into a simple low bun, revealing the length of her neck. She's quite attractive.

"Hello, Mr. Walker. Emmett is in his office with Detective Hammill. They're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Gwen." I nod. Emmett's office takes up a third of the floor to the left, across from Gwen's desk. Walking into my brother's office, I check his phone.

Why hasn't Leo texted back? The guy is usually quicker to respond.

“Look who’s finally decided to show up,” Lillian exclaims. “Did you get distracted on your way here?”

A hint of jealousy coats Lillian’s words. I ignore it. As long as her envy doesn’t interfere with protecting Alice, I don’t care if she expresses it.

I remain standing, my focus on my brother. “What did you find?”

Emmett rubs the back of his neck and breathes a heavy sigh. “Not much. We’ve checked two of the cameras near the alley this week, but we’re waiting to get access to more. Whoever the guy is, he got away. There was no trace leading anywhere. We’ve asked several of the businesses if we can review their camera footage, too, but I don’t know what kind of luck we’ll have.”

“Damn it,” I mutter before my jaw clenches shut.

“And...” Emmett continues, “we can’t find any witnesses at this point.”

That makes sense. The street at the other end of the alley was relatively void of people. That’s why I hoped there would be some sort of evidence to help track the attacker. A footprint. A dropped item. Fibers from the rope he handed over to Lil. Anything to help catch the asshole.

“Anything on the letters?” I ask Lillian.

“I just got them an hour and a half ago. How long do you think it takes to find evidence?” She tosses a pile of papers on

Emmett's desk. "Left the originals with the lab, but I thought you'd want to go through them. Made several copies of each."

"You know me well."

Lil picks one off the top and hands each of the brothers a copy. It's dated nine weeks ago in the top right corner. The first letter. The penmanship is clean. Long, sharp letters except for the signature, which is in elaborate cursive. I can tell that whoever wrote it took effort to make it look neat and impressive.

"Dear Alice, Light reflects off your costume, dazzling the audience, but all I see is your face. Yours Truly." Emmett states, a facsimile of the note in his hand.

"This one's dated five days later." Lillian reads the note: *"Pretty girl, The magnificence of the night sky cannot compare to your beauty. Yours Truly."*

"Those don't sound threatening at all," Emmett voices. I notice that, too, but Emmett hasn't seen the seventh letter yet.

"No. That's probably why Alice didn't think much of them at first." I pull out my phone again. Still no response from Leo. I shoot off another text, doing my best not to worry. Leo knows how to do his job. He wouldn't let anything happen to Alice. Pocketing my cell, I pull another letter. "Here's the one from last week."

I hand the letter to Emmett for comparison. He reads it, sets it down, and picks it back up. Then he rereads the letter, this

time out loud. “*My Alice, I’m waiting for our moment. We’ll be together soon.*”

My fists coil tightly. I hate hearing the words from that letter.

“That’s unnerving.” Emmett stares up at me. “She received this last Saturday and then got attacked on her way home?”

Both Lillian and I nod. That’s why we think the letters and the attack are connected.

“Another letter was delivered today during the show,” Lillian says. I’ve yet to look at this one. Lil and I felt it was important to open it in a more controlled setting to save potential evidence.

“Let me see it.” I reach for the copy just as Lil pulls it out of reach.

“You’re not going to like it, Walker.”

“I don’t like any of this, Lil. Now give me the damn letter.”

Lillian extends her hand with the facsimile toward me. I yank the paper from her and skim over the writing. Same font. Same signature.

YOU GOT AWAY. FOR NOW.
I'M WILLING TO WAIT A LITTLE LONGER
BEFORE YOU'RE MINE FOREVER.

Yours Truly

Lillian hands a copy to Emmett, who reads over it.

“What the hell?” Emmett’s words echo my thoughts. The paper crumples in my fist. “I guess that confirms the attack and the letters are related. Do you think it’s someone from work?”

“Maybe. Or someone who’s a fan of the show.” I can’t be sure which, but it’s someone who knows Alice in some capacity related to the magic act. Whether she knows the guy or not is another question. If it is an audience member, someone who Alice has never actually met in person, it could be much harder to find the asshole.

“He signs them Yours Truly. Why do you think that is?” Lillian asks. She shuffles through the other letters. “Each one is signed the same way.”

“It’s like a love letter in that way.” My jaw tenses like a vice at Emmett’s assessment.

Lil looks between us. “This could get so much worse before it gets better.”

December 9, 3:04 am

-Alice-

Screaming. Fearful and strangled. I bolt up in bed, breathless and sweaty and now tangled in covers. My eyes dart around the room as my hand presses against my chest in a desperate attempt to calm my racing pulse. The ear-piercing cries have stopped.

Were they mine?

Disoriented from what must have been a nightmare, I click on the bedside lamp. Light reflects in a small sphere around the bulb, not enough to illuminate all corners of my room but enough to wash away the closest shadows. The door to my bedroom flies open. A yelp gurgles in my throat.

“Alice, are you ok?” Leo’s voice, strong and loud, is a mix of alarm and threat. His gun is held unholstered in his hands as he examines the scene.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t mean to disrupt Leo’s night. Sure, he was keeping watch over me and my apartment, but I didn’t

intend to be a bother or give unnecessary concern while he essentially babysits me.

Leo's already begun a thorough investigation of the room, treading over the carpet toward the closet. Twisting the knob, his movements are swift, and soon he's positioned in front of the open door, gun drawn at my wardrobe. One hand sweeps through the clothing. The other points his weapon at a nonexistent entity at the back of the closet. Seemingly satisfied no one is hiding in there, Leo turns and lowers to the floor in a squat, peering under the bed. And though I know he's being thorough at his job, I suppress a small giggle at the ridiculous scene.

"It's ok. I had a nightmare. That's all." I brush off the fear resonating through my bones. Logically, I know it was a dream. It just seemed so real. I glance down at my shaky hands resting against the comforter. Bandages wrap around the rope burns. I can still feel the ghost of my attacker's hands on them. My skin crawls.

When I look back up, Leo's watching me closely. Gun now holstered, Leo's arms cross over his broad chest. His brows furrow.

"You're ok?"

"Yes. I'm ok." I'm not sure how true those words are, but I don't care. I refuse to be a bother. "What time is it?"

"Around three."

I've only been asleep for an hour. Jack left ninety minutes ago. The urge to ask if he's back tickles my throat, but I know he's not. If he were, he'd be in my room right now, his arms around me, keeping me safe. That's what I want right now. As much as I appreciate Leo's presence and diligence, I want Jack.

"You going to try to go back to sleep? You haven't gotten much." Leo emphasizes the last statement as though I'm not aware of how little sleep I've gotten.

I shake my head. I couldn't fall back asleep yet. I'll try again in a bit. Probably. *Maybe Jack will be back by then.*

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stay up for a bit." *At least until my nerves calm down.*

"It's your place, boss lady. You can do what you want in it," Leo quips.

I quirk an eyebrow in Leo's direction. "Boss Lady?"

"Well, yeah. Jack's the boss. Boss Man. You're Jack's lady." I smile at Leo's explanation and have no doubt my cheeks have reddened. I follow Leo through the darkened living room into my kitchen, where a white light shines brightly overhead. Despite the ache of having my eyes adjust to the intensity, it's better than the dark. I maneuver around the kitchen, filling my green tea kettle, turning the flame on the front right burner up high, and reaching into the cupboard. My hand grasps my favorite mug, a large, heavy piece of gray stoneware. I can never have too much tea.

Remembering Leo, I turn my head.

“Would you like some tea? Or, I could make you coffee.” I need to stay busy, keep my mind off the nightmare. And the reality lurking behind it.

“Tea sounds good, Boss Lady.”

“Really. I can make coffee if you prefer,” I say again.

“Tea sounds perfect right now,” Leo insists.

The tea kettle whistles its high-pitched whine, and I fill the mugs to the brim with steaming water. As I sit at the circular table in the middle of the room, I notice the spread of letters across its surface. Seven papers, organized in an arc across the table.

“You’ve read the letters.”

“Yeah. I figure the more eyes on something, the more likely we’ll solve the problem.”

I nod and swallow. Without prompting, Leo stacks the notes and folds them in half, shoving them under his leg. Relief rushes through my veins. Out of sight, out of mind.

Isn't that what got me into this mess to begin with?

“Thank you.”

A momentary silence swallows the room. Leo and I sit awkwardly and unfamiliarly at the table. I comb my brain for any topic of conversation.

“This is a nice place you have here,” Leo says. “I like the, um, décor.”

My eyes roam around the kitchen. Original hardwood floors race across the ground. Behind the cupboards, sink and stove, bricks layer upon each other. Surrounding the rest of the room, three crisp white surfaces are decorated with obscure wooden wall art in geometric shapes and one acrylic painting with various shades of teals that reminds me of clouds over the sea. I own none of it. Except for my mug and kettle, everything in the kitchen is Sam's.

“Oh. Thank you.” I pause and bite the inside of my cheek. *Think of something else to say.* “Um... what does your kitchen look like?”

A hearty laugh explodes out of Leo. If I wasn't aware of how ridiculous my question was, I might be offended. Instead, I laugh with him.

“Well –” Leo begins and then stops. Sheer perplexity dances across his face. “You know. I'm not really sure.”

My eyes pop wide, and my incredulity takes voice. “You don't know what your kitchen looks like?”

A skeptical smile accentuates the question.

“I mean. I don't spend much time in it. If I'm not at work, I'm at the gym, and if I'm not at the gym, I'm asleep,” Leo states as though that is obvious. “I guess it's white? Maybe it's beige.”

Amusement sweeps across the room.

“I know I don't have anything fancy on the walls like you do.” He points toward the painting. “Did you create that?”

“Ha, no. I’ve got zero talent for physical art. Sam picked it out. She’s decorated most of this apartment.” I spin my finger in the air to emphasize the scope of my roommate’s influence on the décor, most of which Sam grew up with. “I mean, except for my room. That’s all me.”

When I left Montana, I took only a suitcase of clothes and the jade ring Granddad gave me for my high school graduation. After his death, my mother donated or sold many of the items in his home before moving herself into the house that I once considered my haven. That was another reason I left. I couldn’t watch as Linda destroyed my fondest memories.

Suppressing a yawn, I bring the back of my right hand toward my mouth only to notice I’m not wearing my ring. *Did I forget to put it on?* It’s a habit, so I’d be surprised if I had. Then again, I had been rushing around before work. With the landlord stopping by and Sam out of town, I found my morning more chaotic. *I was running late. I probably left it in the little dish on my dresser.*

I’m vaguely aware of Leo rising to place his mug in the sink and leaving the room with a “be right back.” And he is right back within a minute, not giving me enough time to worry about the solitude. When he returns, he sets a pill in front of me. Sitting down, Leo takes out his phone, reads something, and types into it quickly before repocketing it.

“Melatonin,” he explains. “With the weird hours this job requires, I sometimes need to take one to get sleep. I figured it

might help you get some rest.”

“I look that terrible, hm?” I laugh. Leo is quick to deny it, but I don’t allow him to apologize. “It’s ok. I’m sure the dark circles around my eyes would make a raccoon jealous.”

“You’re forcing yourself to keep your eyes open.” He continues, “You’re safe right now, Alice. I’m here. Lincoln’s on the street. And Jack –”

“Will he be back soon?” I interrupt, instantly feeling silly for asking, but I’ll feel much more relaxed when he returns.

“And Jack would probably like it if you slept more. He’ll worry otherwise.”

“You’re good.” *How could I argue with that?* Jack is already doing so much to help me. Adding any extra worry for him is out of the question. I pick up the small pale pill and place it in my mouth, swigging my now lukewarm tea to swallow it down.

“Thank you again.” My voice is soft, but I want these men to know how much I appreciate the security and kindness they’ve given me. With that, I saunter off to bed, keeping the small nightstand lamp on its dimmest setting.

December 9, 3:48 am

-Jack-

Emmett, Lillian, and I stare at the monitor when a ding draws my attention away.

“Thank god,” I sigh to myself. Relief courses through me as I pull my cell from my pocket. I’d been waiting too long for Leo to respond. So long that I was about to get in my car and drive back to Alice’s house to make sure everything was fine.

All’s good, boss. Everything looks clear at the apartment and on the street.

I read the text twice and exhale. *Everything is ok.* Tension releases from my shoulders, and my expression relaxes.

Emmett takes a sip of coffee, continuing to view the papers. Lillian’s gaze is trained on me, watching every movement I make. She shakes her head, lips falling at the corners. Then she returns her focus to the video.

After we began to review the letters, we were notified we had access to more street cameras thanks to Lillian pushing the issue earlier in the night. Setting aside the notes, the three of

us began to screen through the first of four videos. Not having a clue which way the asshole ran after exiting the alley, it was difficult for Lil to know which camera feeds to ask for. She opted for the two closest to the backstreet and one further in either direction after that. It wasn't much. The two nearest the alleyway were still halfway down the street. The grainy video only showed the opening to the alley at a distance. Even isolating a time frame of ten minutes before and five minutes after the attack meant we spent forty-five minutes watching the first video several times, trying to catch a glimpse of the attacker.

“Let's watch it again before moving on,” Emmett states.

Why does it feel like we're wasting time? I pace the office, raking a hand through my hair. I should be with Alice. Deep down, my gut is telling me to go to her.

She's safe. And you need to find the asshole who did this.

With the most recent letter, I have little doubt the guy will try again. More than anything, I want to stop him before he can. My eyes scan toward the clock. I'll head out soon to be with her.

“Hey, look.” Emmett points to the screen. I round the desk to see what my brother found. Scrolling back, Emmett stops the video. Sure enough, a figure clad in black, head covered by a hood, keeps to the shadows and sulks into the alley. The timestamp reads 11:36 pm.

“He was waiting for her.” Anger rips through my body. The pulse resonates in my strained jaw. “The asshole knew she was

going down the alley, and he was waiting for her.”

“What does that mean?” Emmett screenshots the paused video and saves the image to a file labeled “A.H.”

“At the very least, it means he knows her schedule. Possibly works at the show,” Lillian pipes in.

Regret filters through my chest for not chasing after the asshole. If I’d stopped the guy a week ago, Alice wouldn’t have to be scared.

“I’m heading out. You two keep reviewing those videos, and let me know if you find anything.” I grab my coat and storm out of the office. Despite the text from Leo, I need to ensure Alice is safe. I need to be with her.

The roads are plowed, and only light snow drifts from the sky. Parking directly in front of her building, I survey the area. Lincoln’s car is still on the other side of the street. Once on the porch, I text Leo, who meets me at the front door.

“She’s asleep again.” Leo’s whisper barely carries in the space between us.

“Again?” I don’t like the sound of that.

“She’d woken up from a nightmare. Was thrashing and screaming. I thought someone was in her room, but no one was there. I didn’t ask her, but if I had to, I’d guess she was probably dreaming about the attack.”

My heart is nearly yanked from my chest. I shouldn’t have left. Having a qualified team of trusted individuals meant I should be able to delegate work.

But that's not how I am. That's never been who I am.

Despite the absolute trust I have in my team, I feel more confident in my own work. Finding Alice's attacker means I need to make sure the job is done right the first time.

We walk up the steps into Alice's apartment. The place is dark save a single light in the kitchen and a small glow illuminating from Alice's bedroom. Guilt clutches onto me once again.

She's sleeping with a light on.

Knowing we've all had a long night, I turn to Leo. "You need rest?"

"Nah. I'm good. You go get some sleep, and I'll nap later."

I clap him on the shoulder before removing my coat and boots and heading toward Alice. Reaching her room, I twist the knob, careful not to wake or scare her.

Alice sleeps in her bed in the dim light. I stop at the sight of her. She's gorgeous. Her cheeks are a permanent shade of soft pink. Her plump lips match them perfectly. Chocolate hair sprawls over her pillow in wild abandon, reaching down and around her shoulder and over her chest. Her breasts, clothed in a black tank lined with lace across the top, rise and fall with steady breaths.

I close the door. At the quiet click, Alice startles awake, gasping a deep breath as she props up on her elbow.

"It's just me, Alice." The moment I speak, Alice's body slouches, visibly relaxing.

“You came back.” Her sleepy sea-green eyes bore into mine.

“Of course I did.” I sit on the edge of the bed. My hand finds hers. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m ok.” Alice blushes. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

“Me, too.” I brush a few stray strands of hair from her face before gently gliding over the fading bruises on her temple and cheek. I keep my touch feather-light.

Leaning in, I press a kiss to her lips. “Now, let’s get some rest.”

Standing, I strip off my long-sleeved gray henley, tossing it on a chair in the corner of the room as though it’s the most natural occurrence. The spontaneous motion surprises me until I realize how much my body yearns to hold Alice.

I watch Alice as she watches me, her eyes burning with desire. I unbutton my slacks and slide them off. They, too, end up on the chair.

Crossing the room in my black boxer briefs, I click off the light Alice had left on. She doesn’t need to be afraid with me here. Lifting the comforter and sheets, I climb in beside Alice and wrap an arm over her stomach, pulling her closer. The scent of roses drifts through the air, and my lips lift at the corners. Inching up the hem of her shirt ever so slightly, I graze my fingers over the soft, smooth skin, drawing slow figure eights. I plant gentle kisses along her bare shoulder.

“I’m sorry I took so long.”

“You’re here now.” Alice turns over, facing me. Her lips crash against mine. I pull her against me.

When has a woman ever felt so completely right in my arms?

December 9, 4:39 am

Shivers wretch through my body as I sit in the first-floor apartment, wrapped in a paint-splotched plastic that had been covering the floor. I should've known there were no downstairs neighbors, but I'd been being cautious.

Moseying through Alice's apartment, it took a bit to finally make it downstairs. By the time I realized my mistake, two security men were making rounds of the property and nearby areas. I watched them through the window, hiding in the shadows of the unfinished apartment. Willing to wait them out, I sat patiently. At some point they'd leave, and Alice would be home.

And she came home. With him. And now that cocksucker has extra eyes on Alice like she belongs to him.

Another shiver ricochets through me. I'm freezing in this god-forsaken icebox.

How soon can I attempt to leave?

Fuck those assholes.

Though I'm itching to throw something, the anger stays inside my head. I can't make any noise. I can't chance getting caught before getting Alice.

I stare at my hand. Still secured on my pinky is her jade ring.

At least I have this.

Tucking myself into a closet with the plastic covering, I close my eyes and take a deep, slow breath.

I can be patient a little longer.

December 9, 12:07 pm

-Alice-

Perfectly straight letters pop off the page, but the words are no longer forming. At least not for my eyes. I have memorized each of the letters currently sprawled across the table. When I awoke in Jack's strong, safe arms around ten in the morning, these were the farthest things from my mind.

I'd much rather still be in bed, entwined with Jack.

The second he took his shirt off last night, I was a goner. Delicious muscles flexed from every plane of his body, and I wanted nothing more than to touch each and every ridge. The man was built to be someone's muse. And the moment his fingers trailed over my stomach, all inhibition I may have evaporated. I had no choice except to curl into him, relishing his arousal pressing against me.

I had much better plans for how to spend the day with him that didn't involve reading these letters.

The twisting, curving font of the sender's signature leers up at me from seven pieces of paper. The contrast between the

lettering in the notes and the final two words on each page is staggering. Why not use the same font throughout? Even while contemplating, I know the answer. The notes are meant to be clear, incapable of being misinterpreted. Yours Truly, delicately designed to evoke an essence of adoration, threatens me.

Even the earliest notes send a chill down my spine. The innocence of those first two messages now seems far more sinister. I pick up a letter. Without looking at the date, I know it's the third note. This was the first one where I thought it might not be from a fan of the show. I hand it to Jack, who passes it to Leo.

Good. It's better if Jack doesn't read them out loud. I don't want to associate his voice with the sender.

"My dear girl, Every time you stop and look over your shoulder, I feel as if I'm caught. Yours Truly." Leo reads the words out loud, and memories flash through my mind. Fridays are busy at The Amazing Anslar. We still have rehearsal in the early afternoon before the six and nine o'clock shows. It makes for a long day.

"I'd been exhausted after rehearsal that day, but I was relieved I hadn't gotten a letter. It had been nine days." I pause. "The other two came within five days of each other, so I thought whoever had sent them thought twice and stopped." I refuse to look up from the table. I'm too aware that the men's eyes are on me as I speak.

I wish I could crawl away and not have to face this.

“Mandy, Tessa, and I had gone out for an early dinner. We needed to be back by four for last-minute practice before costumes and makeup. The six o’clock show went on without a hitch. The audience enjoyed the magic. Mark seemed pleased with the performance. Between shows, the girls and I always go into the back. Refresh makeup. Change costumes. Relax for an hour before the nine pm show.” A dull numbness blankets my body as I relay the story. “That’s when I saw it. Sitting on my desk. After reading it, I started wondering how often the sender was watching me.”

Leo stares at the rest of the letters, picking up another one. *“Prettiest Alice, You look radiant in red. Yours Truly.”*

I can feel Jack’s focus on me from across the table and glance up. To his credit, he looks stoic as he listens. He’s doing it to keep me relaxed and unafraid. Having Jack here makes dealing with this more manageable.

“The fourth letter. It came the following Tuesday.” I take a breath, refusing the prickling in my eyes the opportunity to produce anything. “I had worn a red sweater the day before.”

I watch Jack. I see the moment my words register their truth. Jack’s apathetic façade vanishes.

“You don’t work on Mondays.” The tightness in Jack’s voice confirms his rage. Behind him, Leo exhales sharply as understanding sets in.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t, and I don’t have a red costume.”

The chair scrapes across the floor. It nearly topples over before resting back on four legs. Jack strips the letter from Leo's hands. His eyes scan over it, again and again, a constant pulsating in his jaw. The whack of Jack's clenched hand against the wood makes me jump.

"Damn it, Alice. You've been being followed for weeks and didn't tell anyone?"

"I was hoping it would stop. Just go away and... and..." I don't have an *and*. I don't know what else to say.

Before anyone can break the hush that's fallen over the room, a siren erupts from my phone. All eyes glue to the cell at the edge of the table. When I don't immediately reach for it, Jack and Leo's heads turn to look at me.

"It's my mom." Lifting and resetting my shoulders with a sigh, I palm my phone before dragging my feet to my bedroom.

Maybe the call will end before I close the door. Then I won't have to talk to her. But the alarm keeps sounding even after I've locked myself in. I resolve to answer it.

"Hi, mom."

"Darling." Linda's voice slithers through the phone despite her obvious attempt to make it sound cordial and loving. One word, and I know she's seeking something. Most likely money. Each time Linda calls sounding like this, she asks to borrow money. Fifty. One hundred. The amount always varies.

I never ask what she needs money for. The first time I tried didn't end well. "How have you been?"

The million-dollar question. She should know how I've been. Linda either forgot our last conversation or actually doesn't give a shit about me.

And I already know the answer to that riddle.

"I've been ok." No sense in rehashing with mommy dearest. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, you know. Things are still rough. Jeffrey and I have been doing all we can to get back on our feet after the whole fiasco with the Snyders." I take a silent but deep breath. I've heard about the debacle with the Snyders at least five times now. Considering Linda only calls once every few weeks, this so-called fiasco has been going on for a while. Jeffrey, Linda's current boyfriend, got shitfaced and drove the truck through the Snyders' fence, across their lawn, and into their front window. Somehow, Linda and Jeffrey were confused and furious when the Snyders decided to take them to court.

And yet, I listen silently as Linda relives the tale another time.

After she's spewed the entire story, all the while calling the Snyders several unsavory names for the umpteenth time, I manage to say, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes, well. Because of the Snyders, money is tight."

I knew it.

Why do I continue to deal with this kind of behavior? Linda is a parasite. She takes and takes and has never given me anything in return. But deep down, I know why I put up with Linda. Despite not being anything near motherly, Linda is my mother. My Granddad's daughter.

"I need to borrow money." The term 'borrow' is loosely defined. Not once has Linda paid back any of the money she's borrowed from anyone. I know I won't ever see the money I've given her. "Five hundred dollars"

I choke at the amount.

"Five hundred dollars? What could you po – I don't have that kind of money."

"What the hell do you mean you don't have that kind of money? You've got a job, don't you? Don't tell me you were fired. For Christ's sake, Alice, what kind of lazy ass are you?"

"I have a job. I just don't ma –"

"So you've spent all the money you make? What could you need all that money for? You never were good with finances. Throwing all your earnings away."

"No, it's not that. I don't throw my money away, Mom." I cringe at the pleading in my voice. I'm so frustrated at this never-ending cycle. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Oh, I get it." Linda's voice is indignant. "You just don't want to help your mother out. After everything I've done for you, you can't spare a little cash for the only family you have left?"

I'm silent. I can't bring myself to say anything in defense. No matter how awful Linda is or how many opinions she has so wrong about me, there is one thing Linda always gets right: she's the only family I have left. And for some reason, that matters.

Why does that matter?

"I always knew you were selfish. Ever since you were little, you only thought of yourself." Linda doesn't stop to take a breath or let me get a word in edgewise. Before I know what's happening, my mother spouts, "Your grandfather would be so fuckin' disappointed in you, Alice," and hangs up.

A tear staggers down my cheek. Then another.

"Damn it."

Before I even know what's happening, I shatter. It's been years since I've let her get to me. My shaky hand swipes at the endless flood of tears.

I know better than to let her get to me. Don't listen to what she says.

But that was a low blow, and Linda knew it.

A soft knock raps on the door. "Alice? Let me in, dove."

The low, smooth tone of Jack's voice drags me from the bed. His nickname for me makes my heart flutter. I move to the mirror over my dresser before even considering opening the door, wiping the evidence away, and drying my cheeks as much as possible.

I stare at my reflection. Redness outlines my eyes; rosy splotches run over my cheeks. I barely notice the bruises. The one at the temple is basically gone. The one on my cheek is a mix of fading, disgusting yellows. Pretty soon, the only outward evidence of the attack will be my wrapped wrist.

The light rapping on my door draws my attention again. I swipe under my eyes once more. Breathing through my nose and exhaling sharply to make sure I'm composed, I unlock and open the door with a creak.

Jack takes one look at me, and his forehead creases. I know my skin hasn't recovered from crying. He rubs a thumb over my cheek, wiping away more moisture.

"I'm sorry I yelled. I wasn't angry with you, but the whole situation is infuriating. I didn't mean to make you cry." With the gentlest touch to my elbow, Jack pulls me into him, his arms wrapping around me, so I'm cocooned by his body. I lean back so I can see his face. A jaw cut from stone. Eyes blue as exotic waters. Hair like midnight. Everything so perfectly mapped out I might believe he's a reincarnation of an ancient mythical hero or Greek god.

"It's ok, Jack. I'm not upset because of you." Jack cocks an eyebrow at the response, his blue eyes inquisitive. "I get it. I get why you yelled. And hell, you should be angry with me. I'm angry with myself! I should've told someone what was going on right away! If I had, maybe this –" I hold up a wrist, still bandaged and slowly healing "– wouldn't have happened. Everything that's gone on for the past nine weeks is my fault."

A quivering sigh escapes my lips. The bubbling in my chest threatens to boil over.

“Whoa, there. It’s not your fault, Alice. You didn’t cause any of this.”

Placing a finger below my chin, Jack lifts my mouth to his. The kiss is gentle at first, his lips barely brushing mine. The tease of the touch is too much to bear. I reach my hand around his neck, my fingers tangling in his hair.

Thank god for gravity because I could float away. I contemplate dragging him to the bed. Before I can act on the idea, Jack pulls away, tucking a loose tendril of hair behind my ear.

“We don’t have to continue looking at the letters today if you don’t want to.”

I shake my head. As much as I hate reading the letters, I want this whole situation to end. The only way to do that is to catch the person sending me the notes.

“It’s probably better if we do.”

Jack nods and takes my hand in his with a comforting squeeze.

“Leo’s ordering some lunch, and Alexei is on his way over. He wants to check your wrists.”

I steel my composure. “Then let’s get to work.”

December 9, 1:13 pm

-Alice-

I lead Jack through the apartment back to the kitchen. The moment we enter, my gaze sweeps to the table.

“I take it you’ve read the fifth letter,” I say. I stare at the paper, crimped on one side.

A TRINKET. A PHOTOGRAPH.
ANY PIECE OF YOU.
I WISH I HAD SOMETHING
TO CARRY WITH ME ALL THE TIME.

Yours Truly

“This was before he attacked. Did anything of yours go missing during that time?” Leo asks.

“No, nothing except my tote on the night of the attack.” I pause and glance at my hand. “And a ring my grandfather

gave me. I'm pretty sure I just left that at work, though. I forgot to look when I was last there."

"Then I don't get it. If he knew he was going to go after her, why toy with the idea of taking something of hers?" Leo asks.

"To feel close to me." Jack and Leo whip their heads toward me. "Having anything of mine in his possession would have reassured him."

"Reassured him?" Jack asks.

I swallow and look up at the men. "That I'm his."

Jack's jaw clamps shut with an audible snap of teeth.

"It makes sense," Leo starts. "Her stalker wanted to have a higher-level relationship with her while remaining hidden behind the letters."

"But..." I stop, taking a deep breath. *I don't want to tell them. If I let it remain unknown, maybe it won't mean anything.*

The pause after my "but" extends longer than it should. Silence strangles the room. It becomes more apparent with each ticking second from the wall clock. My eyes are locked on the letter even though I blink rapidly. My lips purse as I bite the inside of my cheek.

Jack sits across from me, taking my hand in his.

"But what?" His voice rumbles.

I finally look up. "The idea of something of mine became, I don't know, not enough or something. After the fifth letter,

something changed. I think that's why he attacked."

A snarl escapes Jack's throat. "What do you mean? What changed?"

I can see the wheels in his head turning, trying to figure out what I'm thinking. Letter five is creepy, sure. But it's nothing compared to what came next.

And then Jack sits up straighter, his eyes narrowing.

"The sixth letter," he utters.

Yes, the sixth. The only one they haven't seen. My chest rises and falls in shallow increments. A slight shake of my head to clear the impending fog.

He bolts from his chair and paces the room before stopping in the archway to the living room. Jack watches me. When I say nothing, he sighs. "What did it say, Alice?"

"Have Detective Hammill or Emmett found anything in those videos?" I ask. *How long can I go before I have to tell them?*

"It's hard to tell, but in one video, we can see a person walk into th—" Leo's response is cut off when Jack's hand thumps against his chest. Jack nods toward the doorway, and Leo leaves without a word.

There's no escape now.

"The sixth letter." Jack's voice is stern but far from angry. He drags the chair over and sits directly in front of me. "Dove. It's pretty clear this asshole's motive goes beyond admiration.

If we are going to catch the bastard doing this to you, we need all the information we can get. We need to learn how he thinks so we can get ahead of him.”

“Giving voice to things makes them more real, you know? Hidden somewhere in the psyche, there’s an element of pretend. A distant thought. It can’t harm you that way.”

He nods. “What did it say, Alice?”

My voice is almost silent.

“You’ll *be the start to my new collection.*”



Jack’s fury never once scared me. Even now, as it continues, I find it more reassuring than anything. My focus ping-pongs back and forth with Jack’s pacing. He’s been at it for an hour, phone to ear, barking orders to his employees and the detective.

As Jack stalks the small space of my kitchen, his muscles tense and tighten in waves of motion. Every couple of minutes, Jack’s concerned and caring eyes find mine. I savor the brilliant blue radiating from them.

A knock on the door pulls my attention. I walk over, look through the peephole, and open it.

“Hi, Alexei.” I swing the door open for the doctor.

“Hello, Alice.” He steps into the kitchen. “Your landlord seems nice. He was leaving the apartment downstairs as I was coming up.”

Really? Rarely has Mr. White ever come by on a Sunday except on the rare occasion that he's forgotten something or is collecting rent. Thank god he wasn't collecting rent. I need my next paycheck to come in or Sam to come home before I can pay that. With everything going on, I have forgotten to call Sam.

Or I'm avoiding it.

I sigh. I'll call her later once everything calms down.

"He's been renovating the downstairs for a few weeks now. He wants to be able to rent it before the new year, though I don't know how much luck he'll have at this point."

"Have a seat. Let me take a look at your injuries." Alexei and I sit at the table. "The abrasions on your head have healed nicely, and most of the bruising is gone."

I nod and smile. It was oddly comforting watching the bruises fade over the past few days.

Jack's growl raises again. "Listen, Lil –" is all I hear before Jack moves into the living room.

"These are healing up nicely. You shouldn't need to wrap them anymore. Just be sure to keep them clean."

"I can do that." My nerves wriggle to the surface of my skin. I smile, not wanting to be rude. "Excuse me a minute."

Everything about the last twenty-four hours has been exhausting. I need a break from the anxiety. Besides, a dull throb is sneaking into my temple.

Closing the door with a light click, I stride over to the window. The afternoon sun reflects off the waves of windblown snow covering the backyard. In summer, the tree outside my window provides decent shade in the yard. With bare branches during the winter months, light bounces around the area on the rare afternoons that aren't coated in gray clouds. The world quite literally sparkles on those days.

Staring out the window, I decide to tackle the inevitable and drag my phone from my pocket, open my contact list, and push Sam's name.

Laughter hits my ears, followed by Sam's melodic voice. "I can't believe you didn't come with us! Georgie's miserable without you here."

A Snapshot of Georgie caging me with one arm after the show flickers through my mind. He got to Cancun fast after last night.

God, that was only last night?

"Maybe next time." I try to chuckle, but everything comes out breathy. I'm terrible at hiding my emotions from Sam.

"What's wrong? Who do I need to beat up?" Sam's tone changes, dropping any remnant of humor.

I remain silent, unsure how to start the story without making Sam want to rush home. *This was a bad idea.*

"Alice? Seriously, what's wrong?" Sam asks again.

"You know those letters?" It's an irrelevant question. Of course, Sam knows about the letters. I told her about each one

since I began getting them, except for the most recent since Sam's been out of town.

“You got another one? Go to the police! This is getting out of control.”

“I got two more. One last Saturday and one last night. And –” I clear my throat. “And I was attacked last weekend. Walking home from work.”

Then I can't keep quiet about what happened, relaying every detail of the attack and being saved by Jack. I hear a small gasp through the receiver. Unsure of what to say or how to proceed, I let the news sink in for Sam.

“That's it. I'm coming home,” Sam declares. When Sam's determination sets in, there is little anyone can do to change her mind.

“No. No – don't do that.” This isn't what I want. “I'm ok. A little banged up, but everything is healing, and I'm ok. And Elite is keeping an eye on me. They're ramping up surveillance around the house and–”

“It's bad enough to need security?”

“What? No. I mean. I don't know. Jack thinks it is. He's got his team on the case and some beautiful detective friend.”

“Jack? The same Jack you've been gushing about for the past month?”

“Maybe.”

“The same man who, and I quote, makes you come just looking at him?”

“I never said that.”

“So, I paraphrased. With the amount you blush over telling me stories of this guy, I wouldn’t be surprised if you did.”

I’m happy that even in the high stress moments, Sam can keep me smiling. I don’t know what I’d do without her.

“He’s just doing his job,” I try to reason. It’s not a complete lie, but it’s also not the truth.

“I’m sure of it. And exactly how well has this man been doing his job? Did he stay with you last night?”

“Maybe.” My attempt at sounding coy causes Sam to giggle.

“And he’s staying tonight?”

“I don’t know. He could have one of his employees stay.”

“But you want him to?”

“I think we both know the answer to that one.”

“I’m still coming home early.” Before I can protest further, Sam adds, “I can get a flight on Wednesday. In fact, I just booked it. But I’ll give you a couple more nights with your knight in shining armor.”

“I’m really ok.”

“And I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I didn’t rush home when you need someone with you. Don’t argue. And when I

get home, you better fill me in on all the juicy details of what's going on with you and Mr. Security.”

We say our goodbyes with the promise of seeing each other on Wednesday.

Still standing in front of the window, gazing at the glistening snow, I draw one side of the curtains. It casts shadows over part of my room. I again notice my ring is missing. *Where had I left it?* My attention switches to the dresser, eyeing the tiny dish that typically cradles my most precious piece of jewelry.

Empty.

I flop on the bed with a huff. The second pillow on my bed still smells of Jack. Oh, how the current twenty-four hours might have been different had we stayed in bed. I close my eyes, only for a second, to relish in the thought and lingering scent on my sheets.

It feels like I blinked when my groggy eyes open to a darkened sky outside. Raised whispers come from the other room. Lifting from the bed, I tiptoe to the door and silently open it a crack. Jack's in a heated argument with the detective, and while he's attempting to keep his voice low, she absolutely is not.

“What the hell are you doing with this girl, Walker?”

The detective's profile silhouettes in the kitchen archway before her heels click across the floor to the other side of the

room. I'm intruding, but I can't bring myself to close the door and ignore their conversation.

"That's none of your business, Lil."

The detective lets out a harsh singular laugh. Her heels click back and forth again.

"Not my business? This is my case, and if you're jeopardizing it because you can't keep your dick in your pants, then we've got a problem."

"I won't jeopardize your fucking case, Lil. I want to catch this asshole as much as anyone. More, even! So don't go throwing your weight around. You know me better than that."

Detective Hammill sighs. "You're right, Walker. I do know you. Better than that girl in there. She's too young for you, too green behind the ears."

Eyes wide, I urge my body to turn away, but I can't rip my gaze away from the archway into the kitchen. The detective's delicate long fingers press against Jack's muscular chest. She leans in and tiptoes a fraction, so she's closer to him. My focus shoots to the floor. The air rushes out of my lungs. I'm deflated.

Of course, they've slept together. She's gorgeous. He's handsome. It makes sense.

I try to reason myself into understanding. But remembering last night, Jack crawling into bed makes the realization hurt.

"You know where I stand on us. I can't have this conversation again. Not right now." Jack's words are

apologetic. I peer through the door once more. His hand wraps around the detective's wrist and removes it from his chest. "You should leave, Lil. Let me know if you come up with anything new on the case."

To her credit, Detective Hammill nods and leaves. He sits at the table, light pouring over his masculine body. Exhaustion infiltrates his features. Jack's palm rubs over his face, and he releases another sigh.

Peering up and glancing toward the bedroom, Jack gently calls out, "You don't have to hide in the dark, Alice."

December 9, 5:59 pm

-Jack-

The ‘eep’ that escapes from Alice when she realizes she’s been caught brings a smile to my face. Instead of waiting for her to come to me, I rise from the seat and cross through the living room to her. I meant only to reassure her that there is no longer anything going on between Lillian and me, but the moment I’m within reachable distance of Alice, I can’t help but touch her. I pull her against my body. Without hesitation, my lips are on hers.

Alice’s hands graze up my chest, fingers canvassing my muscles. She pushes her palms against me, but her mouth remains on mine. I hold her closer, refusing to put distance between us.

“Jack.” The breathiness in her voice adds to my arousal. I want nothing more than to scoop her up in my arms, have her legs wrap around me, and carry her off to bed.

Take things slowly.

“Jack.” Alice pushes away, and somehow in the darkened hallway, her eyes catch mine. Sea green and mesmerizing. She shakes her head, and I step back. “I, um. I want to shower.”

“Shower.” I hide the disappointment crawling through me. My hand brushes her cheek, the touch rekindling the fire inside me.

“Yeah. The letter...” She hesitates. “I can feel him on me again. I don’t want to feel him on me when we...”

Alice’s words trail off, but the promise is there. I nod and kiss her forehead. If Alice needs to wait, I’ll wait. She offers a guarded smile before sliding past me toward the door at the end of the hall. I watch her luscious ass sway back and forth in smooth hypnotic motions.

When Alice reaches the door, she turns. A shy smile crosses her lips.

Quietly, more silent than a whisper, she says, “I don’t suppose you want to join.”

I need no further invitation. In three strides, I pull Alice into me again.

“Dove, I’d like nothing more.” My mouth crushes against hers. Alice’s giggle might be the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard. I lift her, and her legs wrap around me, pressing her core against my straining cock. With one arm supporting her petite frame, I shove the door open, start the shower spray, and set Alice on the vanity.

Gentle fingers grab the hem of my shirt and lift it over my head. I whip off her top in one smooth motion before unbuttoning her jeans and sliding them down her legs.

Taking a step back, I groan in admiration. Alice sits on the vanity in a lacy gray bra and matching thong. A faint blush shades her cheeks.

Fuck me.

I move closer, needing to appreciate every second this woman is in my arms. Softly, almost like a feather, my fingers stroke from her shoulder to her elbow. A gratifying shiver ricochets through her body and pulls a moan from her lips.

Alice has captivated me in ways no other woman has. Fuck keeping things professional. Everything about my need for her goes beyond professional behavior. I crave her. Need to protect her. Need to pleasure her.

Not wanting to rush into this moment, I keep my touch soft. I lift her left hand to my lips and trace gentle kisses on her palm.

“I need you to know –” I keep my voice low and words slow. My gaze remains intent on hers. “There is *nothing* between Lillian and me. *Nothing*. It’s all you, dove.”

Alice’s eyes burn with desire as she nods and hooks her lithe arms around my neck. The second our lips meet, passion collides with carnal fire. Any inhibition or concern dissipates in the steam beginning to abstract the mirror. Slick moisture from the shower envelops our bodies.

My thumb sneaks under the lacy fabric, caressing Alice's nipple. When one strap falls loosely off her shoulder, I drag the other band down her arm before reaching back to unclasp her bra. The moment it falls away, my mouth covers the other nipple, tongue flicking against the sensitive skin before moving my lips back to hers.

I trail my fingers down her stomach to her waist, her hips, sliding the fabric down until it's lying carelessly on the tile. In one smooth motion, I discard my boxer briefs. With Alice's legs still embraced around me, I lift her, stepping into the walk-in shower and pressing her against the wall.

My cock pulses against Alice, and as much as I want to fill her this instant, I have other plans. I slide a hand between us, my fingers caressing her folds. She moans quietly as I press a finger inside her.

"That's right, dove. Let me hear you." At my command, she lets another moan escape. I circle my thumb over her clit as I pump my finger inside her. When I add a second finger, Alice gasps with pleasure.

"Faster, Jack," Alice pants. Her hips swing forward as she grinds against my hand. The demand surprises me, hardening my cock even more. Incapable of denying her, I thrust my fingers in and out as Alice's core tightens around them. She screams out my name and sinks into me, breathless. Content is written across her features.

"We're just getting started, Alice." I laugh lightly. "Can you stand?"

With an affirmative moan from Alice, I lower her to her feet. I lace my fingers through hers and drag her arms above her head.

“Keep them there,” I command. Alice nods. Her obedience releases the devil in me. I pin her hands together with one of mine, careful not to hurt her wrists. With my free hand, I grab a bottle of shower gel and squeeze it over a green loofa. An aromatic rush of roses fills the shower. My cock twitches.

“Close your eyes.” Alice obeys again. Slowly, I rub the loofa over her body, down her shoulders, across her clavicle, and over each breast.

She wants the feeling off her. I'll be the one to take it away.

I glide the sponge over her body. Toned yet soft, Alice reminds me of a quintessential goddess. With each caress, small pleasurable whimpers leave her mouth. Eyes still closed, she bites the corner of her lip.

I can't wait any longer.

Dropping the loofa, I lift Alice. Her legs once again wrap around me. I spin her under the spray of water. In seconds, I turn off the shower, step out onto the bath rug, and grab a towel to wrap around my woman.

Mine.

I carry Alice down the hall, tossing her on the bed. Alice, wet in more ways than one, smiles up at me.

“Condom?”

“Nightstand.” She sounds so assured, answering without hesitation.

I open the drawer, pull out a foil wrapper, and tear it open, rolling it down my shaft. Glancing back at Alice, her eyes smolder with desire. I climb on top of her, lifted up on my forearms so as not to crush her.

I pause.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.

I push into Alice. She gasps.

“Wait.” The word comes on a breath. I still, not daring to move an inch. “You’re just bigger than I expected. It’s been a while.”

The cocky side of me smiles. I feather kisses down her neck and shoulder. Beneath me, Alice tests the waters, rolling her hips into mine.

“You good?”

“So good,” she purrs. Alice rolls her hips again. *That’s my cue.* I pull out and slide back in. A delicious mewl escapes her lips.

“Keep making those sounds, dove, and I won’t be able to keep things slow.”

“Then don’t.” Alice’s voice is sultry and low. The encouragement is all I need. I slide out and slam back in, pounding into her. Alice’s satisfied screams fill the room.

Moving to the edge of the bed, I grab Alice's hips and drag her with me.

"Get ready, baby." Hooking my arms under her knees, I line my cock up and shove into her. Alice's head lulls to the side. Her fingers grip the bedding.

"Oh god, Jack." My name on her lips urges me on. I ram into her, relishing in the delicious sounds leaving her lips. "More. Give me more."

She's going to be the death of me if she keeps that up.

I flip her over. My hand glides up her thigh, over her luscious ass, and up her spine. Alice places her knees on the bed, mimicking a feline's stretch. Lifting herself to me, she rolls her pussy and ass against my dick.

"Tease," I say with a smile. I rub the smooth head of my cock over her folds. Alice whimpers at the taunting touch. She glances back, eyes begging for release. I pound into her. Alice's head falls to the comforter at the same time her moan reaches my ears. Her body glistens with water and sweat. My fingers dig into her waist as I pummel her from behind. Each gasp of breath out of her mouth is my deliverance.

"I'm so close," she hums. I reach one hand around, my middle finger rubbing circles over her clit. Her gasps grow louder. I pinch her swollen nub, and Alice screams out. Her core squeezes my cock, and I follow her into bliss. I fall onto the bed beside her, pulling her body against mine. Our breaths slow, matching our intoxicated exhaustion.



Hours later, as midnight nears, Alice and I lie naked in bed, blissful and satisfied in every possible way. Wrapped in my arms, Alice's head rests on my shoulder. I graze my fingers up and down her arm.

"Why did you start Elite?" Alice murmurs into the darkness, curling in closer. I shift with her movement, wrapping my arms around her, protective and affectionate.

"I was part of the Special Forces." I clear my throat. I rarely speak of my time in the military. "MARSOC, specifically. A Raider."

I assume Alice knows nothing of the term, and why would she? My past is overflowing with complexities, secret operations, and lethal outcomes. It's the lethal outcomes I hate thinking about the most. I have no problem killing a person who deserves to die for their crimes, but I hadn't always been positive that those I slaughtered deserved death.

When Alice doesn't ask what a Raider is, I continue, "I was trained to silently kill those our government felt were dangerous to our country." I pause. "I was quite good at my job."

To her credit, Alice doesn't flinch. Instead, she turns to stare into my eyes. "That doesn't make me afraid of you, in case you were worried it would."

It should.

I touch my lips to hers.

“What made you join in the first place?” Alice’s question should be simple, and to a degree, it is. I joined to protect others. But that need stems from childhood.

“My mother,” I start, inhaling deeply to steady my emotions for this story. The only other person who knows lived through it with me. “She died when I was twelve.” My muscles wind with my growing rage. A soft hand on my cheek drags me from giving in to my temper. Jade irises search my face. I take a calming breath. “Emmett and I were in and out of foster after that. A lot of families couldn’t handle me for long. I’d get in trouble a lot. Start fights in schools. Threaten my foster fathers. We were finally placed with a kind elderly couple shortly after I turned sixteen. They got me a counselor who helped me recognize where my anger was coming from and find ways to control it. She suggested I join the military. At some point, as part of MARSOC, life in the military became too much. Three years ago, I created Elite. I wanted to protect people who needed help or were in danger.”

“Like me?” Alice’s voice is hushed. I hate that she sounds afraid, that someone is out to hurt her. Never has an urge to kill been so strong. The only difference now is I’m the one calling the shots. I’m the one making the decisions on how to protect my clients.

But Alice isn’t merely a client. I kiss her. “Like you.”

December 11, 4:09 pm

-Jack-

I watch from the back of the theater near the tech booth. Beside me, Glenn and Ramsey whisper about lighting and sound in the booth as they adjust for minor discrepancies in the show. Their skill and speed in fixing tech-related problems are impressive. Why they're wasting their abilities working for Anslar is beyond me.

The rest of the theater, particularly the wings backstage, are dotted with workers. The two other magician's assistants are nowhere to be seen. Leroy watches from behind the curtain. Some crew members wait off to the side for their cues. Nothing that causes alarm. At least nothing beyond the practicing of the show's tricks. I realize they're illusions, but watching Alice get strapped and chained into a vertical contraption to be used as Anslar's pretty plaything has every muscle in my body tensing. Especially when her wrists are strapped in, and she winces at the pain it's obviously causing her injuries. They might be healing, but they must still be sore.

She stays silent, but seeing the pain cross her features brings a low simmer of anger to my stomach. I step forward when a hand on my shoulder stops me.

“She’s ok, man.” Leo steps from the shadows. “Don’t underestimate her, especially in front of Anslar. That asshole’s just waiting for an excuse to say something.”

I nod and clench my teeth. Leo’s right. Anslar has made every day increasingly miserable for Alice.

The guy is a damn narcissist.

“What are our options for tech in the place? Emmett showed Anslar some plans yesterday. What can and can’t we do?”

“According to Emmett, we can do it all, though he mentioned Anslar argued over price.”

“I’ll eat what he doesn’t pay. How long before it’s all set up?” I know the answer and don’t like it already.

“A few days. We should have everything up and running by Monday next week.”

“If I pay overtime?”

“Thursday.”

“I’ll pay overtime.”

Leo nods, claps me on the back once more, and exits the theater to continue his rounds. My eyes never left Alice. If she’s still in pain, she’s not showing it anymore. My shoulders lower a fraction.

Threatening music echoes through the air as the act becomes more suspenseful and dramatic. Alice pretends to struggle in her chains. She's a good actress, but after seeing real fear in her eyes day after day, I'll never again wonder when she's afraid and when she's acting.

"We're getting some new tech in the place?" Glenn asks from the booth.

"Just making sure everyone's more secure."

"About time," Ramsey says. "This place was built in the 1920s and has had few renovations since then. A lock on a door won't protect anyone these days. Hey, if you need us to help set anything up, we're happy to do it." Ramsey points a finger back and forth between him and Glenn, then adds, "We want the girls safe when they're here. The thought that some asshole's been leaving notes undetected is creepy as fuck."

"I'll let you know." Despite their skill, I won't have them help. I trust a small group of people. And each person in that group has gone through extensive background checks and training to be part of Elite.

I turn my attention back to the stage. Anslar rechecks the straps, proving to his imaginary audience that they are tight and sturdy. The lights dim, so only Anslar and Alice are visible on stage. Anslar leans over, grabs a large thick black fabric sheet off the ground, and slowly lifts it in front of Alice's figure. It hangs loosely, spooling onto the ground. When the sheet has covered the entirety of Alice, Anslar hangs the fabric for only a matter of seconds before whipping it away

at a dramatic crescendo of music. Then the sound completely disappears except for its echo. A spotlight highlights the now-empty spot where Alice had stood moments ago. With only a brief moment to register the successful act, the lights go out.

Every single one.

“What the fuck, guys?” Anslar shouts from the stage.

“It’s not us, man!” Ramsey sounds panicked. “I think the building’s out. We need to check the breaker. We should be up and running in a few minutes, boss.”

Something’s not right.

I bolt to the stage, flashlight in one hand, gun in the other. On stage, Anslar’s nowhere to be found. Several crew members lean against the wall biding their time until practice starts back up. They cringe when my flashlight shines in their eyes.

I move further back to the hallway that leads to the backroom. The hallway is empty. The prep at the end of the hall is silent. I scan the light across the room, slowly at first, but as my pulse quickens, so does my movement.

“Alice?” I call into the darkness. No answer. A pounding comes from the other door that leads into and out of the room. They only keep that door closed on show nights to stave off the bolder fans of the show from roaming too far into the building. The beating on the door continues. I lift my gun, using the hand with the flashlight to steady my aim. Just as I move toward the door, Leo bursts through the opening,

cracking the casing on the jamb. His gun and flashlight point toward me before he lowers his weapon.

I exhale sharply. “Where’s Alice?”

“She’s not on stage?”

I shake his head. “No. Lights went out right after the fucking disappearing part of the act.”

“Fuck. I don’t know, Jack. I was checking measurements and locations for the upped security plans. I haven’t seen anyone. I thought I’d come back here to make sure the girls were ok, but the door was locked. Why the hell was it locked?”

I don’t know, but I’m sure I won’t like the answer.

A scream reverberates through the building. Leo and I race out opposite doors. The scream came from the stage. I’m sure of it.

I rush down the black abyss of the hall, my only thoughts on Alice.

December 11, 4:22 pm

-Alice-

In the blackness of the under-stage room, I cradle Tessa in my arms, pressing a hand against her head. Though I can't see it, the damp thickness of blood oozes against my fingers, matting Tessa's vibrant red hair.

She lets out a soft moan.

"Shh," I soothe in a whisper. "I know it hurts, but I have to press down on it. We have to stay quiet."

My eyes dart around the space, anxious to spot something that would indicate where in the room Tessa and I are sitting. Tessa always comes down to aid me after the act, helping me store away the straps and put away a few other props from previous acts in the show. Everything was going routinely. But as my feet touched the ground after the act, the lights flicked off. I had been momentarily frozen. With a hand against the wall, I began making my way around the room, carefully and slowly so as not to trip, hoping to find Tessa. I didn't dare speak out. Fear had grasped onto my vocal cords at the time. Then I heard the shuffling, followed by Tessa's frightened

scream and a quick thump. Someone muttered *fuck* under their breath. A man. I had wanted to run. Everything in my body begged me to get out of the room, but I had to find Tessa. I wasn't going to leave my friend.

And now, having found Tessa, I want more than ever to run. But I can't leave Tessa behind. And I'm not exactly positive we're alone in the dark.

I hold on tighter to Tessa, wanting to calm her and needing comfort myself. Above us, shouting and clomping reverberate across the stage. Evidently, Tessa's scream initiated a level of panic among everyone else.

Blocking out the chaos from above, I focus on the room I'm in, listening for any noise that would indicate someone else is down here. No shuffling feet. At least none that I can pick up. The noise from above makes it difficult to know where sounds are originating.

Then I hear it from the far corner of the room. An exhale? Inhale? It certainly sounds like a breath. One single intake of air.

My skin prickles with terror.

Fuck. My entire body shakes. *Ok, no more sitting around. That's one sure way to get yourself killed.*

"Tessa?" I chance a whisper so quiet I can barely hear it. "We need to move. Can you walk?"

Tessa nods, and I lift both of us to our feet. With one hand supporting Tessa and the other against the rough concrete wall,

I take deliberate, slow, silent steps. Tessa leans into me.

“How far are we from the exit?” Tessa asks, equally as quiet.

“I don’t know, but we need to get upstairs.” If only I had a flashlight or my cell. Something that could offer us a little illumination. I don’t even want to consider why the generator hasn’t kicked on or what’s taking so long to get the lights running. I’m not even sure the generator turns on anything below the stage. Emergency lights only.

After several steps, I stop and listen again. Disorder and confusion ensue upstairs. I can hear Leo giving commands to others. My goosebumps begin to fade. And then I hear it again.

Another breath.

But it’s no longer in the opposite corner. It’s much closer than before. A mere arm’s reach from Tessa and me. As my flight reaction is about to take hold, a hand clamps down on my shoulder.

Fearful cries rip from our throats. We spin toward the intruder. A shadow.

Another faceless monster.

December 11, 4:29 pm

-Jack-

The innate sound of fear reverberating through the second scream has me ready to shoot first and never ask questions.

Ever.

I have to find Alice. The scream was close. I scan my flashlight across the stage, its luminescence hitting frightened faces.

“Where’d it come from?” My growl causes Glenn to jump.

“I... I don’t know. Maybe the basement?” Glenn stammers.

“It was definitely the basement,” Ramsey confirms.

“Oh my god,” Mandy whispers before panic sets in and her volume increases. “Alice and Tessa are down there! You have to help them.”

She begins weeping. Glenn moves to comfort her. Knowing it could mean danger or even death for Alice has me seeing red and my heart crushing to pieces.

“Fastest way down.” I point the beam at Glenn, whose shaking hand flies up toward a door hidden behind a black curtain. Wasting no time, I rush for the door with Leo behind me.

“Got your back, boss.”

From what can be seen in the glow of our flashlights, the doorway leads down a narrow, winding staircase. In pitch black, the light only reaches so far, making the spiral seem endless. Every nerve-ending in my body forces me down those steps, my pulse beating so fast my chest aches. Images of Alice lying in her blood, body broken and eyes vacant, flash through my mind.

What if I'm too late?

Then someone will pay.

The bottom of the narrow staircase leads into a wide hall. Scanning the light against the gray walls, I notice double doors halfway down the right side. Guns still drawn, Leo and I creep down the corridor, flanking the doors on either side.

I motion for Leo to open the door on my signal. Standing guard, I aim my Sig head-high, preparing for an ambush from the other side. My breathing slows as I listen for noises. I nod once to Leo, whose hand rests on the handle. At the click of the lever, the lights in the building flash on, blinding the men. Simultaneously, a body crashes into me.

Leo's alertness has him aiming his weapon at my assailant.

“Stand down!” I bark. If I didn’t know this body, I’d have shot her. But Alice – her curves, her touch, her rose scent – is ingrained in my memory. I would know her anywhere.

“Check out the room,” I order as I holster my weapon, my arms circling Alice and pulling her close. Her breathing is heavy. Her cheeks moistened with tears. Her body trembling. “It’s ok, dove. I’ve got you.”

Reluctantly, I put a few inches of space between us. She keeps grabbing me closer, clutching my shirt in her fists. My breath stops when I see blood on her hands and clothes.

“Where are you hurt?” My fingers skim over her, looking for the source of the wound. It takes everything I have not to go hunting at this exact moment. Only Alice keeps me anchored here.

“It’s not mine. It’s Tessa’s,” she spurts out. Relief washes through me, and my muscles relax. I pull her closer. Her hands are shaking. “She’s still in there. When he came up behind us, she ran. I couldn’t find her again in the dark. Tell Leo to get her, please.”

“Who came up behind you?”

“I don’t know. I – I don’t know.” Alice’s head shakes back and forth. Ramsey rushes down the stairs as Tessa flies out of the room, collapsing against the wall opposite the doors. Ramsey freezes in place.

“What the –” Ramsey trails off.

“You come down for a reason?” I ask.

“After hitting the breaker, I saw everyone crowding near the door.” Ramsey points up the staircase. “I thought you guys might need some help, so I –” he trails off again. “I didn’t really think it through.”

“Tend to her.” Jack nods toward Tessa.

Eyes wide, Tessa looks wildly around the hall. She slumps forward, forehead bloody and hair matted. Ramsey kneels next to her, reaching an arm around her shoulder. He brings her head to rest on his shoulder and presses a hand against her injury.

“He’s still in there, he’s still in there,” Tessa murmurs over and over. Before I can ask who, Leo calls from inside the room.

“Hey, Jack! You’ve got to see this.”

Hesitant to leave Alice, who’s still clinging to me, I maneuver her behind me, protected by any onslaught ahead and safe within my grasp. My hand remains ready on my weapon. About fifty feet into the room, Leo crouches next to a body lying prone on the floor a yard from the wall.

“He’s out cold,” Leo confirms, looking up toward me as he checks Leroy Dalton’s pulse. A small line of blood trickles from Dalton’s nose. The hint of a bruise threatens below his eye. Leo and I glance toward Alice.

“We may have punched him.” Alice shrugs sheepishly and rubs the knuckles on her right hand. The corners of my lips tug up.

That a girl.

“Wake him up and get him into the office upstairs. And call Lil,” I command. When he turns back toward Alice, my tone becomes softer. “We’ll have to wait for Lillian to get here to give a statement and get the evidence off your hands, but then I’ll take you home to clean up.”

I kiss her lips before hooking an arm around her and escorting her upstairs.



“You need to get evidence off Alice and Tessa and search the downstairs before speaking with Dalton.”

“I know how to do my job, Walker.” Lillian steps around me and into the back room of The Amazing Anslar.

I follow her. “I’m not saying you don’t, Lil.”

“You can’t control this investigation.”

“I’m not trying to control it. I just want –”

She spins and stabs her finger into my chest. “Shut it, Jack.” The glare in her eyes could cut glass. “You don’t think I see what’s going on?”

I remain silent. Of course, she can see what’s going on. Everyone can see it. I shouldn’t have let myself get so involved. Should’ve kept things professional. Except it’s not that simple.

Lillian shakes her head, huffs, and continues, “I’m the lead investigator on the case, and I have my way of doing things.”

“There could be evidence on them.” I point to Alice and Tessa. “And I doubt you want it tampered with. Hell, Tessa is already scratching around her injury.”

Lillian glances at the redhead, whose fingers are tangled in her hair as she assumedly tries to relieve the itch caused by drying blood. The detective rolls her eyes, mumbles something that sounds like *fine*, and instructs one of her two colleagues to collect evidence and statements. Turning to the other, Lillian orders him to search the basement.



“I didn’t hit her,” Dalton states for the fifth time. Lillian and I are sitting on the desk in the office flanking Leroy Dalton. He cowers in the chair. Lillian’s line of questioning has been repetitive and relatively subdued. As it stands, there is nothing she can hold Dalton on at this point. If anything, he could press charges against both Alice and Tessa for punching him in the face. Luckily, he declined to file a report. “I’m serious. I didn’t hit her.”

The conviction in his voice makes him sound like he’s telling the truth, though I know not to trust that. *Trust only the facts*. My gut usually gives me the right answer, but I can only trust the facts. “I told you. I was in the theater when the lights went out. Then I heard a scream and realized it came from below the stage. I was worried about Alice. They just finished an act, and when I heard the scream, I wanted to help.”

“If you didn’t hit Miss Whitmore, then who did? No one else was found downstairs with Miss Harper and Miss Whitmore.” Lillian says. I refrain from rolling my eyes, reminding myself that Lillian is a good detective, even if she isn’t doing her best right now.

“I don’t know.” Frustration seeps through Dalton’s words. His eyes glisten, and a bead of sweat drips down his forehead. “There was someone else down there. I think.”

“What do you mean, you think?” Lil asks.

“When I got down there, someone brushed by me. Not like touched me, but I felt the air. Move. When someone...”

“That sounds a little too convenient, don’t you think?”

“It’s the truth, damn it!”

“Mr. Dalton, there’s no need to shout,” Lillian states.

“Look –” he takes a deep breath. “It wasn’t me. It was dark. I wanted to help. And I have no clue who hit Tessa.”

I can tell Lillian is about to attempt another round of ad nauseam questioning, so I place a hand on her shoulder. She stiffens beneath my fingers. “I think that’s enough, Lil.”

Dalton looks wide-eyed and hopeful at Lil and me. I undermined Lillian. It wasn’t my intention, but the repetition is getting us nowhere, and I want to get Alice home.

“You’re free to go, Mr. Dalton,” Lillian acquiesces, though her cold stare shoots daggers my way.

Leroy floats from the chair and hurries to the door as though a weight has been lifted off him. He cracks it open just as Anslar pushes his way through, almost toppling Leroy to the ground.

“Watch it,” Anslar snaps at his assistant. “We need to have a word, Walker.”

Since when did Anslar start calling me by my last name? His attempted macho *I run this place* façade makes Anslar look foolish. Lillian cocks an eyebrow at the man.

“What can we do for you, Mr. Anslar?” I look past him through the open door to a group of employees and their peering eyes.

“I want to know why I’m paying for security if shit like this is going to happen?”

“You’re paying for security to protect your employees, your show... and you. Now, at your previous insistence, we did not increase security measures here earlier,” I say. Anslar huffs and throws his arms across his chest. “Which reminds me, Anslar. Where’d you run off to during the blackout?”

“Are you accusing me of something, Walker?”

“Just trying to make sense of the night.”

“Make sense of what, exactly? I went to grab a flashlight and try to fix the lights. You’re welcome, by the way. Besides, I hadn’t even made it down to the basement by the time you and your damsel in distress came up. How many more issues is she going to cause?”

My jaw ticks. I tighten my hand, cracking a series of knuckles in the process. Anslar's staring back, a smug grin on his face begging me to throw a punch. I stand off the desk, unwilling to play Anslar's game.

“Feel free to question anyone else tonight without me, Lil.” I step toward the door, pausing next to Anslar on his way out. “You and your employees will need the day off tomorrow so my crew can increase *your* security.”

Anslar is about to protest until he looks into my eyes. My glare is deadly. Anslar nods and backs up.

Stepping out of the office, I cross over to the couch where Alice is curled against the arm, her head resting there. Her expression worried, eyes focused on an object in her hand. My gaze follows hers. Between her fingers, Alice holds a green-jeweled ring. She spins it over and over but never puts it on.

December 11, 7:51 pm

Alice's face when she first saw the ring sitting on her empty station makes the whole chaotic night worthwhile. The near lethargic state of worry it put her in adds to the pleasure tingling through me. She doesn't even respond to her security guard when asked what's wrong.

I've gotten into her head.

A small victory with the promise of a more successful plan.

I watch from a distance as the buffoon plops down next to her on the couch. He drags her closer to him. *Disgusting*. Isn't the guy supposed to be a professional? Where's the rectitude in that?

I look away, scanning the room filled with murmurs and exhausted coworkers. Everyone has a theory, though some are simply whispering about Alice and the security guard.

Turning back to Alice, I watch as a large hand grazes down her arm. Jealousy sweeps through me.

The asshole's not delicate enough for her. She needs someone with finesse.

Precision.

The security's other hand reaches under her chin and turns her face toward him. The concern in Jack Walker's expression is laughable.

Just you wait for what's next.

Walker says something. She shakes her head, her coffee-colored hair flowing over her shoulders despite its ruffled mess.

My Alice. She is beautiful no matter what.

Walker says something else. This time she nods. He motions for his employee, asshole number two, and points around the room and then to the office. The guy nods and moves toward the office where their detective friend waits.

The detective is quite pretty. Not as classically beautiful as Alice, but pretty. I might go for the blonde if I didn't already have my sights set on my beautiful brunette. Except the detective is nothing like Amelia.

And that matters.

There's always next time. Another collection.

My stare returns to Alice. Her bodyguard stands, reaching a hand down for Alice, which she accepts. He lifts her to her feet. Walker grabs her coat from the back of the

couch, helps Alice into it, and places an arm around her waist. Then they leave.

There's little reason I have to stay now.

I can't wait to get out of here.

December 11, 9:02 pm

-Alice-

I stand alone in the bathroom. A fog infiltrates my brain. Almost mechanically, I turn the shower on. Jack wants me to clean up, wash the blood off. But the blood doesn't bother me. At least I know where it came from. How it got on my hands.

I thought I'd lost my grandfather's gift. Heartbroken over it. After looking for it everywhere, I'd been forcing myself to come to terms with the loss. At the very least, I hoped that it would show up at some point in life. Maybe at home. Or in the makeshift lost and found in the office.

I was not expecting it to show up on my near-empty vanity at work right after the blackout fiasco. To anyone else, it would look like I'd left it there, but I know it hadn't been there earlier. I checked again - the station's surface, the drawers, even the floor beneath - just in case.

It wasn't there.

And then, as if by magic, as though it was performing a reappearing act of its own, it was. Sitting on the hardwood top,

taunting me the moment I stepped into the backroom after the power outage.

A chill creeps down my spine at the memory.

The rest of the night at The Amazing Anslar had been a blur. I answered the detective's questions, I think. A small amount of the congealing blood was scraped from my hand into a vial for evidence. At some point, I curled into the corner of the couch where Jack later found me.

I lied to him. Again.

He asked if anything was wrong. Fear had gripped my vocal cords, and a shiver slithered over my skin. I just wanted to get home. Mentioning the ring would have prolonged being there.

The pattering of the shower breaks through my fog, and I remember why I'm in the bathroom.

Clean up. Get the blood off. I'll make some calls. Then we'll get sleep. Jack's words repeat in my mind.

The small piece of jewelry still clenched in my left hand is another story. A sharp ache emanates from my palm. Opening my hand, I stare at a puncture in my skin. A small bead of fresh blood forms. I close my fist again.

I look at my other hand. Tessa's blood, mostly coagulated, coats my palm. A dry streak travels the length of my arm, wrist to elbow. I glide the glass door open a little further. Enough space to step inside the shower. A smear of red wraps around the edge of the glass. I leave it there, moving under the spray.

A distant knock sounds somewhere in the room. *Did someone call my name?* A click follows.

“Fuck.” That now-familiar soothing voice whispers into my thoughts. I lift my head. I find myself sitting on the shower floor, knees cradled against my chest. *When had I done that?* I can’t remember. I stepped in, and then... and then Jack came in. There is nothing in between.

The spray of freezing water floods over me. My teeth chatter.

“Dove.” At his words, my eyes meet Jack’s gaze. Distress is written across his expression. *Is everything ok?* My only movements are those that follow Jack’s path as he reaches inside the shower. Sporadic sputtering reverberates from above. Within seconds, my body warms.

Jack drops his phone and wallet on the counter and steps inside the shower with me, lowering his body to the floor between me and the wall.

“Your clothes are still on,” I say.

“So are yours.” Jack’s arms wrap around me, pulling me close and giving protection. His lips touch the back of my hair in a gentle kiss. “Talk to me.”

I breathe in deeply, the steam beginning to clear the ambiguity that haunted my mind moments before. I hold open my fist, revealing the jade ring.

“My grandfather gave it to me. It was for my graduation,” I begin.

“You thought you lost it.”

I nod. “I didn’t have it on after the attack. It wasn’t at home. When I went and searched at work, I still couldn’t find it. It was gone.”

“But you have it now.”

“It was sitting on my station at work after the blackout.”

Jack’s muscles flex and tighten around me. The slight change in his position makes me feel even more protected. “Someone put it there, Jack. Like they intentionally caused the lights to go out just to screw with me.”

“I wish you had told me while we were still there.”

I nod. I should’ve said something. I shouldn’t have even touched the ring at all. Jack removes the jewelry from my still-open palm, stands, and reaches out of the shower to place it on the counter. He pulls off his soaking shirt and throws it on the ground. I admire each and every movement his muscles make as he undresses. Jack continues stripping down to his boxers, and then those come off, too. A wet puddle of fabric pools on the bathroom floor.

Turning back to me, helping me stand, his arms fold around me again. Then he lets go, capturing my face in his hands. Leveling my eyes with his, Jack kisses me.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.”

My arms stretch over my head, and Jack grips the hem of my shirt, easing it off my body. My bra follows my shirt to the floor. His fingers graze the skin in the hollow where my neck

and shoulder meet. Soon they trace down my arms and around my back. He unbuttons my pants, shimmying those down my legs. My hand naturally braces on his strong shoulders for balance as I step out of them. Jack pauses and places a gentle kiss on the inside of my thigh. As though he knows what I need at this moment.

A delicious shiver runs through me. His fingers hook over the edge of my lace panties, and he slips those off, too.

By the time Jack is standing again, I've forgotten why I got in the shower in the first place. My pulse recklessly beating, I want nothing more than to wrap my body around Jack's and indulge in the same pleasure he gave me the other day. I bite my lower lip.

"Not yet, dove," Jack whispers. A tender laugh escapes with his words.

Lathering my shower gel in his hand, Jack lifts my right arm. His masculine hand circles around and over my skin. The suds turn pink before Jack rinses them away. He repeats the process once more and then turns his focus to my other arm. My skin tingles where his fingers trace. The heat of the shower is mild compared to the inferno ignited by his touch. His thumb grazes over the small puncture wound. I flinch at the tenderness of the nick.

Jack's fingers roam my body, leaving lather in their wake. Dizzy from the steam and Jack's touches, I feel like I'm floating when he spins me slowly around under the spray. Soap flows in rivulets down my body until it's gone. An arm

wraps around my waist, pulling me against him. Against his arousal.

I know I should face the reality of my situation. The letters. The ring.

But isn't this man behind me part of that reality? I'm confident I couldn't survive it without him at this point. Hell. If it weren't for Jack, I might not be here at all.

I reach my hand up and around Jack's neck, tilting my head toward him and crashing my mouth against his. He doesn't resist. I turn in his arms. Fingers tighten around my ass, and I'm lifted off the ground. My legs wrap around Jack.

Icy tiles drag a gasp from my lungs. Jack's cock rests against me. Teasing me. Promising me more. My body craves his. The throbbing between my legs needs nothing else but him.

Fuck me. Fuck me now.

"Are you sure you want this right now, dove?"

"God, yes," I breathe. *I need this.*

"I'm clean, Alice." It takes a second to register what he's saying. I kiss him.

"Me, too. And birth control," I mumble with my lips against his. "I'm on birth control."

Jack's fingers dig tighter into my ass at the exact moment he impales me with his cock. I'm positive he's leaving permanent fingerprints on my cheeks, but I don't care. He stretches me,

fills me. I can feel every damn inch. I roll my hips in pace with his.

Jack's mouth leaves mine. He buries his head into the crook of my neck, the sting from his teeth instantly salved by the lave of his tongue. A low rumble rolls from his throat before his head dips lower. His mouth clamps on my nipple seconds before he takes it between his teeth. My body sparks alive.

His thrusts shove me against the tile. Being caged in by his body, being at his mercy, summons a sinfulness in my core. *I want him to destroy me.*

Every time he slams into me, I mewl his name, loving the sound of it on my lips. I could scream his name all night.

Pressure against my clit pushes me to the edge. Jack rolls it between thumb and finger. White light blasts across my vision. An electrical current charges through me.

“We’re not done yet.”

With only that as a warning, my feet touch the ground, and I’m spun around. My hands smack against the wall as I try to catch my breath. The icy tiles crush my breasts. My nipples tighten more. The coolness of the wall and the heat of Jack’s skin awaken a storm in me. His hand drags down my spine, rubbing the curve of my ass, dipping between my cheeks. A thumb skims over the hole there. I gasp at the unexpected touch.

“This ok?” he asks, circling over the unexplored spot. I nod, not trusting myself to voice how wickedly good it feels.

Keeping his thumb where it is, Jack pulls out of me. He runs a finger through my slick folds. Drags it back, coated in my juices. My muscles tighten the moment it penetrates my hole.

“Relax, Alice. I won’t hurt you.”

The tension in my body unwinds with his words. He withdraws a little before pressing in again. I give in to the new feeling, bracing my hands against the wall. A sigh turns into a moan. I rotate my hips into the pressure. A purr leaks from my lips. As though encouraged by my sounds, Jack slides his cock back into me. A satisfied groan reverberates from his throat. My face warms. With both holes conquered, I give in to the fullness. The ecstasy.

“One more, baby.” Jack increases his pace as he pounds into me, his finger buried inside my ass. “Touch yourself.”

I rub halos over my clit. A large hand grips tightly onto my hip. Jack slams into me. Over and over, his relentless pounding pulls pleasure from my core. The sensation overpowers any thought. My back arches, cheek resting against the wet wall. I fall over the cliff a second time, screaming Jack’s name. My body convulses around him, and he slams into me once more. My soul hums with release as he fills me.

Jack trails kisses up my spine. Exhausted, my legs nearly give out beneath me. The only thing that stops me from collapsing on the shower floor is a strong arm wrapped around my waist.

December 12, 2:53 am

The pen is mightier than the sword.

Shakespeare.

While the pen has added to my enjoyment and anticipation, I doubt the guy knew what he was talking about. It would've been more correct to claim the pen is a prelude to the sword.

I sit at the table in the kitchen. A sheet of blank white paper lies flat against the laminate. The edges of the table are peeling, chunks of laminate missing. But beggars can't be choosers.

My pen scratches down the page. Straight unmistakable letters form, hinting at my next step. The new plan excites me in ways the old one hadn't.

I have the security guard to thank for that. If the asshole hadn't gotten involved – hadn't played fucking hero in the first place, who knows how this whole thing would've

ended. Alice would be dead by now, but where's the fun in that? This new plan is better. More fun.

A game.

One I intend on winning. One that will not only get me my desired result but also torture that damn asshole in the process.

“I’ll be seeing you soon, beautiful Alice.” My whisper floats away with the draft. The thought brings a wicked smile to my face.

Even as I finish my next letter, innocuous and threatening all at once, I’m unsure of when it will be delivered. Timing is everything. The sooner, the better, but patience is vital. I know that now.

Soon, my Alice.

In sweeping, flowing letters, I sign the bottom of the page.

Yours Truly.

December 12, 8:47 am

-Jack-

I wake to the sun filtering through the windows and an empty bed. I'm not usually a heavy sleeper. I'm not much of a sleeper at all. But there's a comfort with Alice that lets me relax when it's just the two of us.

The bedroom door is open. Morning sounds from the kitchen infiltrate the air. Softly, a radio blankets the cacophony of scraping, clinking, and sizzling chorusing with it.

A smile breaks onto my face. With little desire to stay in a bed empty of the woman who belongs in it with me, I make my way to the kitchen, stepping gently.

Leaning against the archway between the living room and kitchen, I admire the scene. With her back to me, Alice stands at the stove in an oversized black knit sweater that stops in the middle of her thighs. She sways back and forth to the song on the radio, humming softly.

Alice scoops up a spatula, brings it to the pan, and flips a piece of French toast.

“You cook,” I say.

Instead of jumping at my sudden appearance, Alice turns toward me with bright, playful eyes and a wide smile.

“Only breakfast,” she replies with a wink before turning back to the stove.

I’ve already spent too much time at this distance and move to her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I let the other hand graze her bare thigh and kiss her temple. The scratches are gone, and the bruise faded. The battle scars on her wrist are healing. Alice is resilient. Courageous, even, especially in helping others when she’s in danger herself. Most of my past clients who have faced similar threats always want to hide, live in a safe house until the danger has passed. Not Alice.

“Why only breakfast?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Alice looks up. I cock an eyebrow. “It’s the most important meal of the day.” She giggles and returns to cooking. Her playful attitude brings a smile to my lips. It’s a complete transformation from yesterday.

I return her good humor but also know to keep a close eye. Shock plays out in funny ways sometimes.

“Anything I can help with?” I ask.

“Pour us some coffee and have a seat. Food’s almost ready.”

I do as she asks, pouring a generous amount of chocolate creamer into her coffee, turning the dark substance into a tawny caramel. Keeping mine black, I bring the mugs to the table and sit. Seconds later, Alice places a plate in front of me.

Crisp bacon. Three pieces of French toast. It smells delicious. French toast has also been a favorite of mine, not that Alice knows that.

“I hope you like cinnamon. I sprinkled some in with the eggs and milk before dipping the bread.”

Alice grabs her plate and sits next to me, drowning her food in syrup. Before digging in, I look at the woman in front of me. Never have I been so captivated by a single person. As my eyes roam over her, I notice her hand.

“You put your ring back on.” I’m a little surprised. After her reaction last night, I was worried she wouldn’t want anything to do with it. Concerned that the asshole may have ruined a memory of her grandfather. But here she is, ring securely on the second finger of her right hand.

Alice places her fork down and lifts her hand, glancing at the jewelry, contemplation in her eyes.

“I decided I don’t want to be afraid,” she starts. Her green gaze finds mine. “Last night, I was so terrified that I completely closed up. I don’t like how that feels. Letting whoever this asshole is get to me won’t keep me safe. I figure I have two choices: I can crawl inside myself, or I can keep fighting. Right? Besides, wearing it might throw the guy off his game. He was expecting me to react. Having it on will show him I can’t be manipulated so easily.”

I lean in. My hands cup her face, and my lips crash into hers. She lets out a small sensual moan. When I pull away, and

she bites her lower lip, I want nothing more than to take her here on the table.

“What was that for?” Her voice is light and curious.

I clear my throat. “For making breakfast, obviously.”

“Mm. I can’t wait until you taste it, then.” She winks with a playful smirk. Taking the hint, I pick up my fork and cut into my breakfast, popping a piece in my mouth.

The French toast hits my tongue, and I moan. “This is incredible, Alice.”

“My grandfather used to make it for me on weekends when I was little. It was always a favorite. By the time I was eleven, he let me help him in the kitchen on weekend mornings. It’s one of my most cherished memories.”

“Tell me more about your grandfather and your life growing up.” I want to know everything about her.

“In many ways, it was a typical childhood. My mother and I moved in with my grandfather when I was four. He made sure I was never wanting. He retired shortly after I was born. Stayed home to help raise me. Made sure I was fed and clothed.” I listen as Alice relives stories of her childhood. Her face lights up each time she regales something. Her eyes sparkle, and her entire body laughs, recalling the fun she had with her grandfather. Tears glisten in her eyes, but a smile remains on her face. “He was a wonderful man.”

Our plates are empty by the time she finishes her stories. When Alice moves to get up, I rest a hand on her arm. “Sit.

You made it; I clean it up.”

I move away, bringing the dishes to the sink. Alice pivots her chair toward me, continuing her tales of childhood. Her laughter is infectious and pure, and I make it a mission to keep her this happy as often as I can.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say and clear my throat. “What would you say to going out on a date? Dinner at a nice restaurant. We can go when you get off work tomorrow or make a day of it on Sunday.”

I glance over at Alice. She wears a big grin. “I’d love to.”

Before either of us can say anything else, the door leading into the apartment pops open. I immediately swing around to face the intruder as Alice braces herself behind me. My arm protectively wraps around her.

“Mmm, baby. Welcome home to me!” A petite blonde-haired girl with dark brown eyes shimmies into the kitchen. She drags a piece of baby pink rolling luggage behind her. Her eyes roam over my body as she removes her designer coat, revealing a pair of black dress slacks and a pale blue fitted sweater. She doesn’t even bat an eye at my intimidating stance as she stares around me at Alice, who’s now skirting around me with open arms. Alice and the girl embrace with a squeal.

This must be the roommate.

Sam pushes Alice an arms-length away. Her hands remain on Alice’s shoulders as she eyes me again. “Look at this hunk. You didn’t tell me you were keeping a freakin’ god in the

apartment. I would've been home much sooner had I known this sexy piece of man meat was around."

A tall, dirty-blond-haired man steps through the still-open door. He's the same man that had been talking to Alice after Saturday's show, caging her in with his arm. I take a step closer to Alice.

"This is Jack Walker, my..." Alice glances up at me before looking back at Sam. "This is Jack. Jack, my roommate, Samantha Fairchild."

I reach out my hand, which Sam takes. Her grip is surprisingly strong for such a small person.

"Pleasure," I say.

"I assure you, the pleasure is definitely mine." Sam turns to Alice while pointing at me. "Are there more like him? I could get used to having men like this around. My poor brother never stood a chance."

I cock an eyebrow at Alice, whose cheeks have turned a deep shade of pink. The man shifts behind his sister. An awkward silence blankets the room.

"Oh, right! Silly me. Getting all hot and bothered over Dreamy McSexHunk here." Sam motions an arm to the man behind her. "This is my brother Georgie." She looks at Alice. "He insisted on tagging along even though I told him we'd be fine."

"I'm only here to make sure you are alright, Alice," Georgie says.

I clear my throat and reach a hand out toward Sam's brother.
"Nice to meet you. Georgie?"

He takes my offered hand after dragging his eyes away from Alice. Georgie applies more pressure to the shake than necessary. The man's attempt at intimidation falls short. *This is the game you want to play?* I increase the strength of the hold. When we release the shake, Georgie stretches his fingers as though ridding an ache. *Good.*

"My sister's nickname for me has unfortunately stuck. Luckily, I don't mind beautiful women calling me Georgie." He steps around his sister and moves closer to Alice, pulling her into a hug. Alice only offers one arm back. When he lets go, Georgie's eyes roam down her body. Alice has yet to put pants on, her smooth legs bare and on display. She shifts her weight into me, leaning away from Georgie. I touch her arm, reassuring her. Georgie's gaze flicks up to mine. "You can call me George. So, your company is protecting our Alice?"

"It is."

"That's got to get pretty expensive." George turns toward Alice. "Can you afford this?"

Alice's mouth drops open.

"I – I don't know." She turns to me. "I guess we should sit down and talk about costs. I'm sorry I didn't think to do that beforehand. I'll find a way to make sure Elite is paid."

Yeah. Definitely want to punch this guy. My hand moves to Alice's cheek. I rub my thumb over her skin and open my

mouth to tell her it's already taken care of when—.

“Just bill me. I don't mind covering the costs.” Smugness permeates George's offer. “She's important to my sister and m—”

“That won't be necessary,” I interrupt. “The costs are covered already.”

December 12, 9:48 am

-Alice-

“So, dinner tonight?” Sam asks. Jack’s thumb stills against my cheek, and his hand drops to my arm. It rests protectively just above my elbow. “I need some BFF time.”

“My treat,” Georgie announces, reaching out and placing his hand on my shoulder. “The three of us can grab a bite, then come back here to catch up.”

I remain silent for a moment. I’d love to have time with Sam. Admittedly, I’m not as thrilled that Georgie inserted himself into my time with my best friend, but I can’t be rude when he’s offered to buy our dinner. And to ignore the worries of my current situation would be nice. So ordinary. I look between Sam, Georgie, and Jack.

“What do you think?” I ask Jack.

His fingers twitch against my arm. There’s a tick in his jaw. Then his expression softens.

“I’ve got to make a stop at the office and then at Anslar’s to ensure everything is well underway and being installed

properly. Emmett's there now. He and I are meeting with Lillian. I might be a while." I can see the gears turning in his mind. "I'd feel better if you kept security nearby."

"Done!" Sam interjects, a grin from ear to ear. Then she adds, "But not you. Alice won't be able to focus on anything else if you're anywhere nearby."

Jack laughs, a deep rumble emanating from his core. My cheeks warm. I understand the need to stay safe, but having a constant watcher is a bit much.

"Do I really need a babysitter? I'll be out with people I trust. I doubt anyone will try something when others can see." I've been looking over my shoulder constantly. Hell, since the letters began, I've felt eyes on me. I want to stop feeling afraid. *I need to feel normal again.*

"We'll keep her safe," Georgie says.

Jack sighs. He takes my hands and pulls me close. The current of electricity between us makes my body crave his. In a perfect world, this is where I belong at all times. Unfortunately, the world isn't perfect. Jack has a job to do. I have a life to live.

"Promise me you'll be alert. Stay with Sam and George. Make sure you always know where they are. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, think someone is following you, anything, you call Leo or me." His voice is gravelly. I nod at Jack's request. I can tell he hates this idea, but I'm glad he trusts me. Despite an audience, Jack's lips find mine. Deep, hard, protective. Every bit claiming, letting everyone in the room

know I'm his. I stifle a moan and feel like I'm melting. Any second now, I'll be a puddle on the floor. When Jack pulls away, he tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear. "I'll be back in the morning."

"You better be," I reply with a smile.

Jack grabs his coat and keys. Before leaving, he points at Sam and Georgie. "Keep an eye on her."

They nod. The second the door closes, Sam fans herself.

"Holy all that's good in life, that man is a god. If he hadn't already staked his claim on you, I would've stripped naked and begged him to fuck me."

"Jesus, Sam," Georgie scoffs. "Could you be a little less crude when I'm around?"



Hours later, Sam and I stumble through our door, laughing and chatting. Georgie follows closely behind, carrying three bags of groceries. This has been the closest to normal I've felt in a long time.

"Exactly how long did you think you could starve for?" Sam's tone is playful.

"I was betting I could make it another week before I'd succumb to shopping or death," I joke, shoving the fruits and vegetables Sam bought into the fridge. I hadn't realized until

now how empty it had gotten, which reminds me: “We have to pay rent. Mr. White will be expecting it.”

“Daddy already paid.”

I freeze in place. I look to Georgie, hoping he’ll refute Sam’s claims. He doesn’t. He only nods.

I never want to take advantage of Sam’s parents’ generosity. Before I can argue, Sam holds up a hand. “Don’t even say it. Daddy insisted after he heard what happened.”

And that is the end of that discussion. I’m well aware I can’t argue once Mr. Fairchild insists on something. He’s a proud man. On top of that, he loves taking care of his family, and I’m considered family.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sam says. “Now, let’s celebrate!”

“Celebrate what?”

“My homecoming, of course!” Sam giggles. She flits around the room, grabbing glasses and wine and whatever just-bought snacks she can carry. She takes her balancing act into the living room, where she plops everything on the coffee table, drops onto the couch, and starts scanning through tv shows.

By the time the second movie ends, my head is fuzzy. An empty bottle of wine lays haphazardly on the table. Sam pours the remaining contents of our second bottle into her glass.

I giggle. *When did she grab that?*

Georgie sits in the chair, sober but all smiles. He must find the scene amusing. Two drunk girls giggling about boys and movies.

Sam leans in close to my ear and hitches a thumb toward her brother. “Poor Georgie will be so upset when he finds out you’re unavailable.”

I giggle, the wine controlling my response. When I shake my head, parts of the room move more slowly than others.

“I’m sitting right here, Sam,” Georgie bites out.

“I know.” Sam hiccups. “It’s not like you don’t have an obvious thing for her, Georgie Pie.”

I cup my hand around my mouth and try to whisper. “Be nice to him, Sam.”

“You two are drunk,” Georgie accuses, pointing between us. More laughter permeates the room.

“You sure you don’t want to marry him? Then we’d be sisters.” Sam slurs as she sweeps her wine glass lazily through the air before setting it precariously on the table’s edge. She stands, wobbles, and spans her arms for balance. “Time to pee.”

Sam holds on to everything available on her trek to the bathroom. I snicker, watching her leave.

“You could marry me,” Georgie deadpans. My head snaps back toward him, and my brain swims for a second before my mouth drops open. It’s the boldest he’s ever been. “We could run off to Vegas. You’d never want for anything again.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask, laughing.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just tired of waiting.” Georgie shrugs. “Or maybe I’m not worried about being honest because there’s no way you two remember this in the morning.”

I’m not so sure about that. Before I can respond, Sam comes giggling back from her sojourn, plopping down in my lap. I grunt with the impact as Sam’s arms wrap around my neck.

“You’re my sister no matter what,” Sam admits. My heart fills my chest as though all the love in the world has taken residence inside. When Sam moves back to the couch, I stand, wobbling slightly. Georgie lifts off the chair, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“You ok?”

“I’m... fine. Just a little unsteady.” I fan my body. “Is it hot in here? It’s hot in here.” Sam’s giggling again. She swigs back the rest of her wine before trying to stand with me.

“I think you two need to get some sleep.” Without another word, Georgie guides us to our bedrooms.

He’d make a good babysitter.

Sitting on my bed, I grab my phone. Not a single text from Jack.

He’s working. The reminder doesn’t ease the hurt. *Stupid wine.*

I type a quick message into my phone before setting it on my nightstand. Still warm from drinking, I stumble to my window and prop it open a half-inch. The crisp air flowing through it brushes over my skin and relieves my discomfort.

As I crawl into bed and under the covers, my phone vibrates.

I miss you, too. Get sleep.

December 13, 1:27 am

This is too perfect.

I'd been worried she'd lock it and I'd have to find another way to deliver my love note. But here she is practically inviting me in. Seeing Alice sway and stumble sent a surge of excitement through me. She's drunk. Passed out in bed. It would take an explosion to wake her at this point.

My fingers itch with anticipation. Straightening, I stand still, taking in my brunette beauty, her hair strewn carelessly across a pillow. Alice's comforter has lowered to below her chest. She's wearing a lace tank top that showcases her perfectly molded breasts. My pants tighten at the sight.

I begin to reach out, needing to touch her, to feel her.

No. I pull my hand back. Focus. Tonight isn't about that.

Moving silently, I place my letter on her dresser. Something is missing.

I grab her ring from its resting place and set it on the paper.

Perfect.

December 13, 4:35 am

-Jack-

My lungs rip open with ragged coughs, and a haze permeates the air. The ear-splitting mechanical shrieks are disorienting. I cover my ears.

“Mom?” I maneuver down the hallway, hand dragging on the wall, elbow covering my mouth. Each step is less sure than the previous.

Faint whimpering underscores the alarm. *Emmett*. Opening the door, I enter Emmett’s bedroom. My nine-year-old brother is tucked tightly in the corner of his bed, sandwiching himself against the adjoining walls. I reach out my hand.

Without warning, we’re in the kitchen. Dishes soak in the sink. I grip Emmett’s arm, refusing to let go, and reach for the door leading outside.

Frantic screams of a woman echo through the room. I drag my brother toward the cries.

Pop-pop-pop-pop!

“Mom? Mom!”

My body jerks up in bed, and I point my Sig across the empty room. Other than my heavy breathing, silence fills the air.

Fuck.

This is why I don't sleep much. I'm not sure exactly when the memory began seeping into my dreams, but it's a near-permanent fixture now. I check that the safety is on before replacing the gun on the nightstand and throw my feet over the side, bending forward. My hands grasp my hair. I pull the strands to release the tension building in me.

One. Two. Three.

By the time I reach fifty, my muscles relax and breathing regulates. It's taken years of practice for these exercises to work. I pick up my phone, illuminating the screen: 4:38 am. Resigned to staying awake, I lift myself from the bed, moving toward the master bath. Without turning on a light, I maneuver through my home. Contemporary and clean-lined, the two-level condo is void of anything too personal, something that never bothered me much until now.

Now it seems lonely.

By 5:30, I'm on my third cup of coffee. Gulping back the last of the warm liquid, I grab my coat, keys, and gun, heading to the office some floors below.

I'm missing something about this whole case. I can feel it. How can this asshole, who was in my sights that night of the

attack, continue to play games? Lillian is better than that. My team is better than that.

Hell, I'm better than that.

The elevator dings and I exit on the floor with Emmett's and my offices. With Emmett and Gwen absent, the place is as quiet as a morgue. It's my favorite time to be here. I can delve into my work without distraction when no one else is around.

Sitting at my desk, I double-click the shared folder on my computer titled A.H. and open the document on Leroy Dalton. Nothing adds up. Dalton was born into a loving and caring family to Mr. Lawrence and Ophelia Dalton. His father made more than enough for the family to survive on one income, and his mother doted on Leroy at home. Involved in extracurriculars through high school. Good college. Steady work. Hell, the guy even volunteers at a homeless shelter at points throughout the year.

Nothing in Leroy's file jumps out as unusual, even if the guy himself is socially awkward. Other than an obvious romantic interest in Alice, one that I've been keeping an eye on for a while, and the fact that he was in the basement during the blackout, nothing connects Leroy to being Alice's stalker.

I close the document and open the file with the videos. We have nine in total now, thanks to Lillian pulling some strings. Five of them are from a distance, making it difficult to see the area where the street meets the alley. Two surveillance videos point in the wrong direction. The one with a view down the alley – the one we were all excited to get our hands on and

watch – statics. The image cuts out periodically with dozens of flickering lines crossing over the picture. One of my guys is trying to fix the image, but there's been no headway.

I play the first video. I've seen it at least five or six times, always watching for new details to emerge. Nothing ever does. By the time I've moved on to the third video, my eyes ache. The tick of the wall clock draws my attention. I've been in front of my computer for three hours. I press my palms against my eyes, trying to reduce the pressure behind them.

My cell rings and Leo's name pops up on the screen.

"Hey, man. Are you at Alice's?" I ask. Leo doesn't respond immediately. My breathing halts, waiting for him to say something.

Leo exhales. "You better get down here. There's another letter."



How did he get into Alice's? The entire way there, my thoughts focus on my need to protect her and how I'm failing. I should've gone over last night, should've been there with her.

Leo hadn't said much else, only assured me that Alice is unharmed. I park haphazardly in front of her home and rush out of the car, pounding my way to the door. Lincoln stands on the porch, guarding the entry. Three more members of Elite roam over the yard. I don't stop to speak with any of them.

Taking two steps at a time, I make my way upstairs. The door into the apartment is cracked, and the door jamb is broken.

“Where is sh –”

“Shh!” Sam’s finger flicks to her lips and points toward the living room. My eyes follow where Sam points. Alice is curled into the corner of the couch under a knit blanket. I take a step toward the archway.

“Let her sleep,” Sam whispers. She takes a sip of steaming coffee. “She was frantic. I’m sure the fright cured whatever hangover she was going to have.”

“Hangover?”

“Two bottles of wine between us might have been one bottle too many.”

I take in Sam’s appearance. Slumped in the chair. Two hands around a large mug filled to the brim with dark liquid. On the table is a half-filled bottle of cheap whiskey. I cock a brow at Sam.

“It’s a classic hangover cure. Probably.” She takes another sip. “Don’t judge.”

“Not judging. Are you ok?”

“Not really. No. We were having fun, relaxing. It got late. Georgie helped us to bed. Next thing I know, I’m waking up to Alice’s scream. As I run to her room, your friend kicks in the door.” There’s a tremor in her hand as she lifts the mug.

“We’ll fix the door.”

“I don’t give a shit about the door.”

“Where’s Georgie now? You said he was here last night.”

“He’s on his way over. I called him not too long ago.” Sam looks up. “You want a cup? I made some for Alice to calm her nerves, but she fell asleep.”

“You two put whiskey in coffee?” Sam smirks and nods. She motions toward the coffee maker, and while coffee and whiskey – especially whiskey – sounds damn good right about now, I shake my head.

I swallow. I should’ve been here. Alice shouldn’t have had to find the note. The asshole shouldn’t have even gotten that close to her.

“Where is she?” George asks, entering the apartment. He moves toward the living room, but I stop him with a hand on his chest.

“She’s asleep,” I say. I glance at Sam and then back at her brother. My eyes narrow. “How late were you here last night?”

“I don’t know. Maybe midnight?” The guy shrugs. His vague response pisses me off. I cross my arms over my chest and stand taller.

“You don’t know what time you left?”

“No. I put the girls to bed and headed out. I didn’t think about checking the time.” George looks back at his sister.

“Don’t look at me,” she claims, throwing her hands in the air. “I was totally not paying attention to the time.”

I should have had Leo stay with the girls. This guy was supposed to keep them safe. Instead, he left and let Alice's stalker get in.

Unless he hadn't left right away.

"Would you be willing to give a writing sample?" Jack asks.

"What?" George tilts his head. "Why?"

"You were the last person with her."

"You don't seriously believe I left the letter." George turns to his sister. "Tell them I didn't leave the letter."

Sam doesn't say anything. Her focus bobs between George and me.

"Sam?" George asks. "You can't really think that."

She glances at me, eyes filled with worry. "I – I don't think he would do this to Alice. I mean, I was pretty out of it, but I don't think he would."

"You don't *think* I would do this? But you can't be sure? What the hell, Sam?!" He huffs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Is Alice alright? Let me talk to her. She'll tell you I didn't do this."

He again tries to move into the living room. My annoyance skyrockets and I push against George's chest, this time shoving him back an inch.

"You're not going near her until I get some answers," I growl.

"What the hell, man? She's my friend."

“And she can stay your friend. But you’re not going near her until I know who left the letter.” I point to the table. “Sit.”

George’s face reddens. He looks like he’s about to say something but sits instead. Tense silence hovers in the air.

“Where’s the note?” I ask Leo, who stands in the kitchen doorway. Leo stares at me, remaining quiet for a second too long. “Where is it?”

“In the bedroom.” Leo hesitates, then sighs. “Where it was left.”

Every muscle tenses until I’m standing rigid. It’s the only thing keeping me from exploding in a fury and shoving someone up against the wall.

“Did you touch anything?”

“Nothing,” Leo confirms.

“Did Alice?”

Leo shakes his head. No. Good. If there is a trace of evidence to point toward this asshole, we’ll find it. I am almost sure there won’t be, unfortunately.

With a nod, I turn toward the rest of the apartment. “Call Lillian. We’ll want to check for fingerprints.”

I sneak as quietly as possible through the living room, focusing on Alice until I reach the other side of the apartment. I creak open the bedroom door. A draft hangs in the room from the window that is open a crack. A white piece of paper lays on the dresser, the corner fluttering with the slight breeze.

MY LOVELY ALICE, ALONE AGAIN IN THE NIGHT.
I KEPT YOU COMPANY.
YOU'RE SO PEACEFUL WHEN YOU SLEEP.
I'LL HAVE YOU SOON.
Yours Truly

The pound reverberates through my body before I realize what I did. There's a dent in the wall. I look at my fist. Superficial abrasions etch across my knuckles. I should ice it, but there's no pain. And I have more important things to worry about. Like Alice.

I had been tempted to drive back to her place once I was finished with work, but I didn't want to interrupt girls' night. *I should've been here. I can't make any more errors.*

"Jack." Her voice is barely audible, but I couldn't miss it for the world. Standing in the doorway, hair ruffled from a restless sleep, Alice stands wrapped in the knit blanket like a shawl. Her arms cross over her middle and hug her sides. She shrinks from the door jamb and walls.

In two strides, I pull her into my arms and kiss the top of her head. She molds into me.

"He was in my room," Alice quivers. "He was in my room while I was sleeping."

I can hear her panic. Only yesterday, she decided not to cower from her stalker, but she isn't protected enough. I press

my mouth to hers before moving back and staring into her sea-green eyes.

“I’m so sorry, dove. I’m going to catch this asshole.” She nods as her gaze wanders to the dresser. I take her face in my hands and make her focus on me. “I promise.”

I should have fuckin been here. I should have been with her. What if he hurt her? What if he –

My heart pounds at the thought as a heavy, sinking feeling fills my chest. I won’t let this happen again.

“You’re moving in with me.”

December 13, 9:41 am

-Alice-

My head throbs.

There's no way I heard him right.

The pinch in my brows as my head tilts to the side causes the room to sway. When it rights itself, and the slight wave of nausea subsides, I ask, "I'm sorry, what?"

"You're moving in with me." He sounds so cock-sure of the statement that I don't know how to respond. My skin prickles in brief excitement, knowing he wants to protect me, but... *Moving in? That's illogical, isn't it?* We've known each other, what, a few months at most? A bout of frustration mixes in with the excitement.

"Moving in with you."

"Yes."

What is he thinking? I understand Jack is worried. I get that my house is obviously not safe. But where does he get off telling me where I'm going to live? He can't just demand I leave. "I can't move in with you."

“Why not?” Jack’s voice deepens to a low growl.

I let out a sharp, singular laugh. “We hardly know each other, Jack!”

My pulse races. When a calm registers across Jack’s expression, my blood boils more. At least until he steps closer and takes my face in his hands. His electric blue eyes bore into mine, and I can’t look away. When he speaks, his voice is deep and carnal. My nerve-endings crawl with energy and anticipation.

“Alice, if you honestly think that, I’m going to have Alexei check that head of yours. We may not have known each other long, but we sure as hell know each other.” Jack steps even closer, the heat of his words electrifying the air in the small space between our bodies. *He’s saying all the right words. I’m sure I had an argument.*

“Um... but...” *What was I going to say?* His lips, inches from mine, are begging to be kissed.

Focus.

I muster up all the willpower I can find and take a tentative step away. A little space to clear the mind. From somewhere in the apartment, I hear Sam. I glance through the bedroom door. She still sits at the table in the kitchen, her carefree and spunky attitude dulled by this morning’s events. Georgie sits across from her. His attention pulls to me, and he offers a subdued smile before saying something to Sam.

Turning back to Jack, I ask, “What about Sam? I can’t leave her. I can’t expect her to be alone knowing someone came into our apartment.”

“I can set her up in a place. Or she can stay with us until better arrangements are made. I refuse to have you stay here another night. What if he comes back? What if you get hurt or worse? I can’t let that happen. I need you somewhere safe.”

How can I argue with that? *I can't*. As my stalker escalates, my life becomes more threatened. *He was in my house*. I know I won’t ever feel safe here again.

I look around the room. My eyes catch the still-open window, and I tug the blanket closer to me as sorrow clutches my chest. I have no other choice but to leave, and that means leaving the only home I’ve known since leaving Montana. Changing not only my life but my roommate’s as well. I couldn’t put Sam in danger because I’m too stubborn to see the sense in Jack’s offer. He cares and wants us to be safe.

With a heavy sigh, I exit the bedroom, passing Leo sitting on the couch, and head straight for the kitchen table. Jack’s not far behind. Sam and Georgie stop talking when I approach. Georgie rises and moves to me, pulling me into a hug. The weight of his hand rubbing up and down my back makes my muscles tighten. I resist the urge to push immediately away.

Behind me, Jack clears his throat. Georgie lets go. He leans against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. I sit across from Sam, back ramrod straight and teetering on the verge of

tears. They haven't fallen, but the itch of moisture has built behind my eyes.

"Alice." I hold my hand up toward Jack before he can add anything else. He looks dejected, but if I'm going to get through the next several moments, I can't have Jack trying to apologize, explain, or backtrack. Jack closes his mouth and leans in the archway between rooms.

Sam's attention ping pongs between me, Jack, and Georgie. After a few seconds, Sam's focus stays on me.

"What's wrong, babe?"

"We can't stay here, Sam. We have to leave the apartment." I watch her reaction, expecting anger, frustration, or even fear. But Sam is always a surprise. The tightened features of her face relax at the news, a smile forming in her eyes before she offers a sedated grin. A light touch on my fingers draws my attention. Sam's hand rests over mine.

"Of course we do, Alice. There's no way in hell I'm letting you stay here after some jackass creeper came through your window. And I sure am not staying here alone."

"You're not angry? Or upset?"

"God, no. I'm worried about you! There will be other places when this is all over, and that psychotic bastard is behind bars. You're top priority, babe."

There's dampness on my cheeks. The dam finally broke. How did I get so lucky to have such a fabulous and loving friend? Without a doubt, Sam is my family. Protective and

devoted, she has my back. I swipe my hands over my face, and then I reach across the table to pull Sam into a hug.

“So where are we going, and how soon do we leave? This place is starting to give me the creeps,” Sam comments as we let go of each other.

“Sam can stay with mom and dad. You can stay with me.” Georgie pushes off the counter. I peer up at Georgie.

Why not invite his sister to stay with him?

Jack’s fist clenches. He stands straighter, no longer leaning against the archway. Behind him, Leo puts a firm hand on his boss’s shoulder.

“Jack’s offered to let us stay at his place,” I explain to Sam though I haven’t looked away from Georgie. These words are as much for him as they are for her.

“You think I want to play the third wheel in that sexy man’s home? Or live with my parents again? And I sure as hell refuse to stay with Georgie.” Sam laughs, and I can’t help but smile, too.

“I don’t have any other suggestions,” I admit.

Sam waves her hand through the air. “I can always stay with another friend.”

“Emmett can host you.” Jack’s authoritative voice rings out from the living room. When had he and Leo moved from the kitchen?

“Who’s Emmett?” Sam asks tentatively.

“My brother,” Jack calls out. Sam’s head whips around, so she’s looking back at me.

“There are two of them?” Sam’s eyes brighten in her whisper. “I’m sold. Let’s get packing.”



An hour and a half later, Jack’s driving us into an underground garage, through a wall that opens magically, and down a tunnel manned by men with guns.

“A little overkill?” Sam jokes. Jack chuckles but doesn’t answer.

By the time he parks, I’m questioning if we’re really in a fortress. No matter what, I feel safe. There’s no way my stalker can get through all those hoops unnoticed.

“How long have you run this business?” Sam begins her interrogation before the elevator door is even closed.

“Three years,” Jack responds matter-of-factly. He pushes a button.

“Only three? How can you afford a building like this? It must have cost millions.”

“Sam!” I chide.

“It’s ok, Alice.” Jack grins and glances at Sam through the rearview mirror. “It did cost a lot. The money came from various sources. Income from the business. Income from previous jobs and smart investing. Inheritance. Loans.”

“Hmm. What made you want to start a security company like this?” Sam asks.

“That’s too long a story for an elevator ride.”

“Fair enough. Have you had clients like Alice before?”

“Not exactly.” Jack smirks, his glance catching mine.

“I meant any clients with stalkers.” Sam rolls her eyes, but the slight smile on her face says she likes Jack’s response.

“Have you had clients with people trying to kill them?”

“Yes.”

“Have any of your clients been killed?”

“No.” Then he adds, “And I’m not going to start now.”

The elevator dings and we stop at some floor – the buttons aren’t numbered – though I notice other ones above the button Jack pushed. When the doors open, a tall, dark, gorgeous man stands in the lobby, and the proverbial cat catches Sam’s tongue. I’ve never seen her speechless. Sam doesn’t let people intimidate her in any way. She exudes confidence, especially around men.

“Emmett, I’d like you to meet Alice and her friend Sam.” Jack takes my bag and rests his hand on the small of my back. I shake Emmett’s outstretched hand.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” Emmett’s voice is deep, like Jack’s, but lacks the same cadence as his brother’s. Tall. Black hair. But his eyes are distinctly gray. Nothing electric and blazing like Jack’s, but subdued and mysterious. If

Jack's eyes were ice, Emmett's would be stone. "It's good to put a face to the name."

"Likewise," I say.

"I'd like to sit with you, hear your story for myself. See if there's anything my brother missed." Emmett keeps his eyes on me, ignoring any reaction from Jack. I suspect he's teasing his brother in a way, though there's an underlying seriousness to his words.

"Don't push that on her yet, Emmett. Give her a chance to breathe," Jack says.

"Oh, no. It's ok. I'd be happy to meet with you. The more eyes... right?" I don't want to recount everything, but I will. There is no way to solve the problem but to attack it head-on.

"Exactly what I was thinking." Emmett's smile is as captivating as Jack's. These brothers could have any women they wanted. They must have had many girls falling at their feet growing up.

Behind me, Sam clears her throat.

"This is my best friend, Sam. Samantha Fairchild." I move to the right and into Jack, allowing Sam to pass.

Sam, who has managed to compose herself, struts forward and throws her hand in front of her. When Emmett goes to shake it, Sam turns her palm down and lifts it higher. It takes another second for Emmett to cock an eyebrow up at Jack and me. By the time he clues in that Sam intends for him to kiss the back of her hand, she pulls it from his grasp with a sly

smile. Emmett's eyes go wide, and his mouth drops open slightly before he reins in his shock.

I hide a smile. Leave it to Sam to start flirting and seem unattainable all in a matter of minutes.

“Shall we?” Emmett motions toward a door to the left. I didn't realize he meant immediately when he asked to hear my story. Then again, there's no time like the present or some shit like that, right? I nod and reach for Jack's hand.

“Let's get this over with.”

December 13, 1:22 pm

-Jack-

The elevator doors separate, revealing the expansive open-concept condo. I sense Alice's hesitation before she steps out. With wide eyes, she remains silent, her gaze darting from one end of the penthouse to the other before it stops on the floor-to-ceiling windows that waterfall the living room's exterior walls.

Alice walks to the windows, peering at the ground far below. I watch, giving her space to acclimate at her own speed. She places her single bag on the floor against a nearby chair. The other items we packed up were left for Leo to deliver later to prevent anyone from catching on that she was moving out. Anything else was staying at the apartment to make it look like Alice and Sam still lived there. Another safety precaution I decided on before leaving her place earlier. Surveillance would be posted round the clock in case Alice's stalker decided to make another visit.

“So, this is all part of Elite headquarters? Is the building open to the public?”

“Part of it is. We have public access on the street level, which opens up to a general lobby and several conference rooms. Our clients only have entry to that part of the building. The rest are offices and apartments, a gym, and a firing range. There are very few access points to this part of the building. We’re perfectly safe here.”

“How many apartments?”

“The two penthouses and a few smaller apartments. Only employees live in the building, and that’s only if they choose to. Many of them live elsewhere.” I keep my voice soft and patient as I near her. My chest presses against her back, and my skin vibrates with the proximity.

“There are a lot of people coming in and out of the building downstairs.”

“There’s a cafe next door. That’s where they’re going.” I take her hand and place a kiss on her palm. She pulls her eyes from the window. “You’re safe here, Alice.”

She nods. I’m about ready to reassure her a thousand times over that she’s safe, but her eyes go wide, and a gasp escapes her mouth.

“What time is it?”

I check my watch. “Almost 1:30.”

“Oh my god. I’m going to be late for work. Mark is going to kill me.” Alice goes to grab her bag. I halt her hands in the process.

“You aren’t going in today, Alice.”

“What do you mean I’m not going in? It’s my job. I need the money, Jack.”

“You received a letter this morning.” I try to remain calm. I try to keep my voice level, but the frustration battles hard. “The asshole was in your room! I’m not putting you in danger. I’m not letting you put yourself in danger, damn it.”

Alice’s eyes flare. She pushes her finger into my chest. Hard. “You don’t get to control that. And I already told you I’m not hiding.”

“That was when you got the ring back. The guy was in your house, damn it!”

“I’m not letting him win, Jack. I’m going to work.”

With a deep breath and consciousness to keep my volume lower. “I can’t let him near you.”

Her blazing stare cools, and she rests her hand on my chest, moving closer.

“And I can’t show him he’s won, not even a little. If I don’t show up today, he’ll know he’s rattled me. I can’t have that, Jack. It’s bad enough he’s scared me out of my home.” Alice’s words make me want to fight her battles even more. I pull her into me, wrapping my arms around her small frame. “The only way I can fight back is by continuing to live my life,” she whispers into my chest.

As much as I hate it, I feel myself relenting. “Ok. We’ll do it your way.”

I press my lips against hers. Alice's arms snake around my shoulders. Her fingers grip my back. I want to throw her over my shoulder and show her the bedroom, but we don't have time for that. I pull away. "If you want to go to work, we better stop before my willpower dies completely."

"Thank you."

Alice turns, grabs her bag, and heads toward the elevator doors. She pauses and glances back with a wink. "We can pick up where we left off later."

December 13, 2:03 pm

The last person I expect to see at work is Alice after our night together. She'd been so peaceful and lovely in bed. Just thinking about it still makes me wish I'd crawled under those covers with her. Touched her porcelain skin. Kissed her luscious lips.

Trailed the cold blade over her body.

Felt her tremble under me.

Amelia had trembled. She fucking shook with fear. It had been exhilarating, knowing I had so much power over her. That first slice had been exquisite. Her screams reverberated through my body as I pressed against her.

Don't think about it now. There will be a time and place for that.

Alice doesn't scare easily. Her strength is certainly a turn on, and I'd hate it if she didn't fight back. Showing up at work is fighting back.

I discreetly readjust my pants, smooth the features on my face, and move closer to the girls while pretending to work. As I pass by them, my elbow grazes against Alice's arm. She startles. *Perhaps she's putting on a disguise as well.* Perhaps under the calm surface are rougher waters. Excitement boils through me. I'm teasing myself. Seeing how far I can go before she scares further.

I ignore the touch, pretending I didn't notice.

"Have you seen Tessa?" Alice asks Mandy.

"I heard she'll be back tomorrow. It's too bad she got hurt."

"Yeah. I feel awful about that," Alice says.

"You can't blame yourself, Alice. It's not your fault." Mandy smiles at Alice.

Except it is her fault. If she hadn't fought so hard in the alley, no one else would've been hurt. A little fight is fine. Too much will prove detrimental to others.

Alice nods, her brows pinched together, eyes glancing to the floor.

"Hey! A bunch of us are going to a club on Saturday. Someone got us into Deviance! Can you believe that? No one knows for sure who got us in," Mandy says. Her cheerfulness does nothing to encourage Alice, who offers only a weak grin. "Pleeease."

Alice hesitates. Anxiety riddles her features. She blinks rapidly as she turns her head slightly to the left. Her

fucking personal bodyguard stands across the room talking with some other asshole security guys.

“They can totally come, too.” Mandy points in the direction of the bodyguards. *Great. Keep your enemies close and all that shit, I suppose.* “I think Tessa is going, too. She’s supposed to be back to work tomorrow. We’ll drag her ass out regardless.”

“Ok. Sure. Yeah, I’d like that. Get back to some level of normalcy around here, right? Can I invite my roommate?”

Her hand brushes a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and it takes everything in me not to help.

“Definitely. The more, the merrier! I’ll let the others know.”

My body radiates with anticipation. The last time I felt this excited was in the alley as I waited for Alice.

But patience is key.

I’ll have her soon.

December 13, 9:01 pm

-Alice-

I can't pack up my backpack fast enough. This whole day had been testing, and Jack had been right: I should've taken it off. Even as I get ready to leave, my eyes dart across the room. I never realized how many people were involved with the show. My social circle at work consists of Tessa and Mandy, the two tech guys, occasionally Vince and Leroy. Looking around now, I count at least twenty-five people.

And everyone was so nice today. No one seems like a psycho. I glance toward the office where Mark speaks with a couple of crew members. His eyes narrow in on me, though his conversation doesn't stop. A shiver crawls up my spine.

"Ready?" Jack's warm baritone heats my core, successfully removing the chill from moments before. Familiar, strong muscles lean against my back as Jack slides behind me. His hand grazes down my hip. Tingles spread over my skin, but I resist the urge to lean further back into him. I'm at work, and Mark is watching.

I turn my attention back toward my boss. His eyes threaten, jaw clenched tight. With arms crossed over his chest, he leans against the desk. Despite obviously seeing me looking at him, his stare never falters, never falls away.

“Mark’s staring,” I whisper. A low rumble flows from Jack as his gaze snaps toward Mark. When I look back at my boss, he has busied himself with papers on the desk.

“Let’s go home.” Jack helps me into my coat and grasps my hand.

Home. Even though it isn’t my home, the sentiment creates butterflies.

At the ding of the elevator doors, I’m spun and pressed against the wall. Jack’s lips crush mine. By the time I catch up, Jack’s already unzipped my coat and shed it from my body.

“I’ve wanted these lips since we left for work,” Jack growls. My fingers tangle in his hair as he lifts me from the ground. My legs wrap around him. I’m vaguely aware we’re moving, of a door opening, and Jack tossing his keys on the counter. Within moments, I’m tossed on a bed. The aroma of mountains and midnight float around me the second I land.

Jack ghosts his fingers under the hem of my shirt. The feather touch ignites tingles in my skin. He drags my shirt over my head, tossing it to a corner of the room. My pants follow, and soon I lie on his mattress in a lace bra and hipsters. Despite the slight chill in the air, my skin heats. Jack’s gaze rakes over me. Every inch of my body bursts into flames.

“You look good in my bed.”

There’s no time to process his words before Jack crawls on top of me, his hard length pressing against me as he trails kisses across my collarbone, up my neck, and to that sensitive spot below my ear. My core slickens as my body craves more of his touch.

“Do you use that line a lot?” I quip.

“No one’s ever been in my bed.”

I sit up, rolling him off me, stunned at his admission. He lies on his side on his elbow, muscles taut through his shoulders and chest. *God, he’s gorgeous.* I almost forget why I rolled him off as my gaze travels down his body to the bulge in his pants. A soft chuckle shakes Jack’s shoulders.

Regaining composure, I force my eyes to his. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t like people staying over,” he states. “There are too many complications that can arise.”

The slightest panic flutters in my stomach, and my chest clenches a little. Am I a complication? My mother certainly believes so, at least until she wants a handout.

“But I’m here.”

Jack cocks a smile. “Yes.”

“I’m literally living with you... temporarily.” My wide eyes catch the slight fall of his grin. Did he just realize offering me

safety at his place means I'm staying over? Maybe he has another room that I'll be staying in.

Jack reaches across the bed, gently stroking the back of his hand against my cheek.

"I invited you here because I want you here."

I'm not sure I believe him. For a man who's never had another woman stay over in his bed, Jack will realize he doesn't want me here eventually. *Won't he?*

Instead of voicing those embarrassing thoughts, I nod.

"Now, let's get back to business." Jack rolls over me, his arms stretched straight on either side of my body, and he nudges my legs open with his knee. Lowering himself, Jack's lips graze mine before finding a new path across my jawline, down my neck, and between my breasts. When Jack's mouth wraps around a nipple, my nails dig into his biceps. Jack moans. His tongue flicks over the sensitive pearl before taking it between his teeth. He pulls. The sting travels to my core. A purr slips from my lips.

Jack delivers the same attention to my other nipple. I writhe beneath him. When has any man been able to elicit this reaction from me?

The answer is never. Jack has a level of control over my body no man has ever had.

"More," I breathe.

"That's the plan, love."

He moves his hand south, dipping a finger under the edge of my hipsters.

“Are you wet for me, Alice?” He drags his finger through my soaking folds. Two fingers penetrate me. He lowers his head, flicking his tongue over my clit.

“Fuck, Jack.”

My hips rise and fall with the pace of his fingers moving in and out of me. Jack sucks, licks. Grazes it with his teeth. Every seam in my body unravels in the best of ways. I lie, unraveled and completely satisfied, beneath Jack as he crawls up my body. He presses his lips to mine, and I can taste myself on his mouth. “Wow.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed that, but we’re just getting started.” He rolls to his back next to me, his mouth pulled up at the corners. I don’t miss a beat. I roll on top of him, my inner thighs snug against his hips.

“Your turn.” I wink. Jack’s irises darken. His hands lift to my waist, but I stop them. “No touching until I say so, mister.”

Obedient, Jack raises his arms above his head. “It’s the only way I’ll be able to resist the temptation of putting my hands all over you.”

My body hums from being in command. My lip finds its way between my teeth. I use a knee to spread Jack’s legs, situating myself between them. My gaze flicks hungrily to his.

“Close your eyes,” I demand.

He does. I take him in my hands, my thumb and forefinger not quite touching. I knew he was huge, but having him wrapped in my fingers confirms it. A bead of precum glistens on his head. My tongue darts out, swiping over the tip of his cock. Jack groans, the sound encouraging me to keep going. I've never felt so in control. Licking from head to base and back, I swathe his member in my mouth. His skin is smooth against my lips. I swirl my tongue around him, my hand pumping slowly up and down his shaft. He gasps.

I want more of him. I want to give Jack everything I can. None of my previous boyfriends had been quite this large, and I'd always been reluctant to give them head, but I want this man to come in my mouth. Claim another part of me. I glide my hands down to the base of his shaft, my mouth following in pursuit.

The head of his cock hits the back of my throat, triggering my reflex and my panic. A hand tangles in my hair.

“Breath through your nose and swallow.” I do what he says. A satisfied moan comes from Jack. “Damn, love, that feels good.”

I pull away. My focus steels on Jack. Everything has been so stressful. I've been wound tightly, constantly looking over my shoulder and afraid. I need to lose control. Give it to this man who has done everything in his power to keep me safe. “Fuck my mouth, Jack.”

There's a beat. A slight shake of his head. A blink before his eyes become ravenous.

“On your knees.” His voice is deeper, more carnal. I can hear the arousal in it. My mouth dries, and my pussy heats. I lick my lips at his charge and scramble to the floor next to the bed. Jack stands in front of me, his cock in direct line with my mouth. I lick my lips again. The anticipation weighs in my stomach.

His hand wraps around my head, fingers twisting in my hair. Tilting my head up, he says nothing. The muscle that edges his jaw ticks. Whatever he sees in my eyes gives him permission to plow forward.

“Open up.”

I do. Cock in hand, Jack slides his head over my lips, coating them in precum. “Lick.”

My tongue laps the salty liquid, my eyes never looking away from his. I part my lips again, an unspoken plea for more. He slips his shaft in my mouth, pushing until the tip hits the back of my throat. His hand holds my head, keeping me in place. Eyes watering, Jack’s command from earlier comes to mind. I breathe through my nose and swallow. And I moan, vibrating the cock in my mouth and eliciting a starved moan from Jack.

“Fuck,” he growls. “Touch yourself, Alice. This is going to be hard and fast, and I’ll be damned if you don’t get off again.”

As my fingers reach my clit, firm hands cradle my head. Jack pulls back and slams back into my mouth. Pleasure and shock flood my system, each vying for dominance. I lean into

the pleasure, circling my clit. The pressure in my core builds beyond anything I've ever felt. I want to scream in ecstasy. Juices drip down my thigh as I close in on falling over the edge. Jack pounds into my mouth, each time hitting the back of my throat, over and over. I mewl and purr, and Jack only increases the power in his thrusts. Every inch of my body sings carnal hunger as it nears ecstasy.

“Come, Alice.” My body shakes. Bright white streaks across my vision. A hedonistic cry rips through me. Jack keeps my head in place, shoving inside once more before he stills, and hot fluid shoots down my throat. “Swallow.”

I do. Every fucking drop. When I'm done, I look up at the beast of a man in front of me and open my mouth. Before a second can pass, Jack pulls me to standing and crashes his lips against mine. We fall together on the bed, me beneath him, tongues warring, chests heaving.

“Fuck, Alice,” he breathes. I'm sated and satisfied. He kisses me again before pulling back the covers and moving us underneath.



Hours later, I lie with my back curled into Jack's body, his arm protectively draped across mine, his breathing steady and quiet. I try to keep my breathing stable and anchored in pattern to mimic sleep. I'm far from it. My mind bounces between

images of the letters, work, and Jack while his recent confessions echo along.

I can't pinpoint when, but somewhere along the line, my crush on Jack became more. Those three words are there, but I'm afraid to say them. It's too soon. My jaw clamps shut, and my throat swells with an invisible strain whenever I even think them.

The sudden whirr of vibration reverberates from Jack's side table. Almost instantly, his arm unwraps from around me, the bed shifts, and footsteps pad softly from the room. The air a cold indicator of his exit, I huddle beneath the covers, straining my ears.

"What's up, Lil'?" Jack's voice is near whisper, but in the silence of his penthouse, any pin drop can be heard. "Now's not a good time... yes, she's here."

The pulse in my chest jackhammers as I hold my breath for more silence.

"That's none of your business, Lil'," Jack growls. "I know what I'm doing... we're not having this conversation right now."

Hang up. Please hang up.

He exhales heavily. "Why are you calling so late?"

A lengthy hush envelops the space. Why is she calling? It has to be about the case, right? What if it isn't about the case? They have history. My outstretched hand grasps my phone, illuminating the screen: 3:56 am.

Who calls at four in the morning about a case? It would have to be a rather big breakthrough, and if that were the case, Jack would wake me up, right? I press a button on my cell, darkening the screen, and place it back on the side table, careful not to make a sound.

“How about your office?” Another pause. “Fine. I’ll meet you at your place.”

With gentle footsteps coming back toward the room, I do my best to relax my muscles and steady my breathing. My eyes prickle behind closed lids. The footsteps stop just inside the doorway. Even in the silence and with my back to him, I can feel his presence. He barely moves beyond that spot before there’s shuffling, and he leaves. Within seconds, the door to the penthouse clicks closed.

And I’m alone in my temporary home.

December 14, 4:31 am

I flick on the hanging bulb before descending the stairs. My sanctuary glows a bright white in a concentrated pool of light. The far side of the room, still shrouded in a purposeful level of darkness, is lit by a weaker bulb accenting my display of tools. With a few more adjustments, I'll be ready for Alice.

It's best she escaped that night in the alley. I know now I wasn't prepared for her arrival just like I hadn't been prepared for the others. In particular, Amelia. I'd just been so enthralled by her that I couldn't wait. Forgot to plan and think things through. I was so rushed and frenzied with her that I hadn't been able to keep her as long as I had wanted. It hadn't mattered. She disappointed me in the end. Sweet girls shouldn't taste spicy.

Autumn stayed a little longer, but I still made mistakes that prevented anything long-term. At least she tasted sweeter. Her hair smelled like peaches. But her skin was so smooth and soft, my slices swiped into her much farther

than I intended. I learned from that mistake. Practiced on slabs of meat with a sharpened knife before finding my next muse.

Aubree wasn't as striking as the first two, but she was beautiful nonetheless. She carried with her an air of kindness and confidence. Her hair was the perfect shade of hickory, and her eyes shined like emeralds. Her smile was straight and genuine. Aubree's sugary scent wafted through any room she was in. It was unfortunate that she was so afraid. I'd have kept her longer if it weren't for that, but the moment I smelled her urine soaking the bed, I knew she couldn't stay.

But Alice will be different. She'll stay longer.

I repeat the assurance in my head several times a day, and with each reiteration, I become more certain of its truth.

Dragging the thick fraying rope through the metal rings, I laugh at my initial error. Thick rope might look intimidating, but it is more difficult to tie and control. The likelihood of gaps increased with thicker twine.

I toss the old rope to the side. Four new rings clang together when it lands on the bare mattress. I hook one around each of the bedposts adjacent to the initial four in the corners. I lift the new, thin lasso, unwind it, and pinch it in half. With my knife, I slice through the line. Then the process is repeated until there are four three-foot lengths of rope. Threading it through the eight rings, I take

caution in looping the cord several times in figure eights before noosing the ends. It will let me control the length of slack I'll offer her. A smile slithers over my lips.

In under forty-eight hours, Alice will be in my bed.

December 14, 4:33 am

-Jack-

I won't let that happen to Alice.

I had wanted nothing more than to stay in bed with Alice. For the first time in, well, ever, my apartment felt full. But Lillian said she had something new to show me on the case, and my need to catch the asshole tormenting Alice grows stronger with each passing day.

I pull up in front of Lillian's house in her suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. The place is dark, save a light on her front porch and another inside on the first floor. Knocking on the door, I wait as patiently as I can in the cold considering I'm exhausted and the beautiful woman I just made love to is at home in my bed.

This better be good.

Lillian opens the door. She's still in her work slacks and white button-up blouse. In typical Lillian fashion, not a hair is out of place despite it being past four in the morning.

“Don’t you sleep?” I quip though it comes across as more annoyed than anything.

“Don’t you?” Lil smiles back. She moves aside and lets me enter. Light from her dining room overflows into the hallway; though not bright, I can make out Lil’s expression. Professional with a hint of jealousy. “You didn’t bring Alice?”

“She was sleeping.”

“You never have people stay over, Jack.” I don’t respond to her comment. What can I say? She’s right, and I know she’s hurt. “What changed?”

“You really want to have this conversation right now, Lil?” I ask. Lil stays silent. She stands her ground, staring at me in the dim lighting. I sigh. “I don’t know what changed. Maybe nothing. What exactly do you want to hear?”

“That we still have a chance. That it should be me in your bed rather than her.”

Images of Alice curled in my sheets float through my mind. As far as I’m concerned, no other woman belongs there, but I couldn’t be that harsh to Lillian. She’s a friend and a damn good detective.

“I can’t say that.”

“I care about you, Jack.” Lillian steps closer, her hand gliding up my arm. Her voice lowers into a sultry whisper. “You make me feel good. I can do the same for you. You know I can.” I step back, but Lillian continues. “Remember the hotel in New Orleans?”

Vaguely. It was months ago. At best, it's a distant memory.

“The wine. The jacuzzi.” She again steps nearer, her eyes locked on mine. A splash of seduction crosses her gaze as she reaches for me. “Tell me you haven't forgotten.”

“What did you have to show me about the case, Lil?” My voice is firm, unrelenting. My best response is getting Lillian to focus on work rather than her feelings. Dejection dances on her features as she realizes she can't break my resistance. She nods her head once. With a sigh, Lillian turns and moves into her dining room. Papers, folders, and a laptop are scattered across the mahogany table.

“You really don't sleep, do you?” I ask, amazed at the amount of work Lillian's got spread out.

“Being jealous doesn't mean I can't keep my head on straight. I want to catch the asshole, too.”

For a brief second, a ping of guilt stabs through my chest. “That's not what I meant.”

“I know.” Lillian sits in front of her laptop. I stand behind her. “I don't normally bring work home, but this case had me stumped.”

“Had?”

“In many ways, our unsub acts like a psychopath. The notes and the attack on the victim were calculated risks rather than rash or erratic choices.” Lil refers to Alice as the victim rather than by her name. “Not to mention note number six. He told

the victim she'll be the *new* start of his collection. It got me wondering if there have been other cases.”

“You think we have a serial stalker?”

“Or worse.” My jaw ticks at Lillian’s response. She clicks something on her computer and brings up an old police report. “Just under three years ago, Aubree Westing filed this. She’d been receiving strange letters at her place of work, Simmer.”

“The restaurant on the corner of Duke and Third?”

“That’s the place. She’d received five letters in a matter of a month. After the fifth one, a friend convinced her to report it.”

“Then what happened?” I skim the report.

“She went missing.” Every muscle in my body fills with tension.

“That’s not the only case, Jack.”

“There’s another?”

Lillian clicks her mouse again, and another tab pops open. “This is from five years ago. Autumn Redford reported having received letters over the course of three months at the movie theater where she worked. She went missing about a month after filing the report.”

Lillian reaches across the table and picks up a manilla folder housing several pieces of paper. Opening the file, Lillian hands me a missing person’s report.

“Amelia Hawthorn?”

“She went missing seven years ago.”

“Did she also receive letters?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then what’s the connection with her?”

Lillian points to another manilla folder at the other end of the table. I grab and open it. Immediately, I know what Lillian is getting at. The top picture shows a young woman with long brown hair and green eyes staring into the camera. She smiles brightly as though she were laughing at something the photographer said. Scrolled across the bottom is the name Aubree Westing. Behind that, another picture of a different young brunette, eyes sparkling like emeralds. Autumn Redford. Either of them could be Alice’s sister.

I don’t have to look at the third picture to know what it is, but I do anyway. Flipping over the page, Amelia Hawthorne stares back at me. With a sharp intake of breath, I close the folder and slam my fist into the table. Red marks paint the top of the folder when I lift my hand. The scabs on my knuckles from when I pounded Alice’s wall have broken open, the sting radiating through them again.

“Amelia looks just like her,” Lil says. No shit. If there was any doubt that Alice’s stalker was the same man who harassed and potentially kidnapped the other women, it was gone the moment I saw that photo. “Clearly, the asshole has a type.”

“So you think Alice’s stalker is a serial killer,” I say as Lillian gets up and goes into the kitchen. She comes back with a first aid kit.

“I think there’s a good chance.” She opens the kit and motions for me to give her my hand.

“I got it.” I slide the first aid kit toward me, cleaning and dressing my surface wounds. “Any way we can connect one of Alice’s coworkers to the other three victims?”

“I’m still working on that.”

“Start with Leroy Dalton.”



By the time I arrive home right before the first hints of sunrise, I’m exhausted and want to crawl back into bed with the green-eyed beauty I left there an hour and a half earlier. Images of the other victims replay in my head. I can’t shake the resemblance between the women.

What happened to the other victims? They went missing and were never heard from again. No contact made. No public sightings. No bodies found. Other than Amelia, the other victims had little family, similar to Alice. They worked hard to survive. Few people missed them when they disappeared. Hell, Aubree wasn’t even filed as missing by a family member but rather her boss.

I won’t let that happen to Alice.

December 14, 3:59 pm

-Alice-

I can feel Jack's eyes follow me as I glide across the stage. Attentive, protective, and intimidating, Jack is a clear presence in the room.

Earlier, I had pretended to be asleep when Jack crawled back into bed in the dark hours of the morning. When we woke later, I pretended to be oblivious to his middle-of-the-night absence and ignored the tightening in my chest and stomach. I made breakfast as Jack worked at the kitchen table. He had an office, but he insisted on being around me even if he was busy.

Now at Friday's dress rehearsal for this weekend's shows, most of my coworkers don't seem on edge, except Tessa. She shouldn't have come back so soon. Then again, she had little choice. There are bills to pay and mouths to feed, and Mark doesn't react well to employee absence. Especially on show nights.

Mandy sits next to Tessa, holding her hand. Ramsey and Glenn laugh at something in the booth. Leo, who's standing

next to Jack in the back next to the booth, cracks a brief smile but not his demeanor. Like Jack, he's professional and daunting.

The lights brighten as music blasts through the theater. I carry two long, rolled ropes to Mark, keeping a smile on my face. All that's left of my facial injuries are small white lines where the scratches had been. My wrists are a spattering of red lines where new skin has scarred over, but I cover it with makeup before showtime. In a matter of minutes, Mark will wrap those rough fibers around the remnants of my injuries.

"No, no, no!" Mark's foot slams against the stage, echoing his discontent.

I glance around when the music cuts off and the lights brighten full force. Everyone stills except for Jack, who stiffens as he takes a single step forward. When I look back at Mark, it dawns on me that I'm the reason for his outburst.

"Get your head in the show, Alice!" he snarls. He jabs a stiff finger at me from a mere three inches away. *Does he have the guts to touch me with Jack here?* "You know not to cross in front of me!"

Had I crossed in front of him? I'm not entirely sure I hadn't, so I stay silent. The ropes drape across my forearms, which are tiring quickly under the weight.

"Back to stage right. We're restarting!" he hollers across the theater.

Before Mark returns to his place on stage, he moves in front of me, blocking half of my body from the view of others. Successfully hiding me, Mark pushes the tip of his finger into the soft spot below my clavicle. My foot shifts back before I'm able to balance myself. "And don't fuck up this time."

His finger is still shoved against me when a growl emanates from the back of the theater. In the back of the audience, Jack stands rigid. Leo's hand cups his shoulder firmly. Jack's electric glare is pinned to Mark, who quickly removes his forceful touch and wipes his hand on his pants.

"Let's go again!" Mark commands, his stare remaining on me a second longer than necessary. "And someone get Leroy on the damn phone. Tell him he needs to get his ass here now before he's fired!"

Everyone else looks at each other in silence. Leroy is always here for rehearsals. When was the last time I'd seen him? Yesterday, right? With each passing day, it's becoming more important for me to keep a tally of who I interact with in order to feel safe and in some level of control.

I steer myself to stage right to my starting cue. As the lights dim and the music restarts, I steal a glance at Jack. His eyes remain on the stage, on me, but his phone is to his ear. Concern tumbles over his face, and for a moment, his stare diverts to Leo before returning to me.

I hear my cue and restart my path across the stage, attentive to my placement in relation to Mark. I hand him the ropes, move toward a horizontal platform and delicately maneuver on

top of it, so I'm lying prone. I spread my legs, so my feet meet the corners of the contraption. I hate feeling this exposed, but Mark insists vulnerability and sexuality are selling points. He slides his fingers up the outside of my legs. A shiver slithers over my skin at his touch. He continues to trail his hand up my side, lifting one arm above my head, then the other, securing both tightly in place.

The ground. Snow. Tightening around the wrists. A weight holding me down.

A smile spreads across Mark's lips when I flinch.

I endure the rest of the illusion in silence, welcoming the freedom of being off stage the second it's finished. I have some time before I'm required on stage again. Leo walks through the other door as I step into the back room from the hallway.

"Where's Jack?" I ask.

"Lillian called him. Another possible breakthrough in the case. Something about one of the other victims."

"Other victims?"

"Jack didn't tell you?"

I shake my head. *No, he hadn't told me anything.*

Just like he left without telling me. Twice. Frustration and something else surge through me. Why is he keeping things from me?

“You might not be the first person your stalker has gone after. I shouldn’t say more until Jack does.” Leo plops onto the couch. He’s more at ease when others aren’t around. Not that he’s never aware of his surroundings. His eyes scan the room even if his body looks relaxed, arms draped over the back of the couch. “Jack asked me to bring you home after the shows.”

“He won’t be back?” I check the clock on the wall. There is still over an hour left for rehearsal. And then the shows. How long can following a lead take?

“He wasn’t sure. Apparently, Lil has a lot of information to give him.”

“Did he go down to her office? Did they need to speak with me? Maybe I can help.” After all, I have more firsthand knowledge of my stalker and the attack. If there have been other victims, wouldn’t I be able to shed some light on the details?

“He just said he was stopping by Lil’s and for me to take you home.”

An ache spreads through my chest like someone is wrenching it open. He went to the detective a second time in under twenty-four hours. Certainly, she doesn’t work from home. They couldn’t meet at her office? At the precinct? Hell, even a diner seems like a better meeting place. Less intimate. Less familiar.

I nod and begin preparing for the next illusion. The ache in my chest dulls to a numbness spreading through my heart.

The remainder of rehearsal happens in a blur. I maneuver through the shows feeling like a robot, performing the moves required but not registering the details. By the time I arrive at Elite, I'm exhausted and lonely. Jack had given Leo a key for me. And I insist that Leo doesn't have to ride with me up the elevator and to the apartment. I've never known anything to be more secure than the underground passages and hidden entrances of Elite.

I enter Jack's apartment and throw my stuff at the edge of the door when my phone blares. Snaking the cell out of my pocket, I don't need to look at the screen to know it's Linda. How'd I get so lucky that my mother would call twice in one week?

"Hello?"

"Did I wake you?" There's no concern in Linda's voice. More contempt and accusation, as if it would be lazy for someone to be asleep at 11:30 on a work night.

"No, mother. I just got home from work."

"Oh good, you do have a job still. Look, Alice, I really need that money. If you can't give the full five hundred, how about part of it? Half, even." Is she actually begging? That's unlike her. But I don't have the money. If it weren't for Sam's father, I wouldn't have been able to pay rent this month, not that it matters now that Sam and I have been relocated.

"I don't have that kind of money, Mom."

“Of course you do. You have a job. Besides, I heard that your roommate is loaded. Couldn’t you borrow it from her?”

She can’t be serious.

“No, mom. I can’t. But I’ll send you fifty dollars for now. It’s all I can offer.” And that is even too much, but I desperately want to get off the phone.

“Whatever,” Linda exhales. The line goes dead before I fully realize my mother has hung up on me. Staring at the screen, I open my contacts and dial the only number I need right now.

“Hey babe, what’s up?” Sam asks, chipper and lively despite the late hour.

“A hell of a day. Come upstairs. I’ll tell you all about it over drinks.”

“On my way.”

December 14, 9:32 pm

-Jack-

Lillian had called again as I was driving. No longer meeting at her place, I head toward the Belleview Police Department. Sergeant Dunham, Lillian's boss, wants to speak with me.

"I hear you have a personal interest in this case." Robert Dunham never wastes time getting down to business.

Standing straighter, I hold out my hand for Dunham. "And if I did?"

Dunham's eyes move from my face to the outstretched arm and back up. He lifts his head before shaking my hand.

Lillian squirms in her seat. I stay calm in my own, eyes directed at the man on the opposite side of the large wooden desk. I know what the sergeant is trying to do. It won't work. I've had too much experience working in conjunction with the Belleview PD and am aware that Elite's services are too good for Robert to sever over something like this.

Robert offers the hint of a smirk, nearly imperceptible. I might've missed it had I not been watching closely. Almost as

fast as I'd seen it, it's gone, replaced once again by a stern exterior. The sergeant clears his throat.

“This just got bigger than some girl, Jack. We're now looking at a potential serial killer. I assume Detective Hammill filled you in on the details.” I remain still and unresponsive. Admitting that Lillian shared case information if she wasn't supposed to might hurt her career. “It would be a disaster if this case screwed up because of personal feelings.”

“You know that won't happen, Bob. Personal interest or not, my men and I are professional. We get the job done, and we get it done right.”

Robert leans back in his chair, hands coming up, so his fingertips touch to create a peak in front of his chest. His lips thin in a papercut line. Narrowed eyes stare me down. He opens his mouth and closes it quickly. With a shake of his head, Robert stands and walks to a window looking out across the city. Lillian looks at him and then at me. I've never seen Lillian so unsure of herself. Robert intimidates her, but she seems more surprised that he doesn't intimidate me.

I let the sergeant remain silent for a few minutes more.

“Look. Bob.” I stand, startling Robert. The words and movements are abrupt enough to push back at his powerplay. I move toward his seat and cup my hand on his shoulder. “I understand the concern that personal interest might affect a case, but not with me. I have men continuing work on all other cases Elite works on with you and your department. Besides, I'll be involved whether you allow it or not. You know that.

You might as well allow it to save us from all the red tape later on.”

Robert hesitates before nodding. “Fine. But one mishap, and you – you specifically – are off the case. No girl is worth destroying your livelihood or that of your men. Got me?”

I keep my mouth shut. It’s a weak threat.

“Detective Hammill.” Lillian rises at her superior’s attention. “Feel free to include Elite on all aspects of the case from here on out. If any problems arise, I’m holding you responsible.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Leave now,” he commands.

Immediately, Lillian turns for the door. When she opens it, she turns back, waiting for me to walk through. I intentionally hesitate before moving toward the opening. Before I leave, and without turning back, I offer, “Good seeing you again, Robert.”

The moment she closes the door, Lillian is hustling down the hallway, mumbling something about me and her job. I follow her to her office, where she shuts the door and plops into her chair, looking exhausted and rattled. Her always-perfect ponytail has released a few stray strands.

“You’re going to get me fired, Walker.”

“That won’t happen, Lil. Robert won’t look at this case again, anyway. He cares only when he thinks it will benefit

him. If anything, I got you more control over the case. With my help, you're going to take down a potential serial killer."

Lillian sighs, leans forward, and places her elbows on the table, palming her eyes. When she releases the tension, she sits up straight.

"Fine. Let's find this asshole and lock him up." I would've preferred if she ended her statement with *and kill him*, but I know protocol, and as far as Lillian is concerned, criminals – even serial killers – have the right to go through the justice system. "I did more research on your pal, Leroy Dalton. Quality citizen. Upstander."

Lillian opens a file on her computer.

"But?"

"But he went to the same college as Autumn and worked at Simmer."

"That's where Aubree worked," I say. Lil' nods. Having connections to two of the victims – three when Alice is included – makes him a viable suspect. "Any overlap in the dates?"

"Definitely with Autumn. He was a senior, she a sophomore."

"What about with Simmer?"

"That's less clear. All I could find was a mention that he worked there. When I called the restaurant, they couldn't find his records nor tell me exactly when he was employed.

Supposedly, their system crashed last year, and they never saved hard copies of their paperwork.”

“That’s convenient.”

“It certainly is.”

December 15, 2:12 am

My coworkers don't even question who got them on the list for Deviance. Strict invite-only, people get lost in the thrill of such exclusivity. I'll let everyone think what they want. They're all pawns to me anyway.

It helps that I grew up with the owner of Deviance. Helps more that I have blackmail on the pervert. I slip easily in through the back door of the place. Open from nine at night Thursday through four in the morning Sunday means I don't have to wait to prepare the next part of the plan. Everyone here must think I'm another worker. No one's ever questioned my presence.

I weave through the hidden hallways of the building before finding the security offices. It's funny how unprotected most places are in reality. People put thousands of dollars into their tech security, and then one person comes in, alters the entire system, and leaves without a trace.

Like a ghost.

December 15, 3:24 am

-Jack-

The first thing I see when I walk into my home is the empty bottle of Macallan 25 sitting on the counter in the kitchen. Lights illuminate the apartment, but deafening silence meets my ears.

“Alice?” I call out.

Nothing. The hum of the furnace punctuates the quiet. A prickle rests over my skin. The silence is unsettling.

Something's wrong.

I race through the first floor of my penthouse. No sign of her. I fly up the stairs, still calling her name. Panic grips my chest tighter with every step. She's nowhere. My pulse thrums through my veins as I race back downstairs. I plant a foot firmly on the floor from the bottom as the door bursts open and pull my gun, aiming it at the intruders.

It takes only a second for the scene to register. Alice and Sam's raucous laughter infiltrates the silence from before. I

holster my weapon, moving swiftly toward the women who have yet to notice my presence.

“Where were you?” It comes out as a growl, angrier than I intended considering relief sweeps in jittery waves over my skin. The women flinch at my unexpected approach. I pull Alice into me, holding her close. My hands trail over her body to make sure she’s ok.

And then she pushes me away.

Her laughter has died, replaced by furrowed brows and an angry glare. A few feet behind her, Sam mirrors Alice’s demeanor. She holds another bottle of whiskey in her fist.

“Where was I?” Alice staggers back a step before righting herself. I steal another glance at the empty bottle on the counter.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Not a lot.” She waves her hand ambiguously in the air. Then her finger stabs into my chest. “Where were you?”

“What do you mean? Didn’t Leo tell you? Where is he anyway?” He was supposed to stay with her until I got home.

“I sent him home.”

You don’t have the right to do that.” Incredulous. That’s how I feel right now. My employee disobeyed direct orders. I’ll deal with that later.

“Well, I did it.” She juts her chin out, firming her stance. “I don’t need a damn babysitter.”

“He’s not a babysitter, Alice. He’s there to protect you when I can’t.” I sigh, exhaustion clouding my brain. “I was working. Leo should’ve mentioned that before you sent him away.”

“With the detective?” Sam steps closer as she asks the question. Her speech is slurred like Alice’s. “Were you working with the pretty detective?”

My gaze ping-pongs between the two women before settling on Alice. Her arms cross in front of her, eyes puffy and rimmed with a faint redness.

“Yes, with Lillian. We are investigating this case together. We had to meet with –” I lose my words when I see the look of rejection fall across Alice’s features. I want to hold her close, reassure her, but this interrogation is pissing me off. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “All I’ve been doing the past two weeks is working on this case, Alice. We’re just working the fucking case.”

“That’s what she is to you? Just a case?” Sam is drunk and protective. A dangerous combo. And her line of questioning isn’t helping.

“That’s not what I said. I –”

“Did you go to her house? Her office? Where did you meet her, Jack?” Alice’s breathless question punctuates the air. Silence regains its grasp on the night. My brows droop, and I tilt my head a fraction. When Alice begins speaking again, her words are incensed. “You left last night. You left our – your bed and took that phone call.”

“You were awake?”

“And she asked you to come over, right?”

“Yes, but –”

“And you went to her and didn’t tell me and came back and assumed I knew nothing. And you didn’t say anything, Jack.”

Her words are slowing, losing power.

Reassure her. Tell her what she means to you.

I don’t want to spill my guts to Alice when she’s drunk. And I certainly don’t need an audience. I open my mouth to speak. Alice shakes her head.

“Don’t bother.” Alice staggers again, and I reach out to balance her. She jerks away and turns toward her friend instead. Her action feels like a bullet to the chest. “I’m going to stay with Sam at Emmett’s place until this is all over. If you think I need a babysitter, tell Leo where I am.”

December 15, 11:23 pm

-Alice-

By Saturday, my chest is heavy. I've been staying at Emmett's, and as I expected, Leo's been diligent with babysitting duty. This morning he'd been waiting at Emmett's door to pick me up. He stays close while I'm rehearsing and performing. Jack's kept his distance. I haven't seen him once since our argument.

He's only respecting my wishes. But somehow that's worse right now. If he wanted to be with me, he'd be fighting for it, right? Not hiding or avoiding me. The ache in my chest grows.

On top of that, my nerves are bouncing around erratically every second I'm at work, especially without Jack's presence. My hands won't stop shaking. It's been difficult to grasp onto props and focus on the illusions. All I hope is that I've been able to hide my fear. I'm more surprised that I made it through Saturday's performances. One of these times, I'm going to hurt myself if I can't get my anxiety in check. Luckily, I don't have to worry about work again until Tuesday.

“I can’t believe we’re getting into Deviance! Practically the entire company will be there tonight.” Mandy saddles up to me, staring into the mirror and reapplying her crimson lipstick. “I think Mark got us in.”

“Why would he do that? He doesn’t like any of us,” I say.

She laughs and shrugs. “Beats me, but who else can pull strings like that?”

“I don’t know. I guess...”

Mandy swipes the color across her lips once more and squeals in delight. “Ready to party?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” *Ain’t that the truth?* I want some level of normalcy in my life and going out on a Saturday after work seems like the most normal thing a person can do. I understand the risk, but my babysitter will be by my side the whole time, I’m sure. He won’t let anything happen.

I breathe in deeply and release my breath as slowly as I can.

Go out. Have fun. Be normal.

And flirt. Definitely flirt.

Because heartache doesn’t fix itself.

An arm slings around my shoulders just as I finish touching up my makeup. I jump before registering the reflection in the mirror.

“You look lovely, ladies.” Glenn’s grin spreads wide on his face. His shaggy hair drapes across his forehead carelessly, emphasizing the boyishness of his face. The just rolled-out-of-

bed look works for him. It's easy to see why Mandy's got a crush on the guy. "Let's get going! Let's get dancing!"

Mandy giggles and strides away with Glenn, his arm still draped around the blond bombshell. They walk toward Ramsey, who gives me a nod with a quick "see you there" before throwing his arm around Mandy's waist and leaving the room.

I put some finishing touches on my face. Movement in the mirror draws my attention. The door to the room is open. Leo stands, his back to me, facing Jack. He hasn't stepped into the room, hiding in the shadows of the entryway. When his piercing arctic eyes steal a glance at me in the reflection, I still. I can't breathe, can't think. Shivers run over my skin, and I'm hot and cold all at once.

Before I can even consider turning around, he's gone. A ghost. A memory. When this is all over, that's all he will be. Sadness snakes through my veins, weighing me down. Leo turns, catches me staring, and offers a sympathetic half-assed half-smile as he plants himself against the wall waiting for me. I give him no reaction back. Nothing. He's met with a blank, disinterested stare. I don't need pity, so Mr. Babysitter can wipe that look right off his face.

"You sure you want to do this?" Tessa glides up to the mirrors, uncertainty written on her face. "Because I'm not."

I can only assume Tessa's been on edge, too. The once vibrant red-headed ball of energy has been a wallflower these past few days.

“No,” I level with Tessa. Between having a stalker out to get me and a man breaking my heart, the only thing I’m ready for is a lot of alcohol and sleep. “But it’s about keeping control. Hiding the fear.”

Tessa nods as though she knows exactly what I’m talking about. “Then let’s go.”

December 15, 11:59 pm

Alice steps into the club. My body crawls with anticipation. She looks beautiful. Showcased in a skin-tight black dress with a plunging V-neck, Alice doesn't disappoint on our big night.

All of my previous mistakes will be made up for soon. And then I get to keep her. The front of my pants bulges. I push into the rail, relishing in the excitement. A clammy palm leaves a mark on the chrome barrier. I gulp down the remaining dark liquid in my cup and place it on the tray of a passing server.

Focusing my attention back on the floor below, I watch my girl. Alice moves through the crowd toward the VIP section. Coming to me.

December 16, 12:00 am

-Alice-

Deviance is wild. The line to get in extends far down the block. We can breathe easily knowing we won't have to wait outside in the cold to get in. VIP treatment means skipping the lines and the freezing temps. Inside the club, shadows in the seating areas clash with bright lights cutting through the darkness on the dance floor. Electronic music booms through hidden speakers, and a DJ in the corner controls the chaos of the undulating rave.

A spiraling staircase near the DJ leads to an expansive balcony that circles the lower level of the club. At the bottom of the steps, two musclemen guard a velvet rope. That must be the VIP area.

Bodies press against bodies all across the first level. Pressure on my arm pulls my attention away from the mob of clubbers. Leo's hand is firmly but gently placed on my elbow as he moves me forward through the throng of people. The crowd parts as we walk. I get it. He's intimidating. No one wants to bump into him.

As we reach the roped-off staircase, Mandy and Tessa prance down the steps. The bouncers remove the velvet, so the girls seamlessly filter onto the first floor. Mandy grabs my hand and tugs me along. The pressure on my elbow disappears and is replaced by a tighter grip on my forearm. The tension of the pull boomerangs me into Leo's chest.

"What's the deal?" Mandy's hands have found her hips, and her peep-toe heel taps furiously on the floor, though I can't hear it over the music. Leo ignores the question and loosens his grip on my arm.

I sigh and roll my eyes. "You've got orders to keep me close."

"More or less."

"I'm just going to dance. Right there." I point to the dance floor. "You can stand here the whole time or go upstairs and watch from above. Hell, you can even come dance with us."

A smirk crosses Leo's lips, amusement playful in his eyes. "I'll be over there by the bar."

I follow his point. The bar is maybe twenty feet from the edge of the dance floor. As long as I can keep Mandy and Tessa away from the center, Leo will be close by and to my rescue before anything can happen.

I turn back to him, cocking my brow. "Drinking on the job?"

"Just getting water. I won't be far. Don't hesitate if you need me."

“Got it, babysitter.” I salute him.

“Don’t call me that.”

I laugh and allow Mandy to tug me through the sea of dancers. The tension in my shoulders melts away with the rhythm of the music. Even Tessa seems more relaxed. The pumping bass reverberates through my body as I let loose.

“Where’s everyone else?” I yell over the hypnotic beat blaring from the speakers.

“A lot of people are still upstairs. Some haven’t gotten here yet,” Mandy shouts back, offering a shrug.

“She was begging Glenn to come down,” Tessa teases.

“Shut up.” Mandy playfully pushes Tessa, and we all laugh. The beat changes, and strobes flicker over the dance floor. I close my eyes, drowning in the trance. The rhythm pulsates in my head, overpowering my thoughts and concerns and fears, and letting me enjoy the moment.

When I open my eyes again, we’re in the middle of the dance floor. Minor panic flutters in my chest as I gaze over the crowd toward the bar. Catching sight of Leo banishes any alarm.

If I can see him, he can see me.

I’m about to turn back toward Mandy and Tessa when Jack reaches the bar, tapping Leo’s shoulder. Leo points. Jack’s stare follows. Our eyes catch. My body desperately wants to pull me toward him, but I stubbornly refuse to let it. What he had done, not telling me he was going to the detective’s, hurt.

It hurt a lot. Maybe I was a little unfair the other night, but I don't want to be walked over in a relationship. There's history between him and the detective. If he did go just for work, why wouldn't he tell me before going? Or even after getting back?

As if on cue, Detective Hammill slides up behind Jack, her hand touching his forearm. He turns toward her, opens up the space near him to let her in his and Leo's conversation, and signals for the bartender. Her hand stays on his arm.

I cringe and swallow down the lump of heartache trying to escape through my throat. The room blurs. I blink to clear the impending flood threatening to escape.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I shout over the music, turning and rushing toward the opposite side of the first level. I can't be sure either Mandy or Tessa heard me, but I need a moment to myself. A moment to breathe before facing the rest of the night.

Shoving my way through the crowd, my head bobs left and right looking for the restroom sign. I stumble through an archway. The hallway is dim, much darker than the dance floor, but I slow my pace only slightly. Twenty feet down the hall, another corridor juts off endlessly to the left and right. By pure chance, the sign in front of me reads "Women's" with an arrow pointing left.

I drag my cell from my wristlet, thanking the fashion design gods for the invention. Not ten feet into the new wing of the passage, a door on my left opens. I jump, dropping my phone

as a horde of women exit the bathroom. My heart picks up speed again.

Carefully bending at my knees, I pick up the phone, swipe it on, and press the screen. It rings as I go through the door. A woman in a mini dress and stilettos stands in front of the mirror above the sink, refreshing her makeup and fluffing the waves in her blond hair. She pays no attention to me.

“We’re almost there, babe.” Sam picks up.

“We?”

“Emmett wouldn’t let me come alone. We’re about ten minutes out.”

“Protocol,” Emmett mumbles in the background.

“Sure, big guy,” Sam retorts. “Anyway, we’ll be there soon.”

The woman at the sink leaves. I move quickly to the door and turn the lock. Solitude for a few minutes. That’s all I need. Solitude.

“Awesome. I’ll be in the bathroom, down the hall on the wall opposite the DJ. I think. And then turn left.”

“Oh, no. What happened?” Sam asks. My phone beeps. An incoming call. I ignore it.

“Nothing that I can’t wait to tell you. Meet me here; I’ll fill you in. Then we’ll drink and dance and flirt.”

“Sounds like you want revenge.”

“Absolutely.” I sigh. “Except not really, but let’s pretend, ok?”

“You got it, babe.” Sam hangs up.

I take the place of the blond from moments ago and stare into my green eyes.

Go numb. If you’re numb enough, you can’t feel anything.

I glance at the screen. Jack’s name appears under missed calls.

What the hell am I doing?

I can’t hide in a bathroom for the next ten minutes. Knowing Jack and Leo, they’ll send a search party to find me because I didn’t inform them where I was going. Ridiculous.

I swipe gently under each eye, removing any trace of smudged eyeliner. With a deep breath, I turn toward the door and unlock it, stepping into the hall. As the door closes behind me, every light above flickers out. I’m shrouded in darkness. A scream is distant in the building.

Fuck.

My quiet gasp reaches my ears. The thumping beats have silenced, replaced by a confused murmur of voices. Some short moments later, shouting from an angry mob ensues.

A power outage. Just a power outage.

Emergency lighting hasn’t gone on. I need to get back to the floor.

Blindly, I place my hand on the wall, determined to find my way back to my coworkers or Leo.

Or Jack.

My fingertips graze the wall; the other grips my phone. I swipe it on for some reprieve from the blackness. The second my finger touches the flashlight app, an arm snatches my waist, jolting me backward and making me drop my cell.

Shit, shit, shit. This can't be happening! Shit!

A hand encases my mouth and nose. I keep struggling. My arms flail, scratching at the arms and hands of my attacker. *I'm not going down without a fuckin' fight, asshole!* My fingers grasp onto his, trying to pull them from my mouth. I can't breathe. Can't gasp for air.

He drags me backward. Moisture streams down my face. I'm pulled down the hallway. He turns, and I'm dragged some more. Another turn. The noise from the irritated crowd becomes quieter the more we move.

"Alice?" Jack's voice echoes through the catacomb of corridors. He's so close. So damn close and not close enough. Not even in the same hall.

I throw my body against the man. He grunts and tightens his hold, squeezing my stomach and gripping my mouth tightly. His fingers dig into my cheek and jaw.

"Just remember, you're making me do this," a voice scratches in my ear. Then my head explodes with a flash of light and pain.

And finally, a black abyss.

December 16, 12:37 am

-Jack-

I grab the waters from the bartender and turn to hand one to Lillian, who came to subtly interrogate Alice's coworkers. Lillian takes her water and continues talking with Leo. I scan the dance floor where Alice had been dancing with her colleagues. Only now she isn't with them.

My breath freezes in my lungs. How long was I turned for? No more than a minute.

Why didn't I just go to her when I arrived?

I wanted to. Wanted to hold her. To kiss her. Tell her... but I forced myself to stay back. She wanted space. I wanted to respect her wishes.

And now she's gone

"Where is she?" My voice rumbles as a cold sweat and a shot of adrenaline overtake my body.

"She's right over –" The moment Leo's eyes hit the spot, he shuts up. Tessa and Mandy dance freely in the crowd, oblivious to their missing friend. "Fuck, where did she go?"

“Damn it, Leo,” I hiss. My eyes roam over every face in the club. One of them has to be her. Just one damn person needs to be her.

“Calm down, Walker.” Lillian slides her hand over my arm. I shrug off her touch.

“I won’t fucking calm down! Not until I know where she is, Lil.”

“She probably just went upstairs. I’ll go check.” Lillian hustles toward the stairs, flashing her badge at the hired gorillas.

I grab my cell, dialing Alice. It rings. And rings. And doesn’t fucking stop ringing until it gets to her voicemail. I shove the phone back into my pocket.

Grabbing Leo by the collar of his shirt, I pull him toward the dancing girls. They must know where she went. She wouldn’t have gone somewhere without telling someone. The pinch in my brow and clench of my jaw warns others not to mess with me, and the sea of dancing clubbers splits as we move forward. When we reach Mandy and Tessa, the women startle to a halt.

“Where’s Alice?” Mandy and Tessa flinch at the question.

Mandy looks around the room. “She was just here a minute ago.”

“Oh my god.” Tessa stills, eyes wide, mouth so slightly open. And then, in the next second, she’s frantic, spinning and turning in every direction, trying to see over the crowd.

“Where’d she go, Mandy? We have to find her. We have to find her!” She pivots toward Leo and me. “I didn’t know she left. Why would she leave? I wouldn’t have let her go alone. I swear, I wouldn’t have.”

Leo reaches a hand out to her. “It’s ok. It’s not your fault. We’ll find her. Do either of you remember how long ago you last saw her?”

Tessa’s practically hyperventilating in her spot. I want to do the same, but I need to stay focused. I can’t move. I refuse to leave this spot until I have a plan of action. Not finding Alice in the sea of people, my eyes seek out any place she could’ve gone. The club is massive. Three floors, unlabeled doors, hallways.

Where are the most logical places she’d go? The bars. A table. A restroom.

“Where are the restrooms?”

“Everywhere. This place is designed to accommodate hundreds of people a night. I think each hallway has one,” Mandy explains.

Several bars circle the room. Between each, a hallway disappears into dim lights.

“Leo,” I point toward one of the bars. “Go around that way and check each hallway. I’ll take the other direction. We’ll meet in the middle.” I turn toward the girls. “You two go upstairs to the VIP section. Tell Detective Hammill to check the bathrooms upstairs.”

The girls nod. Before they can move from their spot, the entire club goes pitch black.

One of the girls screams. I pull out my phone again, using the flashlight to see. Tessa grasps Leo's arm. Mandy holds on to Tessa. The crowd, confused, murmurs their annoyances, which turn louder as agitation sets in.

"Get the girls upstairs. Find a manager to make sure no one leaves. I'm going to start checking the hallways," I command. Then I start shoving my way through the throng of people. They're less willing to budge now.

Getting to one of the hallways, I pocket my phone and unholster my gun. Pulling out a small flashlight, I steady aim with it and move down the hall. A door on the left. Men's bathroom. I kick open the door, enter, and scan the room with the light. Empty.

Sliding back into the corridor, I continue moving through the maze of hallways. To my right, another door. Women's. I open this one more gently.

Let her be in here.

Gasps sound from one of the stalls. I shine the light through the room. "Alice?"

Two women emerge from behind one of the swinging doors. For the briefest moment, my pulse normalizes. I flash the beam over them.

Blond. Both are blond.

And they look terrified. “Stay here and lock this door until the lights come back on or the police get here.”

I exit.

Damn it, Alice. Where are you, dove?

The hall ends and extends to the right. I turn. Darkness has swallowed the corridor. Everywhere my light reaches, new corridors expand. I step into the new hallway.

“Alice?” I shout.

Respond. Yell back. Say anything so I can find you, love.

Without warning, the overheads flash on blindingly, and the music from the floor blares to existence. I blink, adjusting my eyes.

Empty. Every place is fucking empty.

I begin to run, glancing down one hallway and another and another. All empty. I shout her name again, calling for her with each glance.

“Jack!” Emmett runs up behind me, Sam in tow, nearly breathless.

“We know... we know where she was,” Sam says. “I need to.... get out to the dance floor to find it, but she called... told me where she was.”

“Go!” I growl. The music gets louder and louder with each step closer we get to the main room until we burst into the once-again dancing crowd.

“There’s the DJ!” Sam shouts before racing in the opposite direction she pointed, down another hallway and veering left. “She was in – oh my god.” Sam stumbles to a stop and stills as though she’s been turned into stone. Only her head shakes back and forth. She bends at her knees, grabs something off the ground, and holds it up. A pink phone. “It’s Alice’s.”

A void opens in my chest. She’s gone.

December 16, 9:39 am

My lip twitches. A smile draws across my face as I recall the night's events. The adrenaline pumping through my veins when grabbing Alice. Her fight to get away. Her bodyguard so close.

But not close enough.

And my inevitable victory.

As the chaos unfolds around me, I can't help but relish my work. Police arrived as I was returning to the scene. In the confusion, I was able to easily sneak back in without notice. More of Elite's crew arrived fifteen minutes later. They searched every hallway, every room, every fucking crevice they could find, hoping Alice was still there.

She isn't. At the time, she'd been safely tucked, bound, and gagged – and out cold – in the trunk of my car.

And now she's downstairs. In her room.

A shiver of pleasure crawls up my spine. It radiates through me.

Finally, she's mine.

December 16, 9:51 am

-Jack-

I rake my hands through my hair as I lean on my elbows over the desk. My head thrums with a dull pounding. My eyes burn as though they've been torched rather than being wet and tired. And a constant sting threatens to unleash the tsunami of emotion building within my chest.

Pull it together. She needs you.

Sighing, I lift myself from the chair, moving toward the windows to survey the streets far below.

And you need her.

A tightness pulls at the depths of my stomach, a mix of anger, fear, and regret. What if I don't get her back? What if I can't find her, and that asshole?

My fists tighten. The muscles in each hand strain beyond normal capacity, sending an ache to the bones. I can't think of that. The only option is to find her.

A knock disrupts my thoughts. Standing in the doorway, Emmett holds a pile of mail and a cup of coffee.

“You look like shit,” he says. I grunt in response. No shit, I look like shit. I feel like shit. My brother enters my office and places the mail and mug on the desk. “I thought you might need a cup. You haven’t slept.”

“I can’t.” I haven’t been able to since Alice walked out of my apartment the other night.

Emmett stands next to me. A hand claps firm pressure on my shoulder. “You can’t beat yourself up, Jacks.”

Rage boils inside. I fling Emmett’s hand off of me and grab him by the collar.

“Don’t you dare try to fucking pacify me!” Emmett’s hands shoot up in surrender, but there is no fear in his eyes. He stares back, steeling his gaze to mine.

“I’m not trying to pacify you.”

I loosen my grip. “It’s my fault she’s gone, Emmett.”

“You need to stay focused. You want her back? Stay focused.”

I let go and step back, separating myself from Emmett. I don’t know whether to stand or sit or ram my fist through a wall.

“It’s my fault he got to her. I told her I would protect her, and I failed. I’ve never failed at protecting anyone in my life, not since –” The words trail off. Emmett will understand. Not since our mother.

“That wasn’t your fault either.”

I nod, then shake my head. “She was so upset, so angry when she left. All I had to do was reassure her. Tell her again that there is nothing between Lil and me. Bring her along and show her that everything I was doing was to keep her safe.” My lungs feel like they’re collapsing. “I should’ve fucking begged her to stay, told her what the fuck she means to me. That I can’t live without her. That I love her.”

I look up at Emmett, expecting some kind of reaction. There isn’t any. He looks on attentively but is otherwise passive and silent.

Emmett clears his throat. “You’ve never said that about anyone before.”

I’ve never felt that about anyone before.

“I can’t lose her.”

“Then let’s get her back. What’s the plan?”

The plan? I don’t have a plan. At least nothing short of ramming down every door in the city to find her. This is the first time I’m making shit up as I go. Just the thought of that makes me furious. There’s always a plan. So why is it I have nothing when it matters most?

“Have you rechecked the security footage from last night?” I ask.

“Twice. Every camera associated with the place malfunctions right before the lights go out. We can see Alice run off and go into the bathroom, but we never see her come out.”

Of course. This was planned. The guy knew exactly what he was doing.

I pace behind my desk. What should we do next when we have so little to go on?

“Check them again. Go further back with each video, a half-hour minimum. Look for any other suspicious movements. See if Leroy Dalton shows up on any tapes. And check the VIP area to see what her coworkers were doing. We can’t rule them out.” At least it’s a semblance of a plan. Do something other than nothing.

“Anything else?” Emmett asks.

“Bring in each of her coworkers for questioning.” As I pace, a manilla envelope on the desk catches my eye. I shove the other mail aside and lift it. There’s no postage, but my name is scrawled across the center.

“What’s this?”

Emmett shrugs. I tear the top fold open and let the contents of the envelope fall onto his desk. Two pieces of paper fall out. The first is white. Straight, neat letters are written through the center of the page.

SHE'S THE PERFECT START TO MY NEW COLLECTION.

Yours Truly

Everything in my body goes numb before it flairs to life with a vengeance. The rage I tried to keep inside boils to the surface. The mug of coffee Emmett brought in flies through the air, smashing against the wall and shattering.

“What is it?”

“Letter six. Rewritten,” I growl.

Hesitating for the shortest moment, I lift the other paper that fell face down on the wood surface of the desk. Turning it over, the breath is sucked from my lungs. My chest constricts as though a hand clenches my heart, threatening to rip it out. The close-up image shows little but reveals enough. Brunette hair falls over a bare shoulder. Rope loops around a wrist, digging into new, familiar scars. Her arm stretches above her head.

My glare finds Emmett.

“When I get him, I’m going to kill him.”

December 16, 2:13 pm

-Alice-

A gasp shocks me awake, a cry from earlier still lodged in my parched throat. The unforgiving fluorescence from above beats down. My eyes are dry and achy. I squint, bringing my hand up to block the glaring light. A click of the latch sounds from across the room. My whimper is scratchy and weak.

Terror rips through me. Tremors shudder through every inch of my body.

I force myself to sit up, the sound of rubbing metal keeping time with my movement. I rub my left wrist. The ache is fresh compared to the right. My feet touch a rough, cold floor. Concrete.

I sit on a makeshift wooden bed, no larger than a twin. A thin, blue-striped mattress barely cushions the harshness of the slats underneath. Ropes dangle from the corners, and a large belt wraps around the center. No sheet. No blanket. Just a bare, stained mattress. I don't allow myself to consider the source of the stains.

Concrete walls stack around me. A bucket sits casually in the corner. Twenty feet to my right, wooden stairs lead beyond the dim light's reach. I stand and take a tentative step. A heaviness from my leg slows me. Looking down, I notice a cuff wrapped around my left ankle. A thick chain extends from the cuff toward the leg of a solitary chair bolted in the center of the room. Below it, a drain.

I swallow, ignoring the implications of the drain, and take another step. More scraping accompanies my movements. The chain seems long. *How far will it go?* It clangs and scrapes over the ground as I move. I take another step. And another, blocking the harsh dragging noise of the heavy restraint from my mind.

I move toward the stairs. Each step a promise. Each inch closer to the possibility of escape. My pace increases even as my body aches. Determination pulls on my brow. Three feet from the bottom step, my leg is stretched back as the restraint pulls taut. I plummet to the ground, hands outstretched to break my fall.

I land with a grunt. Lifting to a sitting position, I wipe my hands down my legs, flinching at the sting as I rid them of sandy grit. Tiny abrasions dot my palms and knees. I shiver. Only then does it register: my dress is gone.

I huddle on the floor, wearing only lace underwear and a bra.

“Drink, Alice.” The harsh command makes me jump. My head snaps toward the direction of the voice, staring into the

black void at the top of the stairs. Cloaked in darkness, I can't see more than a pair of boots on one of the highest steps. My breath quivers with an exhale.

"Let me go." My plea is met with silence, but the boots remain. "Who are you?"

"Drink!" he yells.

I look back at the bed. Two bottles sit near one of the legs. Defeated, I crawl back toward it, cowering into its side when I reach the mattress. I lift a bottle. Cold condensation coats my hand, sending a secondary shiver through my body. I lick my parched lips, a reminder that I haven't had anything to drink in...

"How long have I been here?" The water bottle scrunches in my palm. I examine the outside of it, tip it upside down, checking for tiny holes.

"I'm not going to poison you, Alice." He laughs. He actually laughs at me. The tiniest fraction of fear is replaced by a pit of anger. He abducts me. Chains me up. Removes my clothes. And then laughs at me.

I twist the cap off the bottle, put the opening to my mouth, and sip. The second the icy water hits my tongue, I can't stop drinking. Before I know it, the bottle is empty and crushed in my hand.

"You've been here just over twelve hours."

"Who are you? Why did you take me?" The questions come pouring out in panic as the shock of this predicament is

wearing off and reality is becoming clear.

“You’ll know soon enough.” The boots turn. A door is pushed open, and though some light filters in, his back is to me, his head hidden by darkness.

“Wait! Don’t leave,” I call. “Please just let me go!”

The door clicks shut, and the scraping of a lock follows. A shudder crawls through me as my eyes prickle and blur. My breathing quickens as I glance around my prison.

Pull it together, Alice.

I wipe the tears with the back of my freshly scraped hands. I take inventory of the rest of my body. A bruise has formed on the outside of my thigh. My once-healed wrists are again angry, swollen, and red. There are a few superficial scratches on my chest above my breasts. Some of my nails are broken. My head throbs with a dull rhythmic beat.

“It could be worse,” I whisper. The sound of my voice soothes me. Three deep breaths to focus on calming my nerves and making a plan. I lift myself onto the mattress. “Besides, Jack will find me.”

Tears sting my eyes. My lungs squeeze as a ball forms in my gut, and nausea undulates in waves through my stomach.

How am I going to get out of here?

December 16, 11:36 pm

-Jack-

I sit at my office desk Sunday night. It's nearing the twenty-four-hour mark since Alice went missing. Once that hits, my odds of finding her alive lessen drastically. It doesn't help that Lillian keeps reminding me of that deadline. Not that it's a hard deadline. For all I know, the psycho who took Alice wants to keep her alive for a while, though that thought scares me, too.

Or she could be dead already.

No matter what, I'll never stop looking.

"Have you called her?" Emmett walks into the office, followed by Leo. I've never seen Leo with such mussed hair or dark, tired eyes. He's barely said a word to me since last night.

Both men take a seat in the chairs on the other side of the desk.

"I'm avoiding it. How do you tell someone their daughter has been kidnapped by a potential serial killer?"

“You could have Lil do it,” Emmett suggests. He’s been suggesting it since this morning.

“No.” While it’s usually the job of the police to inform family members in such situations, I feel responsible. I need to do it. But how? I cleared my throat. “Have you found anything on the tapes?”

Emmett shakes his head. “My guys are going through them now, pushing back the timeframe to search.”

I nod. They can’t magically put the answer on the screen, but I was hoping something useful would’ve been found by now. My eyes catch the manilla envelope. Shoved inside are the letter and the picture. I close my eyes, and the image on the Polaroid is there, torturing me. Lillian will be here soon to pick it up and test for fingerprints. All we need is one small error to catch this asshole.

I look over at Leo, who stares at the top of my desk.

“It’s not your fault.”

Leo glances up, eyes wide for a startled second before anger washes over his face.

“You put me in charge of watching over her. You trusted me. Alice trusted me. I failed both of you.” I get it. I feel the same way.

This is my fault.

“Do me a favor, Leo. Check on what’s happening with the video review. Look the tapes over with him. Maybe you’ll see something that can help us.”

Leo nods, rises, and leaves the room. Emmett waits until Leo's out of view before turning back to me. He stands, too.

"You should listen to your own words, you know." Then he leaves me to stew.

I sigh. My fist firmly grips the phone. The number is already dialed in; I only need to push send. I pinch the bridge of my nose, applying pressure to relieve the ache intensifying in my head.

I push the button and stand, pacing behind the desk. The phone rings two, three, four times. She isn't answering the call. My mind races for the best way to leave a message when an agitated voice interrupts, "Who the hell is this?"

I clear my throat. "Is this Linda Harper?"

"That depends on who's asking," the woman snaps back.

"Ma'am, my name is Jack Walker. I work for Elite, a security and protection agency here in Belleview."

The distinct dragging and sparking of a match scrapes and sizzles through the receiver. She inhales, then sighs. "So why are you calling me? I don't need any damn protection."

"No, ma'am." I press my forefinger and thumb against my forehead and rub the length of my brows. "Elite works very closely with the Belleview PD. I'm calling because your daughter is missing."

"Alice is causing trouble again, eh?"

For a moment, I'm speechless. Causing trouble? I just told the woman her daughter is missing, and she automatically assumes Alice is the problem?

"No, we believe she was abducted, Ms. Harper." *And it's my fault. All my fault.* I can't rest until I get her back. "We are doing everything we can to fi—"

"Look, Alice has always been a problem. Ever since she was little. She dropped out of college and ran away. Can't hold a fucking job if her life depended on it. In fact, I'm sure she probably lost her job and just ran again."

"She didn't run away," I growl through the phone. My body vibrates with anger.

"I don't suppose she left any money for me. She was supposed to send \$500, but the selfish little bitch couldn't bother to help out her only family." The woman pauses briefly, inhaling again. "Hey, if she's missing and you guys can't find her, does her family get some sort of restitution?"

And that's when my patience snaps in two. Linda Harper is a bitch. How could someone as sweet as Alice come from someone as horrible as this?

"You don't fucking deserve her," I snarl into the phone and hang up.

The phone shatters when I slam it face down on the desk. I turn away, seething. I see only red. Erratic breaths stagger out of my lungs as my mind twists around the heartless woman's words.

“What the hell happened in here?”

I spin toward the voice, ready to throw a punch. Emmett’s perplexed stare greets me. That’s when I look down. Shards of mirror scatter the carpet, and blood drips from my right hand.

Seconds later, Emmett’s shoving a towel at me. “Here.”

I take it, wrap it around my numb, dripping hand, and sit in my chair. “I’m fine.”

The phone rings, gliding slightly on the desk from the vibration. Flipping it over, Lillian’s name scrolls across the spidered screen.

“Tell me you found something,” I demand, answering the call.

“I did, but you’re not going to like it,” Lillian says. I wait a beat, refusing to let panic set in.

“What is it?”

“Leroy Dalton is dead.”

December 17, 1:01 am

I hadn't lied when I told Alice I wouldn't poison her, but I hadn't mentioned anything about drugging her. Before I left the bottles of water, I dissolved half a sleeping pill in each. I needed some way to keep her under control. How else would I be able to strap her down on the bed?

She's restless now, slowly waking. Disoriented. It's better for her to be drowsy this first time. Ropes snake around her ankles and wrists, the nooses attached to the bed pulled taut to stretch her torso just enough for easy access. I'm not bothering with the center belt right now. Between the tension of her other restraints and the sleeping pill, Alice will be easily contained.

"Wake up, Alice." I omit the low scratchiness from my voice. Hiding my identity was important when I attacked her in the alley, but there is no sense in disguising it currently. She's too out of it to recognize me.

I tap the side of her face, then stroke it. My finger skims the edge of the blindfold. Her skin is smooth under my

touch. I let the pads of my fingers wander down her jaw and neck, over the curves of her body, relishing the softness of her skin.

“It’s time to get up.”

Alice moans.

“That’s it. Wake up. I can’t do this next part unless you’re with me.”

Her hands shift, probably attempting to reach for the blindfold covering her eyes.

“Oh, god.” She struggles weakly against the restraints. “Please let me go.”

I love her begging. They always beg at first. It only makes my experience better.

“That’s not going to happen, Alice.” I turn, rising on my knees on the bed between her legs. I slide a paring knife out from my pocket, dragging the cold, flat surface of the blade over her stomach. The moment the cold touches her skin, Alice starts trying to buck her hips, whimpering wildly.

“Shh, shh. Hush now, Alice. It only hurts for a moment.” I press my body against hers, breathing in her sweet rose scent. My cock twitches with the aroma, and my hand roams down her side. Alice sobs.

“Get off me!” she demands. Her legs jerk, trying to kick me off her, but her body is helpless with the sleeping pill in her system.

She begs for help over and over. No one will hear her.

I take the paring knife and tentatively press the tip into her right side, not yet puncturing her perfect skin. Her screams freeze to nothingness.

“Please don’t,” she whispers. A series of pleas echo from her throat, her mouth barely moving.

“It’s time to play, my sweet Alice.” I apply more pressure to the knife. Alice’s cries accompany the first perforation into her skin. It enters easily. I drag the knife down her side an inch, careful not to cut too deep this first time. Then I pause. Alice’s sobs reverberate through my body. I pull the blade another inch. And another. Slicing effortlessly into my beauty. The satisfaction is too much to take. I’ve waited for this for too long, and my body releases despite my desire to continue. My breathing is heavy as my weight falls entirely against Alice. I pull the knife away from her.

“Thank you.” I kiss her lips. She tastes like candy. Alice cowers away the best she can. Tears fall from beneath her blindfold, moistening her cheeks. “You were perfect.”

I stand, pick up my camera, and take a picture.

Simply perfect.

December 17, 3:21 am

-Alice-

He'd left me strung to the posts when he left, spread eagle, cold, and bleeding. I either passed out or fell asleep after that. By the time I woke up, my limbs were unbound, except for my left ankle, which is again cuffed to the chain.

The damp trickle had slid down my waist for a while, though now it's replaced by a coagulating stickiness. I keep my breathing shallow. Tight. If I lie still enough, I can almost ignore the painful twinge emanating from my side where he had sliced into me.

"It's time to play."

My skin crawls as his words replay over and over in my mind. I shift, trying to escape the memory. My muscles tense, and I moan even though I want to stay silent, pretend I'm anywhere other than here.

"You were perfect."

I'm convinced I know the voice. Tenor. Clean. Certain. And yet, in every way misleading.

Who the hell are you, asshole?

I move my fingers toward the wound. My touch is feather-light against the incision, but pain still shoots through me, causing my breath to catch in my throat. I turn on my right side to avoid touching the open gash to the filthy mattress. Keep it far from the stains that have permeated the fabric. Though now my blood has seeped into the bed. I bite my lip, forcing myself not to cry at the pain as I pivot.

A plate on the ground catches my eye. On it, three strawberries and a slice of bread. My stomach growls. I reach for the food before hesitating. One of the two water bottles remains on the floor next to the plate. I pull my hand back.

I would've fought had he tried to tie me up, but I have no memory of that happening. He had to have drugged me with the water. He could drug the food, too.

My stomach growls again. How long has it been since I've eaten? Dinner last night?

Was it only last night?

I can't be sure.

It had been around midnight, maybe 12:30, when Jack walked into Deviance with the detective. My pulse stutters a beat, and my chest feels heavy. The memory further shatters my already crushed heart.

And then I ran. I couldn't stay and watch him with her. So I ran. And then...

I must have been taken shortly after midnight on Sunday, but I have no idea how much time has gone by since waking in this hell. No clue how long I was passed out after the asshole cut into me. No inclination as to what day it is. And no damn idea if anyone knows where to look.

The cold reaches my bones, sending a shiver through my body. I eye the plate once more.

I can't starve. If I have any chance at all, I need to eat.

I pick up the smallest strawberry and bring it to my nose. *It smells like a strawberry.* Opening my mouth, I hesitate and close my eyes. With a deep breath through my nose to calm my nerves, I bite the tip off the end of the berry. Sweet and fruity. And juicy. Suddenly, I'm ravenous. Reaching down, I grab another strawberry.

Just as it touches my lips, I feel his eyes on me.

I look around the room, finally focusing on the uppermost step.

“Don't stop, Alice.” A tremor coils through my body at his voice. It's familiar and strange all at once. “You need to keep your strength up if we're going to keep playing.”

December 17, 4:58 am

-Jack-

Nausea washes over me until I want to vomit. It has nothing to do with the hacked-up and bloated version of Leroy Dalton lying on the ground in front of me. It's the thought that I was wrong about him. That Alice is currently with the asshole who most likely did this to another human being.

Mostly, it's that I couldn't protect the woman I love.

Lillian stands beside me. She is taking in the crime scene in the living room of Dalton's one-bedroom apartment. Other than the dead body, the place is immaculate.

"So, it's safe to say Dalton isn't our unsub." Lillian throws out the remark. I can't be sure if she's rubbing in my mistake or just making a statement.

"How long has he been dead?" I ask.

"Based on the bloating and insect activity?" The medical examiner looks up from his squatting position. "Five to seven days."

Fuck.

So much time wasted chasing a ghost. I shove the manilla envelope into Lillian's hand. Carefully, she unfastens the opening and slides out the letter and photo. She inhales sharply and then glances at Dalton's corpse.

"We're dealing with one sick son of a bitch," she says.

I nod, not trusting my emotions, considering I'm on the verge of either lashing out or crumbling. Neither will help Alice right now. I have to keep my feelings in check if I'm going to find her.

"I'll have it checked for prints."

Lillian snaps her fingers at one of her officers. The younger man grabs a plastic bag, walks over, and holds it open for the detective. She slides it in, gives the man some orders, and turns back to me.

"I need to get back to work," I say. *I can't stand around doing nothing.*

"I'm sorry this is happening, Jack." Lillian places a hand on my shoulder. "We'll get her back."

Absolutely, I'll get her back. I refuse to rest until I do. I just need to make sure I get her back alive and in one piece.

The world is a blur. Brake lights go in and out of focus as I drive back to the office. If they found something on the tapes, they would have contacted me immediately. I haven't heard from them. Exhaustion and fear mingle together in my body.

When I arrive back at my office, I sit in my office chair. Exhausted, I lean forward, elbows on the desk, and run my

hands through my hair.

Think! What am I missing!?

I open up the digital folder I have on the case. One by one, I double-click the files on Amelia Hawthorn, Aubree Westing, and Autumn Redford. There has to be a connection. Screens pop open with all employment and academic history I have on the three women. I'll start there, connecting Alice's coworkers to any location these three women were associated with.

A quick tap on the door drags my attention to Emmett, who is walking into the office, brows furrowed, jaw clenched.

"What's going on?" I ask, standing.

Emmett tosses a manilla envelope on my desk. My heart drops to his stomach, being eaten by the acid and bile. *Another one*. Just like the first, there's no postage, no address. Only my name is scrawled over the front.

"How the hell is he getting these here? Find out who's accepting them."

Emmett sighs. "Julie at the public front desk found both."

"Who's giving them to her?" Anger rips through me as my voice grows louder.

"No one. They're wedged in the door when she arrives in the morning." Of course, they are. The asshole isn't brazen enough to show up in person.

"Check all the fucking cameras we have."

“We did. And the street cameras.” Emmett pauses before shaking his head. It’s another beat before he speaks again. “All cameras hitting the front doors blacked out for an hour both mornings.”

Impossible. Elite has the most up-to-date and secure tech in town. Hell, the state. How could someone hack into our system without us knowing? My jaw twitches, the clench so tight it’s threatening to break the bone.

“We’re dealing with someone who knows his shit,” I growl. “Either he has improved his skills on his own or has gone to school for IT. Do background checks on every male employee of Mark Anslar’s and bring them all in for interrogation.”

“Anything else?”

“Get our tech guys to improve our security. No one should be able to break into our system.”

When Emmett leaves, I fall back into my chair. The envelope taunts me from the desk. I shoot a quick text to Lillian.

We got another envelope.

Not even a second later, Lil responds.

Shit. I’ll be right there.

I place my phone on the desk and reach for the package. Everything in me wants to keep the damn thing sealed. My breathing shallows, considering the possibilities. Images of Dalton’s body flicker through my mind. Then the snapshot of Alice tied up. I break open the top fold, careful not to touch

too much of the outer envelope, and slide out the contents. Staring up at me is another Polaroid. Alice is strapped to a bed, blindfolded, and nearly naked. Tears slide from under the blindfold, streaking her cheeks. As my eyes roam over the picture, my breath catches in my throat. Red drips down Alice's left side. A slash mars her perfect skin.

That fucker's dead. I will kill him when I get my hands on him.

Unable to look at the image any longer, I place it face down on the desk. I lift the other paper and turn it over. My entire body shakes as every muscle turns to stone.

SHE HAS A BEAUTIFUL SCREAM.

Yours Truly

December 18, 3:31 am

-Alice-

“I think he’s going to appreciate these next photos of you, Alice.” *Jack. He’s sending them to Jack.* “You are simply divine in them.”

Heavy thumps stir me from my dreams. Whatever moment of peace existed in my subconscious has evaporated as I wake in this nightmare. I try to open my eyes, try to force them wide so I can see the man who’s taken me. But they refuse to open, and I can’t see beyond a squinted blariness.

I turn. Or try to. A foggy haze has settled over me. Limbs heavy. Impossible to lift. Everything moves slowly.

The thumps come closer until they’re next to my head. A hand touches my hair, stroking it several times. I try to flinch. Nothing moves.

“Don’t... touch.... me.” My voice is quieter than a whisper, the words lagging.

The man offers a light chuckle before I’m maneuvered to my back. My left leg is lifting. A slight scraping of metal on

metal is followed by a click. The weight around my ankle disappears.

The chain is gone. Get up. Run!

I want to scream, want to run and kick and cry out for help. But no matter how hard I will my body to listen, it remains useless and weak. My legs are spread, and the weight of the cuff is replaced by the roughness of rope. My hands are brought over my head, fibers scraping against my wrists as the man tightly restrains me to the posts.

Please stop.

Then the thumps move away. Each clomp becomes quieter and quieter. *He's going back upstairs. Please let him be leaving.* But the footsteps never find the stairs. There is no hollow echo from the heaviness of boots on the wooden slats that lead to the door above. Instead, the footsteps fade to the far side of the room. For a moment, the room is quiet. Still. As though it's holding its breath.

Another click punctures the silence. Hinges creak. There's a pause and then a soft tap like a cupboard door. The stomps move back toward the bed. Toward me. I pull against the restraints, my arms and legs like anvils anchoring me to the dirty mattress. Soon the footsteps are next to me again.

“We're going to play again, Alice.”

Oh, god, no!

My head moves slowly from side to side. An ambiguous noise resembling a plea escapes my mouth. With little

warning, the bed sags between my legs, and a weight encases my body. His sweatpants rub against the bare skin of my thighs and knees. The cold, smooth surface of metal presses flat against the slice in my side. It's long and thin, narrowing to a tip.

I lift my eyelids, trying desperately to pry them open, and see the man lying on top of me, holding me down. Staring back are two tawny eyes.

I know those eyes. I've seen them before.

But where?

I close my eyes. My memory begins flipping through everyone I know, trying to place that unnerving stare. The cold blade moves from my skin. My whole body freezes. Before I can beg, the needle-like point of the blade pierces my skin just below my ribs. I release a shrill, weak scream. The man rubs against me, shoving his hips against mine, and a thickness grows in his pants. The blade twists minutely before being pulled away.

I gasp for a breath. Tears stream down my cheeks. A gurgled cry catches in my throat.

“Let me hear you scream, Alice.” He punctures me again, deeper. A new pain emanates lower than the first. The gurgle escapes my throat. I can't move, can't thrash against the restraints or his weight. But my cries grow louder, slicing the air.

He grunts his pleasure, pressing his erection against me. The knife pulls away again, and the weight on top of me shifts. The man drags the tip of the knife down my thigh, scraping away skin in a thin, straight line. He shudders against me.

He moves. The heaviness of his body disappears, and he adjusts himself between my legs.

“So beautiful.” A hand caresses my leg, my waist, the smear of slickness moving over my skin. “Red is a good color on you.”

The man shifts again, the dip on the mattress now gone. There’s a click and a flash. And another. I want to shield myself, cover my body.

“I think he’s going to appreciate these next photos of you, Alice.” *Jack. He’s sending them to Jack.* “You are simply divine in them.”

December 18, 5:02 am

She had looked right into my eyes. Straight at me.

It was beyond thrilling.

I glance back toward the basement door. A padlock hangs above the regular handle and latch. Even with her chained up, I can't be too careful. I'll let her pass out again before switching her restraints.

When I left the basement a few moments ago, her whimpers floated up the stairs after me, beckoning me to keep playing. Like the perfect melody. Only when I closed the door could I no longer hear her. Thank god for soundproofing.

I return to cleaning the knife in the kitchen sink, lifting it in admiration. The needle-point knife tapers to the thinnest tip imaginable. It's ideal for puncturing. Pressing into Alice felt like heaven. But scraping down her leg gave me more gratification than I could fathom.

My pants tighten at the recent memory. Good thing I took several photos. I'll save at least one for myself. As much as I want to keep a steady schedule with Alice, I know I need to give her time to recuperate. Especially if I want her to last. The others left me too quickly. *They were such disappointments.* But Alice... she's a fighter. Even through her pain.

I turn off the water, drying the blade with a towel. I'll return it to the case later. Right now, I have other work to do.

A blank paper waits for me on the table. I drag my pen across the page, neatly and methodically, occasionally glancing at the Polaroids. Each one entices me. Excites me. Begs me to keep going.

But I have to view them with an unfamiliar eye. See them from an outsider's perspective. Choosing the one that will bring the most torment and anguish is essential.

My stare settles between two. A smile forms on my lips.

This might be my best letter yet.

December 18, 7:13 am

-Alice-

I wake up alone. Relief rushes through my veins. Every time I open my eyes, I expect to hear his voice. A tremor crawls across my skin at the memory of his body shuddering against mine as he sliced into me. The flash. Pictures of me mostly naked and tortured.

And he's sending them to Jack.

My heart aches in my chest. The scratching behind my eyes threatens to unleash floods. I long for Jack's touch. The feeling of security and affection in his arms. His fierce protection. I shake my head.

I'm so sorry, Jack.

Pain radiates from my side and down the outside of my thigh. Carefully, I move my hand to the newest wounds. Two holes puncture my waist just below my ribcage. I press the pad of my finger to one. My breath hitches. I wince at the tenderness and sharp ache that come with the touch. My shaky finger dips ever so slightly into the wound.

About a half-inch in diameter.

I pull my hand back and take a deep breath. The chill in the damp basement latches onto my bones, and I curl into myself. I lie facing out, my eyes searching this prison. A fog still rests on my brain, and thrumming pulsates in my forehead, but the visual haze has mostly cleared. I stare across the room. That's when I see it. The chain secured to the lone chair is coiled around itself like a snake next to the leg. The cuff is open at the end.

He wouldn't be so foolish as to leave me unrestrained, would he?

Even as I think, a flutter of hope fills my chest. This could be my only chance at escape. I lift myself off the mattress, the ache in my side increasing with movement. I sit, breathing slowly and deeply to gauge how much pain I'm truly in. With my deepest breath comes the sting of healing skin being stretched too far and a dull, deep ache.

Shallow breaths, Alice.

I stand. Without any more hesitation, I take a step toward the stairs. Then another. And another. Soon I'm at the bottom of them, staring up into the black abyss.

What if this is a trick? What if he's waiting for me at the top?

Hope and fear war inside me, tugging me both toward the door, toward freedom, and back toward the bed in the confines of this hell.

I dare to step up. The wooden board below my foot creaks at my slight weight. I freeze, counting the seconds, making sure the noise hadn't been heard. I take another deep breath, my hand holding my side. With more care, I move another three steps toward the top. No sounds accompany my movements this time. I keep going, climbing each stair until I'm cloaked in darkness and standing before a metal door. Without thought of the consequences, my trembling hand touches the cold, round knob and twists.

The knob doesn't turn.

I frantically twist it again, left and right, grabbing it in both hands and shaking the damn door with all the strength I can muster. Hysterics overcome me. I scream and shout and beg the door to open just a little. Just enough for me to squeeze through. But the damn thing refuses to budge. I turn, pressing my back against the freezing door, and slide down to the top step. My hands cradle my head as tears waterfall down my cheeks.

I lean back, smacking my head against the door, defeated.

Fuck.

Swiping the moisture on my cheeks away, I pull myself up and walk back down to the concrete floor, resigned to the bed. As I make the final step of the descent, the light from the far side of the room catches my attention. The glass case glows in the darkness of that side of the basement.

I descend into shadows, nearing the case. The only light source comes from the stand now in front of me. I gasp,

scanning over the horror in front of me.

Laid out under the glass, a menagerie of blades glints in the light. Carefully placed on black velvet. Long, short, wide, thin, the collection before me is both impressive and grotesque. I count the weapons.

Twenty-six.

Twenty-six daggers to use on me. Twenty-six possibilities for torture. *How will I survive this?*

My knees wobble, and I reach out to the glass for balance. I graze my fingertips across the bottom ledge of the top. If I could just get my hand on one knife, I could free myself. I lift the case. Just like the door, it doesn't budge.

My hands glide over the smooth surface, seeking a latch. Nothing. For a moment, I consider punching through the glass. Raising my hand in the air, I'm about to throw my fist down into the case.

And then I hear the unmistakable click of a lock from above.

"Sit in the chair, Alice," he says. "Cuff yourself to the chain."

December 18, 9:42 am

-Jack-

Each tick of the second hand is a reminder that I'm failing Alice. It's been fifty-six hours and seventeen minutes since I last saw her. *That's too fucking long.* And each minute that passes means more torture or worse.

She has a beautiful scream.

My stomach somersaults, knowing Alice is scared, alone, and suffering. *Sick bastard.* Slicing into her. Hurting my woman. I don't give up what's mine. I just need to get to her before this psycho can hurt her further.

A knock at the door drags me out of the daze. Leo barges in with more energy than I've seen since Alice was taken. Hope flares inside my stomach, and I stand, hands forward on the desk. "Tell me you've got something."

"We've got something," Leo says. "But before you get too excited, it's not as much as I wish we had. Nothing on the video yet. We're still working on that. But we've narrowed down a potential list of suspects based on the criteria you gave

us on the three former victims and knowing the asshole knows his computers. At least we should start with bringing in these three guys.”

“That’s a start. Who are we bringing in?”

“For starters, Anslar.” My fist clenches at the asshole’s name. It’ll be satisfying bringing him in for questioning. Leo continues, “Apparently, he was Autumn’s supervisor in the past when she worked at a movie theater in town. And he has some knowledge of the tech. Computer courses in high school.”

“Who else?”

“The tech guy from the magic show,” Leo says. I nod. That makes sense. “Ramsey Thomas. Mostly because he knows his shit when it comes to technology and computers. Also, he worked at Simmer for a few months while Aubree worked there, though he quit before she went missing.”

“What about the other one - Glenn? Does he have any connection to our victims?”

Leo shakes his head. “He was studying computer science in Amsterdam when Autumn went missing. Pictures prove he was there. Old posts on his socials show he never left the country until he graduated.”

“Anyone else?” I ask.

“No one that works for Anslar.” Leo silences. “I checked into George Fairchild. He was there the night Alice received the letter in her bedroom. I wanted to rule him out.”

“But?”

“He went to high school with Autumn.” *Shit.* I don’t like the guy, and I even accused him of planting the letter, but I didn’t think he was a viable suspect. Having known one of the other victims changes that.

“No connections to Amelia? She’s the first victim.” She’s the one who will lead us to Alice’s abductor.

“Not a single suspect has a connection to her that we can find. We’d have to broaden our search to find something, but like you, I’m convinced it’s someone Alice works with.”

“Good work, Leo. Let me know when you have each of the men in interrogation. I want to be the one heading them.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Leo pauses, watching. His brows furrow. The corners of his mouth turn down. “We’ll get her back, Jack.”

“I know.” I have little doubt we’ll find Alice and bring her back. But I can’t help the guilt and worry gnawing at my gut that reminds me we might get to her too late.

“Coffee, Mr. Walker? Mr. Johnson?” Gwen shimmies her way into the office carrying two mugs filled with dark liquid. Under her arm, pressed against her side, is another envelope.

“Fuck,” I snarl. Gwen jumps a little before halting. Some coffee spills over the edge of the mugs onto the carpet. Leo turns to face the secretary, repeating the curse. I glare at the envelope. “Where the hell did you get that, Gwen?”

“Uh. It was on my desk when I came in this morning.” She places the mugs in front of us and hands me the delivery. I crunch the edge in my hand, the muscles in my fist ready to snap.

“How the hell is he getting these in here?” Leo growls.

Realization falls across Gwen’s face. “I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t realize this was... I didn’t know.”

When I say nothing, Leo soothes her. “It’s not your fault, Gwen.”

She pauses for a moment as though she wants to say something. Then she leaves quietly, closing the door behind her.

“Do you want me to take it to Lillian?” Leo asks.

Yes. Get this the fuck away from me before I rip out everyone’s heart so that they know how I’m feeling.

“No.” I need to open it, but I can’t bear to see what the bastard has done to Alice this time. I tear the flimsy edge across the top, no longer giving a shit about fingerprints. The other two envelopes had nothing. This one will be the same.

Tipping the package upside down, the contents slide onto the desk. The note falls out first, face down. I don’t pick it up immediately, instead waiting for the picture to slide out.

Except this time, three Polaroids land in front of me instead of one.

A thickness forms in my throat. I can't swallow. Can't breathe. A dull, radiating thrum echoes in my ears.

"Jesus." Leo's whisper barely reaches my attention.

I spread out each photo. In the first image, Alice is still tied to the bed. A full-body shot of her crying, blood dripping from her side and leg. I push it aside.

The second photo offers a close-up of Alice's injuries. The mattress below her soaked with blood.

In the third, Alice sits in a chair about ten feet from the bed. Her arms are stretched behind her around the back of the seat. Her ankle cuffed and chained. I scan her body for new injuries but find none. Below the chair, a drain awaits her torment.

My body shakes as rage builds inside. I lift my stinging glare to Leo, whose jaw twitches sporadically as he glowers at the images of Alice. I shift my gaze back at the photos. Alice's mesmerizing jade eyes stare straight into the camera. Full of fear. Piercing my entire being with a thousand invisible knives.

I flip over the note.

IT'S PLAYTIME.

Yours Truly

December 18, 2:26 pm

The gray interrogation room unnerves me. Cold stone-colored walls. A single table centered on the floor. I expected Elite to have better accommodations. It's like a jail cell. How long have I been forced to sit in this chair?

My body fidgets. I slide my legs forward, so I slump in the wooden chair. It's nearly identical to the one Alice had been in. Minus the chains. And the drain.

Unfortunately, I had to release her from that restraint when Elite called, wanting to ask me some questions. I suppose I could've left her tied up, but she'd already had enough playtime. My body hums with delight at the memory of Alice tied in the chair, a red stream sliding from the top of her shoulder down her arm, and another pool below her right leg. I was so close to getting off, too, and then the damn phone went off. I almost didn't answer it. I shouldn't have answered it.

Assholes.

They had no idea how inconvenient that was for me.

The doorknob clinks and turns. I stand when her bodyguard walks into the gray room and quickly switch my expression to one of worry as though I have nothing but concern for my missing coworker.

“Have you found Alice?” My words are frantic. My gaze roams over the bodyguard, whose jaw twitches at the question. Hair disheveled. The faintest hint of bruising under his eyes. The asshole hasn’t slept. I take pleasure knowing I’m tormenting this man. He kept her from me for too long. Touched what is mine.

“Sit down, Ramsey.” The asshole points to the chair. I take a seat, mixing a small amount of confusion in with my concerned expression. “Does the name Amelia Hawthorne mean anything to you?”

I want to smile at her name, but that would make it too easy. With a pinch of my eyebrows, I shake my head.

“No, nothing.” I swallow. “Should it?”

December 18, 2:36 pm

-Alice-

My fingers are red, swollen, and bleeding as I try to pry open the lid on the glass case. Desperation consumes me. With no idea when Ramsey will return, I need to get my hands on a weapon fast.

So fast.

I had done what he asked. Sat in the chair and cuffed myself to the chain. I'm still not sure why. Fear, mostly. Knowing that moment wasn't the right moment to try to escape. And when Ramsey walked calmly down the stairs, the smug grin on his fucking face, I sobbed. All the comfort and trust I'd put into my coworker died at that moment.

How could I have been so fooled?

My fingers struggle against the edge, but the lid doesn't budge.

Damn it.

Frustration rips through me. Tears form at the corners of my eyes, and I fall to the ground. Even though I've gotten used to

the cold, a shiver still rolls across my body as though it hasn't come to terms with the idea. A tackiness sticks to my arms, the drying blood pulling at my skin.

You can't give up. Just think!

I peer over the room, seeking out anything I can use to break open the glass. The chain doesn't reach far enough, and the chair and bed are bolted to the ground. The rope isn't heavy enough.

There's only one option since death isn't a choice. I force myself to my feet. Each muscle revolts against the movements. Each cut, incision, and stab screams in silent agony. But determination settles in my chest.

I have no other choice.

Facing the glass and bending my elbow, I lift my right arm high in the air, slamming down toward the case. I can't be sure if I hear the shattering first or feel the shards digging into my skin. The scream that rips from my throat at the pain is followed by a giggle of excitement.

I did it.

I've broken into the case of horrors. I grab the longest blade, black, sharp, and curving like a raptor claw. It's heavy and foreign in my hands, but the hope I had lost rears itself back into existence. I slide my wrist over my cheek, wiping away the moisture, and move to the opposite side of my personal hell, lying on the bed.

I have nothing left to do but wait.

December 18, 4:37 pm

-Jack-

If looks could kill, Anslar would be dead from my glare. The man in front of me is a waste of life as far as I'm concerned. The moment I walked into the interrogation room, a smirk appeared on Anslar's lips and hasn't left. I want to punch it off him.

Leo stands in the corner of the room at my request. Once I saw the magician, I knew I couldn't not hurt the bastard. Leo's here to protect the asshole's life and keep me out of trouble.

"Look, Walker. You're wasting my time," Anslar says.

"What do you have to do, Anslar? Pretend you're in danger? Find some poor girl at some disgusting strip club and make her believe you're more important than you are?"

Anslar's grin grows to show his too-white teeth. He shifts in his seat, leaning forward. The bastard is growing some balls, trying to vie for dominance. I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. Anslar couldn't intimidate a baby if he tried.

“For starters, I’ve got to find a new stage assistant since my current one is off getting killed, apparently.” The calm in Anslar’s voice pisses me off just as much as his words, but I refuse to take the bait. Anslar’s trying to rile me up.

“That’s an interesting thing to say since you’re currently a suspect in Alice’s disappearance.” My words are equally as calm as Anslar’s, though there’s a hint of threat behind them. Anslar’s smile falls the faintest amount.

“I have nothing to do with that. If anything, it’s just inconvenient for me. I’ve got a show to put on. Fans to please.” Anslar pauses. “Besides, she has a fine ass body. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. The guys in my audience loved watching her tied up and helpless. She was a good tool for the show.”

My fingers are suddenly wrapped around Anslar’s collar, twisting the fabric until it squeezes against the asshole’s neck. A hand falls onto my shoulder, but I shrug it off.

“Listen, you little pinprick.” I’m so close to Anslar’s face that I can see each flicker of fear in the magician’s eyes. I keep my voice steady and low. “The moment I find out you touched even a single hair on her head, I’m coming for you.”

I throw Anslar back in the chair and turn to Leo. “Get a fuckin handwriting sample from this asshole and give it to Lil with the others.”

I storm out of the room, maneuvering the hallways of Elite to my office to get a fucking grip. My body hums with anger. I stomp toward the shelf and steal the Macallan off it. Turning a

glass over, I sigh, pouring two fingers of the brown liquid and downing it in a single gulp. The burn soothes my shredded nerves.

My cell rings in my pocket. I pull it out and see Lil's name flashing across the screen.

"Yeah," I answer.

"We got a partial print. We're running it now."

The bastard screwed up.

My chest aches with hope. "I hope you kept everyone in interrogation."

Fuck.

I let them leave with the threat that I'd be seeing them again soon. Before I can relay that information to Lillian, Emmett rushes through the door.

"We have him on video. We've got the shithead."

"Did he just say what I think he said?" Lil asks in my ear. I press a button on the screen.

"You're on speaker, Lil." I stare at my brother a moment before asking, "Who is it?"

"Ramsey Thomas."

"You're sure?"

"Ran facial recognition. He's on Deviance's surveillance early Friday morning, wandering the back halls. And he leaves the VIP area minutes before the cameras all stop working."

The muscles in my jaw strain. *I let him go back to Alice.*

“That’s not enough, Emmett.” Lillian’s reminder is just another stab in my heart. She’s right. It’s not enough evidence. “I’ll have the print ran against his immediately, but we can’t go on just the vid –”

“I have more,” Emmett interrupts. “We looked further into his background. It was pretty secure, but we found out a few things. He didn’t always go by Ramsey. His first name is Henry. Henry Thomas went to college with Autumn Redford and worked with Aubree Westing.

“Any connection to Amelia Hawthorn?”

“They were both seniors at Belleview East High the year she went missing.”

“Son of a bitch,” I roar at the same time Lillian spits out a slew of curses. “I’m going after him, Lil.”

December 18, 4:53 pm

I open the door and step onto the top stair. Peering down into the basement, I see Alice curled on the cot, her knees tucked into her torso. Her back is to me.

“It’s time to play again, Alice,” I call down. “I want to tell you all about my meeting with Jack.”

I’m not sure what I expect from her, but it’s not the silence that meets my ears.

“Alice?”

More silence. I take several more steps down the stairs, watching her. She’s motionless. I pause midway, fixated on her body. Fear inches up my skin.

Is she breathing?

I watch for any signs to indicate she is. She’s so stationary, so perfectly still, I can’t be sure.

I take the rest of the steps, reaching the concrete floor at the bottom.

“Alice?” This time her name croaks out of my throat. *What if I’ve killed her already? That would ruin everything.*

Anger rises in my chest, and I bellow her name. She still doesn’t move. Doesn’t even flinch. I stalk toward her, preparing for the disappointment. *It’s always a hassle waiting for a new girl.*

I reach down to turn her body toward me. A scream fills the basement, and a sharp pain runs across my stomach. Before me, my sweet Alice’s face has contorted into savagery. Her arm shoots out and pulls back. A warm thickness seeps down my side. I lift my hands from my stomach, hovering them in front of my face. Crimson drips from my fingers. The cloying scent of pennies permeates the air.

My knees smack against the concrete, and I stare wide-eyed at my beautiful girl.

“What did you do, Alice?”

December 19, 12:02 am

-Jack-

A small crew of my men and I arrive in the grimy westside neighborhood on the city's outskirts just after midnight. There isn't a single house with a light on inside. No one illuminates their front doors, and the streets are void of people, though beat-up cars line the broken sidewalks.

We park a block over from Ramsey's place, avoiding any chance he might see us.

"Check," I whisper into the air. Five deep checks echo back through my earpiece.

"I'm here, too."

"How far out are you, Lil?" I ask.

"Twenty minutes."

I've waited long enough and refuse to take any more time before getting Alice back and safe. And most importantly, with me.

"We're going in. Join the party when you arrive."

“Don’t do anything stupid, Walker,” she warns. It’s the last comment before everyone falls mute.

We exit the SUVs and walk in the shadows, silent like ghosts. Our eyes adjust to the night. In some dilapidated house on the block, a couple argues and glass smashes against a wall. The crew ignores the distraction. Our primary focus is finding Alice and arresting the bastard holding her captive.

If I don’t kill him first.

Three houses from the address on file, I hold up my hand. My men stop immediately, leaving no option for an extra step. This is how we operate. In sync and focused. There’s no room for error. The night-vision goggles help. It’s a good thing no one keeps their lights on. That would make this mission much more difficult. Stealing through the moonless night is imperative.

I point to two of my men and motion for them to take the back of the house. They move down the sidewalk before crouching into a neighbor’s yard, melting into the blackness. Turning toward Leo and Emmett, I motion them to move in a separate direction. One will take left, the other right. Both unholster their guns and slink into the waiting abyss.

I’m alone as I creep toward Ramsey’s home, hiding behind a row of overgrown evergreen bushes at the front of the small yard. I take in my surroundings, allowing anger to seep through my veins. The yard, covered in a layer of snow, is clearly unattended even in the nicer weather months. A cracked and uneven sidewalk leads to the front door, and

siding is falling off the fading tan house. A water stain darkens the top left corner of the home. The roof is missing shingles. A front window is cracked. A silver line of tape holds it together precariously.

“This place is a shithole,” Leo mutters through my earpiece. “Let’s get your girl out of here.”

“Ready when you are Jacks,” Emmett says, voice steady yet deadly.

On my signal, my men will raid the house. I’ll have Alice in my arms where she belongs. I take a deep breath.

“Let’s go.”

I stalk to the front door. Less noise is always preferred, but I don’t have time for that. I kick in the already fragile door. It splinters from the force.

“In.”

“Entering now,” Emmett states. Breaking glass sounds from another part of the house. “In a bedroom. This place is repulsive.”

That seems to be the consensus. Revolting. Rotting. I continue down the hall.

“Coming in.” Another shattering window. Leo’s entered the building. The other two men will stay outside, monitoring the situation from there. “Also a bedroom.”

With my Sig ready, I keep to the wall, moving through a long hallway. The first opening on my left leads into a small

room. A couple of chairs and a TV tray are centered in the room. I turn back down the hall. The door on the right is ajar. I raise my gun and use my elbow to nudge the door open. A small bathroom. Moldy shower. The toilet is missing a lid. The sink drips steadily.

The first thing I want to do when I get my hands on Ramsey is throw a fist in his fucking face. This asshole has worse coming to him for taking Alice, but right now, my rage is building strictly from seeing the shithole of a house where the bastard has kept her.

I spin back, continuing toward the back of the house. Two more doors on opposite sides of the hall flank the walls. A knob turns, and I pause, aiming the Sig. Emmett and Leo exit each of the rooms, their guns pointed at each other's heads for only a second.

"We're ten minutes out," Lil offers before she goes silent again.

"No sign of Alice yet," Emmett says. I move beyond him and Leo. With each empty room, we can only be getting closer to finding Alice. Though I remain outwardly calm, my pulse is racing. Worry weighs in my stomach. The worry that Alice is in imminent danger surges through me. The fear that she's already dead threatens to destroy my soul.

A dim light glows at the end of the hallway. I keep alert as I move into a dingy kitchen. A small table sits to the side. Polaroid pictures scatter the top. My body stills before I lean my head to the side. The reverberating crack of my neck

releases some tension. Emmett and Leo stand back, awaiting orders. A heavy metal door on the opposite side of the room is cracked open. A thin line of fluorescence breaks through the dim kitchen.

My heart tries to escape its cavity. I move to the door with my men. Leo and I raise our guns, and Emmett pulls the door open another inch. Thick black padding lines the inside of the metal.

“He soundproofed it,” Emmett whispers.

Fuck.

That only means one thing: *no one could hear Alice's screams*. A small, sporadic twitch pulses in my jaw.

“Open it,” I growl.

When Emmett does, I step down the stairs, Sig ready and waiting. As the basement comes into view, a scarlet stream on the concrete floor flows toward me. Everything inside me wants to give out.

We're too late.

My stare follows the line of blood to a slumped body on the floor.

“Help me,” Ramsey croaks as his eyes meet mine. I smirk at the sight. *That's the last thing I want to do, asshole*. Behind me, Emmett requests an ambulance.

Beyond Ramsey, clutching a knife in her hand, Alice is perched on a bed. Her knees are pulled into her chest. She

shivers, clad in only her underwear and bra.

And she stares straight at Ramsey, unblinking.

December 19, 12:17 am

-Alice-

If he moves toward me, touches me... I need to be ready.

My hand cramps with how tightly I hold the knife, waiting for him to come at me again. Voices drone around me, but I can't move my eyes from Ramsey. The mattress sinks next to me. A hand softly grazes my back. My body shudders as I shove back on the bed, knife gripped in my palms, staring at Ramsey.

“Stay away!” I scream through erratic breaths. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

“Dove?” Hands fly in the air, surrendering. “Alice. It's me, love.”

The soothing, deep voice draws my attention away from the devil on the floor. I meet the electric blue eyes that send relief through my body. For the first time in who knows how long, I am safe. My grip loosens. The knife clangs to the floor between the bed and the wall.

“Jack.” I crawl to him and throw my arms around his neck, ignoring the pain shooting through my body. I can’t help it. I hold on to him for dear life. “I wasn’t sure if you’d find me.”

His arms don’t automatically go around me. My heart sinks into my gut like an anchor dragging me under. I pull away, refusing to look at him.

Jack lifts my chin so I’m looking into his eyes. His gaze scans my body, and concern spreads across his face. His fingers hover over a slash on my arm.

“There are so many...” He swallows. “I don’t want to hurt you. That’s all.”

I nod and turn my eyes back to my lap. Strong hands move to my face, one on each cheek, bringing my gaze back to the gorgeous man.

More voices and the drumming of feet echo down the stairs. I turn my head. The detective watches as two EMTs stabilize Ramsey on a stretcher. He moans with the movement. She reads him his rights as the EMTs strap him in. Then she orders one of her officers to ride in the ambulance with him and another to follow behind.

“I’ll be there soon.” Lillian turns back and moves toward the bed, careful not to step into the red pool on the floor. “I’m glad to see you’re alive, Alice.”

I nod. Another pair of EMTs rushes down the stairs, momentarily grabbing the detective’s attention before she looks at Jack. “We need to get her to the hospital.”

He pulls away, but I grip his hand.

“Don’t go.” If I lose his touch...

“The only place I’m going is with you.”



I stir and sit up straighter. Jack’s asleep in the chair he’s dragged closer to the hospital bed, his hand in mine.

“Jack?” My voice is hoarse, dry. I give him a little shake. His eyes open, and a smile grows on his lips.

He clears his throat, leaning forward. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah. Just looking forward to getting out of here.” Two days in the hospital has been more than enough. I need to get back to normal. Start figuring out my next steps.

Jack reaches behind him and grabs a cup, handing it to me. I let go of his hand to grab it with both of mine. After taking a sip of water, I set it in my lap, still cradling it in my hands.

We haven’t spoken about anything. He’s been by my side for forty-eight hours, but neither of us has brought up what happened before I went missing, and definitely not about what I went through.

The silence weighs down the room.

“I’m so sorry, Alice.” Jack’s eyes glisten. A pinch forms in my brows, unsure where he’s going with his apology. “I’m

sorry I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry I didn't explain things better."

"Jack –" I begin.

"Let me say this, Alice. Mostly, I'm sorry I gave you a reason to run. Nothing was going on with Lillian. We were working on the case, and I should've been open with that information. I wasn't, and I almost lost you because I was too stubborn and secretive. But I swear I'll spend all the remaining years of my life making it up to you and making you feel safe. I can't lose you again. If I weren't so terrified of causing you more pain, I'd be lying in that bed with you wrapped in my arms. You're incredibly injured."

"I shouldn't have run off at the club. I was afraid you didn't care, that you didn't want me. And then when I was taken, I was so scared I'd never see you again." I grip Jack's hand and pull him closer. He stands, leaning over the bed. His hand smooths my hair.

"I'm going to kiss you now." The low rumble in his voice awakens my body, and I crave his. I nod. Jack's lips touch mine in a gentle, tentative kiss. It leaves me wanting more, but when I try to deepen the kiss, he pulls away.

"I won't break, you know." I nip at his lower lip.

Jack moves away and grins. He plants a kiss on my forehead and then sits back down in the chair. "Humor me until you're healed, love."

I smile. Only the beeping of my monitor interrupts the comfortable silence.

I clear my throat and stare at the scratchy blanket covering my legs. “So, I’ve been thinking. About what’s next for me.”

“And?”

“I’m going to quit working for Mark.”

“I’m in full support of that.”

“And I am going to go back to school.” I twist a stray thread on the blanket between two fingers, balling it up, then pull it straight again. Jack hasn’t said anything to my declaration, so I glance up. He watches me intently, the hint of a smile on his expression. “I don’t know how I’ll pay for it, but I’ll find another job or take out loans, but I want to go back.”

His smile grows. “I’m sure we can figure out a way for you to do that.”

“I was thinking about going for psychology and business. Or maybe social work and business. I haven’t exactly decided.”

“Why those?” he asks, curiosity in his tone.

Why those majors?

“What I went through... I could help other women. I’m hoping after I get my degrees, you’ll consider opening another sector of Elite. One where we can offer victims therapy and self-defense lessons, and just a place to be around others who understand what they’ve gone through.”

He leans in and kisses me. “I think that’s a fantastic idea.”

January 10, 10:16 am

-Alice-

Jack paces in his living room while I sit on the couch. Even though our apartment had been cleared to live in again, Sam and I haven't been able to bring ourselves to go back. She's still staying with Emmett. I'm still at the penthouse.

Ramsey might be in jail, but I feel safest with Jack.

Alexei examines my wounds from three weeks back. The stitches were removed just over a week ago. Alexei merely wants to make sure everything is healing properly. Due to the intensity of the slashes, I had been warned to limit my physical movement while the slashes closed. It has been a long three weeks lying in bed with Jack each night and not being able to do more than cuddle.

I'm starved for his touch.

"Everything looks good, Alice," Alexei confirms. "You can go back to work as soon as you want." *Work. I should start looking for a new job.* "When do classes start for you?"

“End of January.” I send a knowing smile toward Jack. He’s been proudly telling everyone about my plans. “It will be nice not to be cooped up anymore.”

“You haven’t been cooped up,” Jack responds. It’s true. I haven’t. I’ve gone to lunch and out shopping with Sam several times over the past week.

“How is everything else going? Any more nightmares?” For several nights after I arrived home, memories of my captivity haunted my dreams. Alexei insisted I speak with a therapist. I’ve seen her a few times. Thankfully, the nightmares are fading.

I shake my head. “Not for a few days.”

“I know the trial is set for April.” It seems so long from now, though I’m told it’s a pretty quick turnaround. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate. There’s a good chance that once the proceedings begin, the nightmares will start up again.”

I swallow. I would prefer not to relive those moments, but I need to testify and put Ramsey in prison. He shouldn’t be walking the streets. Lillian says they have an easy case with all the evidence piled against him.

“I’ll let you know,” I say.

“And let me know if anything changes with your injuries. But as far as I’m concerned, you’re in the clear for any kind of physical activity.” Alexei stands and winks at Jack. My cheeks heat. As soon as Alexei closes the door, Jack moves to me, claiming my mouth with his.

“You heard what he said. I’m ready for *any* kind of physical activity.” My hands trail over Jack’s muscular chest.

“So, what I’m hearing is you want to start self-defense training? Sounds good, dove. Go change into your workout clothes, and we’ll get started,” Jack says, stone-faced. I smack his arm.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

Jack laughs before his features sober. He swipes a strand of hair behind my ear. “We’ll start training tomorrow. I don’t want you unprotected ever again.”

“Of course. But first, I have some other needs to address.”

I kiss him. A growl escapes Jack’s throat as his hands reach below my ass and lift me in the air. My legs wrap around him. Our mouths collide, claiming each other. Then he pulls away.

“You’ll let me know if you hurt at any point.”

“Shut up and take me to the bedroom, Jack.”

Jack carries me effortlessly through the penthouse. When he gets to our bedroom, he tosses me on the bed. Laughter fills the air between us. Jack leans over me, crawling between my legs. His fingers caress over my hips and under the hem of my sweater. He lifts it off me, tossing it to the floor. My pants follow suit. Soon I’m displayed in front of the man I love wearing only a lace bra and thong.

The urge to cover up crawls through me. I’ve seen my scars. The horror left on my body. My arms wrap over my side. The

soreness in the area has decreased substantially, though it's still tender to touch at times.

“Don't do that.” Jack takes my hand in his and moves it away. “Don't hide.”

“It's disgusting.”

“You're beautiful. Every scar is a testament to your bravery and survival. You don't need to hide from me.” Jack kisses me once, but his lips don't linger on mine. He trails them down my jaw and neck, over my clavicle, and between my breasts.

The barely-there touch sends shivers throughout my body. My core begins to heat and ache in the best of ways. I reach for his shirt, pulling it over his head. Then his pants. Finally, I lift my hips toward him.

“Patience, love. We're making this last.” Jack entwines his fingers in mine and brings my hands over my head. He secures both with one of his hands before continuing his path over my body. Every inch of my skin hums from his touch.

His free arm reaches under me and lifts me to him, my back arching off the bed. With a quick twist of his fingers, a clasp unlatches. A chill runs over my breasts when he removes my bra, tossing it behind him.

“We won't be needing that,” he says before his mouth covers my nipple. I let out a quiet moan. His tongue swirls around until I'm writhing below him, indulging in the rapture sweeping through me. I'm a glutton for his mouth. Let it touch any part of me, and I'll be satisfied for days.

When Jack pulls away, a warm breath blows over the tip. He continues, teasing the other nipple, lavishing it with the same treatment as the first.

He lets go of my hands. “Keep them there.”

“Promise,” I purr.

Then he moves lower, his tongue caressing the path from nipple to stomach until he reaches the lace of my panties. His fingers hook around the barely there material, dragging them down my legs.

Jack looks up and cocks a brow. He smirks a half-smile. “Don’t you dare move those hands until I tell you to.”

With no hesitation, Jack’s tongue darts across my clit. My hips buck at the touch. His large hands anchor me down with tenderness. The primal need to tangle my fingers in his hair manifests. He moves his tongue over me again, flicking with the tip as he slides a finger inside me. I swing my legs over Jack’s shoulder, pressing my body closer to his lips.

Screw the promise.

My fingers knot in his hair, holding him against me and giving me the control I need. Jack’s breathy laugh heightens my sensitivity. His tongue skims over my clit again. When his mouth covers my center, I lift my hips to get closer. Tremors reverberate through my body. Jack rides out my orgasm with his tongue.

By the time he stops, I’ve lost all ability to move. Satiated and euphoric, my entire body melts into the comforter.

“We’re not done yet, dove.”

Thank god.

Jack lays over me, naked and firm. My legs wrap around his hips, pulling him closer, the tip of his cock against my opening. I reach around his neck and crush his lips to mine as he presses into me. A gasp of pleasure fills my lungs. The sweet satisfaction of him filling me is all I can think about. I bite his bottom lip, holding it between my teeth until the initial wave of rapture subsides. Everything about this man is perfection.

He gives me a gentle kiss. “You feel amazing.”

My core aches with need. A fire ignites inside my stomach, and I squeeze my legs tighter.

“Move, Jack,” I command.

Jack slowly pulls out and thrusts in again. With each drive, our movements become more frenzied and wild. I’m lifted from the bed, my body still encasing him. A squeal slips from my mouth when the cold flat surface of the wall reaches my back. Jack continues to thrust into me, and I give in to the intoxication. My core contracts around him. We both fall into oblivion.

When our bodies stop shuddering, Jack kisses me again and brings me back to the bed. As I lie naked, breathing heavily and so fully satisfied, I glance at the gorgeous man in bed with me.

He looks over and smiles. “I love you.”

I know.

I smile as he closes his eyes. This is where I belong, with him. Safe, protected.

Loved.

I curl into him. His arm wraps around my body, holding me close, and my eyes drift shut.

“I love you, too, Jack.”

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Also By

Something Series

Something Sweet

Something Secret

Depths of Hell

Purgatory

(Currently on Vella)

About Author

Jessica Brown is a writer and SAHM based in Upstate New York where she lives with her husband, son, and tabby, Cutey. She started writing in 2017 and hasn't covered even a fraction of the stories floating in her head. She can't help but create the drama you hate to love and HEAs with the heroes you want in your bed. When she isn't writing, you can find her posting on Instagram, playing with her son, and drinking tea. All the tea.

And maybe some coffee, too.